

To: IBMP Partners
From: Becky Weed
Date: 13 March 2012
Subject: Questions about next steps

During the last IBMP meeting, and in the CWG written responses to your Clarifying Questions, we touched on, but did not complete, a discussion of the rationale(s) for taking measures to reduce seroprevalence of brucellosis in bison. An outcome of “reduced seroprevalence” sounds so instinctively desirable to so many people, for understandable reasons, that I fear that we have not rigorously examined all of its underlying assumptions, nor have we seriously thought through the consequences of a costly and invasive program that does not meet its stated goals.

With those concerns in mind, I list below a series of questions; they essentially boil down to one. What is the plan? I believe that the exercise of trying to answer these questions in detail is in the best interest of the livestock industry, the agency partners, the tribes, and all the citizens who care about the fate of bison and/or tax dollars. In other words, we all start from different places, but it will serve none of us well to launch an ill-conceived plan.

The Questions

What is the vision for reducing seroprevalence – budgets, biology, sequence, timelines?
Where you cannot provide relevant detail, where can we turn for the necessary information now and in the near future?

Here are some key subquestions:

- By what criteria will the livestock industry define 'success' in adequate seroprevalence reduction?
By what measurement techniques? All elk in DSA? All bison in Park? Sampling based on bison that migrate out in Spring?
- If eradication is still presented as the optimum goal, how can that be reconciled with the answer to the previous question?
- What assurances can be provided that a target of adequate seroprevalence will be considered adequate when it is achieved, rather than as a moving goalpost as has been the case for quarantine bison 'success'.
- Where outside the GYA will we allow non-brucellosis bison to roam?
- Suppose we can achieve considerable seroprevalence reduction in bison by some means. How will it be maintained? How will reinfection via elk be mitigated or prevented?
- How will the acceptable cost thresholds for such an undertaking be defined? Should society keep the checkbook open in perpetuity for this project, while we're closing it on so many others?
- If the answers must await improved vaccine research and trialing results, how long?
- What contingencies do you have in mind if a bison vaccine program is undertaken and it becomes apparent in a few years that considerable negative bison behavioral changes are the result, with only moderate and temporary reductions in seroprevalence. Who decides if it's worth it? Who pays the sunk and possibly failed costs?

I have shared these questions with the CWG. I know I am not alone, but neither do I presume to represent the CWG in sending this inquiry. As many of you know, I have some doubts about the merits of an aggressive program to reduce seroprevalence, and about whether seroprevalence is even a sufficiently meaningful measure for the immunological questions we face. I have not reached rigid conclusions, and I am still seeking a diverse range of technical perspectives to help me puzzle through this. I will share that thinking later. For now I just want to explicitly pose the questions to you directly, so that the more public discussions that will come down the road will have a thoughtful foundation. Perhaps we can set up an smaller discussion with one of the Technical Committees for starters, and then figure out whether/how a broader public discussion will unfold.

There will be some who may want to respond, "We can't lay out the plan in this much detail; we just know it's a good idea to reduce seroprevalence and we have to start somewhere". Bison advocates won't consider that to be an adequate answer. My plea is to the livestock industry: forget the bison advocates for a moment. Are you sure you know what you're signing up for?