

Horse Butte and Bison

A Difficult Problem

The hazing and killing of bison on the west side of Yellowstone National Park has been a highly polarized wildlife debate for more than a decade. The Horse Butte peninsula, on the Gallatin National Forest about eight miles northwest of West Yellowstone, Montana, has been the focal point of that controversy. Jutting into Hebgen Lake, this peninsula provides about 2,000 acres of public-lands grazing to livestock producers. Its rich forage attracts bison in the winter and spring.

As bison migrate west out of Yellowstone Park, they are naturally funneled to Horse Butte. State livestock authorities fear the bison will transmit brucellosis (a disease that may induce abortion in livestock) to their cattle. Although there has not been a documented case of brucellosis being transmitted in the wild from bison to cattle, ranchers are concerned about maintaining the “brucellosis-free” status of their stock.

Brucellosis transmission is a risk that has been described as “too small to measure” by conservationists and as “too large to ignore” by the livestock industry.

According to the terms of a multi-agency agreement, federal and state authorities try to haze the migrat-



ing bison back into the Park, but when this fails, bison are captured, tested for brucellosis, and shot if the tests are positive.

Over the past decade, hundreds of Yellowstone bison have been killed. This program has drawn continuing on-site protests, national television coverage, and intense criticism from wildlife advocates and the public.



Seeking Solutions

Two years ago, the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) and several other conservation groups sued the US Forest Service regarding reissuance of the grazing permit for Horse Butte. Last summer, a federal district judge in Washington DC enjoined further grazing, pending preparation of an environmental impact statement by the Forest Service. This decision was appealed, but the appeal was placed on hold as the parties discussed settlement options.

In the meantime, the NWF had initiated an innovative new project designed to retire public land grazing allotments that experienced chronic conflict with large carnivores. Aware of this program, Forest Service officials contacted the NWF to see if allotment retirement might offer a solution for Horse Butte.

Win-Win

In a series of meetings with the grazing permit holders at Horse Butte, other livestock producers, and National Forest officials, the National Wildlife Federation helped develop an equitable and practical solution.

The NWF and the Forest Service made an agreement with the Horse Butte grazing permit holders to move to a new allotment on the nearby Targhee National Forest, where there are no significant livestock/wildlife conflicts. The space on the Targhee NF was created when two permit holders agreed to forego their grazing privileges in exchange for financial compensation provided by the NWF.

The Gallatin NF consequently declared the Horse Butte allotment vacant and will not permit a renewal of grazing (see letter at right). The suitability of this area for grazing will be evaluated in the upcoming forest plan revision. Because of its history of conflict, the Forest Service has indicated the site will be permanently closed to livestock grazing.

As a result, we will secure a cattle-free area that will significantly expand winter habitat available to Yellowstone's bison. We continue to negotiate with these ranchers on sale of their 700 acres of private land on Horse Butte peninsula. In the absence of livestock grazing, there will be little justification for hazing or slaughtering bison.

By securing the retirement of the Horse Butte allotment, we will remove a primary reason for the government bison control program. The state-federal bison management plan calls on agencies to reex-



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Washington Office

14th & Independence SW
P.O. Box 96090
Washington, DC 20090-6090

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Jamie Clark
Senior Vice President, Conservation Programs
National Wildlife Federation
11100 Wildlife Center Drive
Reston, VA 20190

Dear Ms. Clark:

I want to take a moment to personally thank you and the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) for the significant effort you have all put into facilitating the resolution of livestock, bison, and wildlife conflicts on the Horse Butte Allotment in Montana. I want you to know that I appreciate your efforts and support the role you have taken on.

Regional Forester Brad Powell's letter to NWF Director Tom France dated March 21, 2003 lays out the general steps that will have to take place for the Munns Brothers to be authorized grazing on the East Beaver Allotment on the Caribou-Targhee National Forest following the decision by the District Court not to authorize grazing on the Horse Butte Allotment. The long-term status of the Horse Butte Allotment will be determined in concert with or as a part of the revision process for the Gallatin National Forest's Land and Resource Management Plan. The revision is scheduled to begin in 2004. I endorse the concepts that Regional Forester Powell has laid out to bring this matter to closure.

Thank you again for all of your efforts. I am hopeful that your contributions along with those of others will result in a fair and amicable solution for the Munns Brothers, other users of the Gallatin National Forest and the Caribou-Targhee National Forest, and will benefit the bison and wildlife that are at issue here.

Sincerely,

/s/ Dale N. Bosworth
DALE N. BOSWORTH
Chief

cc: Bradley Powell

Hank Fisher
National Wildlife Federation
240 N. Higgins Avenue
Missoula, MT 59802



amine bison control policies as on-the-ground situations change.

In addition, Horse Butte peninsula provides extremely important habitat for a number of wildlife species other than bison, including:

- bald eagles - three nesting pairs use the area, as do numerous other raptors;
- elk - between 50 and 100 elk use the area on a year-round basis;
- grizzly bears - several bears use the area, including a mother with two cubs that was present last year;
- waterfowl - brooding and rearing area for ducks and geese;
- sandhill cranes - contains excellent foraging habitat; and
- pine martens - several martens were radio-collared here as part of a research project.

About The Cost

The National Wildlife Federation paid \$110,000 to secure the grazing permits on the Targhee that made this entire transaction possible. Adding our travel, the cost of the new permit, and other expenses associ-

ated with the negotiation, the total cost of this project is \$127,000. We have raised \$30,000 for the project. An anonymous donor has provided an interest-free loan for the remainder, with repayment due in April 2004. We now seek funds to repay that loan.

Long-Term Importance

Our goal is not removal of all grazing from public lands. Rather, our focus is on specific allotments where chronic conflicts exist between livestock and wildlife. In such situations, livestock producers may be motivated sellers, and allotment retirement can be beneficial for both parties. The payment provided for allotment retirement typically is used to secure new grazing lands that do not have wildlife conflicts.



This pivotal project could provide a new conservation model that would reduce litigation, sustain agriculture, and reconfigure grazing to locations where it is compatible and sustainable. ♦



CONTACTS:

Hank Fischer, Special Projects Manager • Tom France, Director
National Wildlife Federation • Northern Rockies Office
240 North Higgins, Suite 2 • Missoula, MT 59802
406-721-6705 [phone] • 406-721-6714 [fax]
fischer49@aol.com • france@nwf.org