

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
STATE OF MONTANA

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April 19, 2016

Director Mike Honeycutt
Department of Livestock
PO Box 202001
Helena, MT 59620

Director Jeff Hagener
Fish, Wildlife and Parks
PO Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620

Dear Directors Honeycutt and Hagener:

On December 22, 2015, I issued a decision regarding year-round habitat for Yellowstone Bison. A copy of that decision is attached for reference. This decision was issued generally pursuant to my authority under the Montana Constitution (Article VI, Section 8), and Montana statute (Title 2, chapter 15, MCA), and specific Montana statutory authority (Section 87- 1-216, MCA).

The Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) was adopted by the State of Montana in 2000 (through a record of decision signed by Governor Marc Racicot). Pursuant to that decision, the State of Montana agreed to work with the IBMP partners to manage Yellowstone Bison through adaptive management. In the IBMP process, the State of Montana is represented by the Departments of Livestock, and Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

The attached decision represents the final action by the State of Montana in regard to year-round habitat for Yellowstone Bison, and by virtue of Montana law it is binding on your agencies. The IBMP partners have verbally adopted my decision, and the final document that reflects this approval is being prepared and will be signed by those partners. I will sign on behalf of the State of Montana.

The attached decision was the result of a lengthy public process in which I afforded your two agencies every opportunity to come to an agreement for an acceptable plan. My staff engaged directly with both of your agencies to find an acceptable solution. On at least two separate occasions, the Board of Livestock took this matter up in a public meeting, but was unable to find any common ground with the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and ultimately declined to take a position either in support or opposition of the plan. While it would be my statutory responsibility to ultimately approve any plan for bison management that your two agencies have agreed to, it is also within my powers, as head of the executive branch, to resolve disagreements between your two agencies.

My decision allows very modest year-round tolerance for bison in part of the Hebgen basin on the west side of Yellowstone National Park (both sexes), and year-round tolerance for bull bison in part of the Gardiner basin on the north side of the Park. Both are subject to geographic limitations, and bison numbers on the west side are limited to an upper range by season.

There are six fundamental changes in fact and science that support the expansion of year-round bison habitat outside the perimeter of Yellowstone in Montana:

- Cattle are no longer found on Horse Butte because of change in ownership and subsequent changes in land use.
- On the west side of the Park, there are no active cattle allotments on the public lands which constitute over 96% of the area to be accessed by bison.
- Modifications in federal rules that govern the response to brucellosis infection in cattle have significantly reduced the economic consequences to Montana producers of a brucellosis infection in cattle.
- New research indicates negligible risk of transmission of brucellosis from bull bison to cattle.
- Research on brucellosis persistence indicates decreased risk related to cattle turnout dates in the Hebgen Basin .
- Elk are now recognized as the primary transmission route of brucellosis infection to livestock.

The fact is we've been successful at managing Yellowstone Bison and preventing brucellosis from being transmitted by bison to cows. The risk of brucellosis transmission from bison to cattle can be successfully mitigated through focused management. Accordingly, we're adjusting how we manage bison.

I remain fully committed to pushing for a reduction of the bison population in the Park, and keeping those numbers to manageable levels. I believe that with this decision, hunting outside the Park by state licensed and tribal hunters will become a more vigorous tool for population management.

In addition, it is my expectation that we will be able to save money and resources with more effective and targeted management - responding to conflicts when and where they actually occur - but we need to do a limited expansion such as this to find out.

Montana will continue to use the management tools used today to manage bison, applying them on the landscape where bison will be tolerated year-round. Bison will be managed to enforce tolerance zones and seasonal limits, and address situational conflicts as appropriate.

Montanans clearly recognize bison as wild life and want us to do what we can to manage them as such, including providing more hunting opportunities. We can learn how to better do that with our experience from a careful and measured expansion of tolerance, with no additional risk to our livestock industry.

Sincerely,



STEVE BULLOCK
Governor

cc: Sam Sheppard, FWP
Rebecca Cooper, FWP
Marty Zaluski, DoL