

Gallatin Wildlife Association
Positions on Restoration and Management of Wild Bison in Montana

Whereas, the Montana Constitution requires that “the opportunity to harvest wild game is a heritage that shall forever be preserved” and that “the legislature shall provide adequate remedies to prevent unreasonable depletion of natural resources’; and

whereas, there are no viable, year-round populations of wild bison in Montana; and

whereas, we do not leave bison to future generations, we leave the bison genome to future generations; and

whereas, private commercially owned bison are being domesticated and losing valuable genes and wild characteristics.

Therefore, the Gallatin Wildlife Association supports the following positions:

Wild bison in Montana:

1. Bison should again be recognized by Montana as valued, native, public trust wildlife, managed by Fish, Wildlife & Parks, not by the Department of Livestock. Wild bison in Montana will provide recreational, commercial, ecological, scientific, esthetic and social values for Montanans.
2. Restoration should be emphasized within selected “Bison Management and Conservation Areas” having large units of mostly contiguous public land.
3. In conforming to Montana law, bison herds can and should be managed in ways that respect private property rights.
4. A wild bison herd must be large enough to maintain needed genetic diversity, and be influenced by a preponderance of natural selection – so that its valuable wild characteristics are retained across generations. At least 1000 bison on at least 100 square miles of diverse habitat are needed.
5. The valuable ecological influences of wild bison upon native plants, animals, soils and microhydrology of ecosystems should be expressed on at least a few large, ecologically diverse areas in Montana. The Greater Yellowstone Area and the C. M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge area offer the two best opportunities for restoring wild bison in Montana, and probably within the USA.
6. Within the Greater Yellowstone Area, it is in the best interests of both bison restoration and the livestock industry to maintain separation of bison and livestock during months when *Brucella* may be transmitted.
7. While it has never happened, transmission of *Brucella* from bison to livestock should be avoided. In achieving this goal, we believe the most useful and efficient methods will emphasize livestock husbandry, including effective vaccinations, that will also protect livestock from elk-transmitted *Brucella*. (*Brucella* from elk is the far more serious threat to livestock.)
8. Outside the Greater Yellowstone Area, wild bison should be restored with animals that are tested to be free of *Brucella*.

9. In Montana, the numbers and distribution of restored wild bison should be managed with an emphasis on public and Native American hunting, mostly applying the fair chase model. Traditional ways of big-game hunting may not suffice for bison management. Hunters should be dispersed in space and time. Longer hunting seasons may be necessary to influence or control bison distribution at critical times. Licenses for specified sex/age classes of bison may be necessary.

10. We oppose another completely fenced bison herd in Montana. However, strategically placed fencing that will have little or no impact on other wildlife species, could be applied where needed on a limited site-specific basis. Where problem areas are few and small, bison should be fenced out, not in. Other methods for controlling bison distribution may include culling of wandering bison, hazing and training bison, and developing attractive habitat on public land. We must learn how to manage bison numbers and distribution in an adaptive manner.

11. Where wild bison are restored on public lands already permitted for use by private livestock, necessary changes in livestock stocking rates, timing of use, or in types of livestock should be accomplished with the most fair and equitable of available opportunities. However, it is not appropriate for private interests to deny a valuable public wildlife species from all the public lands.

Wild bison in Yellowstone National Park:

12. Intensive handling and interventions such as penning, feeding, vaccinating, and birth control of bison within Yellowstone National Park, will diminish wildness and will not leave the wild bison genome unimpaired for the use and enjoyment of future generations of Americans, as required by federal law.

13. Within Yellowstone National Park, most or all operations with bison at the Stevens Creek facility do not conform to the mission of the Park Service. These operations are conducted according to laws and policies of Montana and should be the state's responsibility.

14. Within the Yellowstone area, *Brucella abortus* is a naturalized species that can not be eradicated. Coevolution of bison and *Brucella* will enhance bison resistance to the disease and may reduce virulence of *Brucella*. Within Yellowstone National Park, this coevolution should proceed with minimal intervention that would weaken or replace the process.