

# INTERAGENCY BISON MANAGEMENT PLAN



## FALL IBMP PARTNERS MEETING REPORT

Tuesday, October 28, 2025 ~ Zoom

### PARTICIPANTS

**Lead Partner & Host:** Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

**IBMP Facilitators:** Deb O'Neill and Stevie Burton

#### IBMP Partner Primaries

**Christy Clark**, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) [IBMP Lead Partner]

**Tom McDonald**, Tribal Council Vice Chairman, Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes (CSKT)

**Bo Vocu**, Executive Director, InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC)

**Mike Honeycutt**, Executive Officer, Montana Board of Livestock (MBOL)

**Dr. Tahnee Szymanski**, State Veterinarian, Montana Department of Livestock (MDOL)

**Tim Reid**, Chief of Yellowstone Center for Resources, Yellowstone National Park (YNP), National Park Service (NPS)

**Aaron Gould**, Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee, Nez Perce Tribe (NPT)

#### IBMP Partner Seconds

**FWP** – Kelly Proffitt, Region 3 Supervisor; Kevin Rechkoff, Deputy Chief Legal Counsel; Marina Yoshioka, Chief of Operations

**CSKT** – James “Bing” Matt, Tribal Council Member; John Harrison, Staff Attorney

**ITBC** – Majel Russel, Legal Counsel; Jason Baldes, Board Secretary

**MBOL/MDOL** – Lindsey Simon, Legal Counsel; Dr. Emily Kaleczyc, Assistant State Veterinarian

**NPS** – Chris Geremia, Bison Program Manager, Yellowstone National Park

**NPT** – Mike Lopez, Staff Attorney; Erik Kash Kash, Wildlife Department Director; Adam Villavivencio, Enforcement; Erik Holt, Fish and Wildlife Commission Chair

**USDA FS/CGNF** – Kathy Minor, Deputy Forest Supervisor; Clint Kolarich, Gardiner District Ranger; Wendy Urie, Hebgen Lake District Ranger; Emma Spurlock, Public Engagement Staff Officer; Jennie O'Connor Card, Ecosystem Staff Officer

#### Treaty Hunt Tribes (non-IBMP Partners)

**Yakama Nation** – Nicholas Kahmann, Legal Counsel

**Northern Arapaho Tribe** – Devin Oldman

**Umatilla** – Andrew Wild Bill

Meeting Location: Zoom

Other Attendees: *Please see Attendance Record in Appendix A.*

## I. MEETING OPENING

The Fall Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) Partners Meeting started with a call to order by Lead Partner Director Christy Clark, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). Christy welcomed all those in attendance and shared her appreciation to the group. Deb forgot to start the recording until after Christy’s welcome message, so it is included here in its entirety:

I’m honored that Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has had the opportunity to serve as lead partner for the IBMP this year. I truly appreciate the flexibility, engagement, and commitment each of you has shown in adapting to a year of virtual meetings and continuing our productive dialogue and shared progress.

As we move into this winter in the northern Greater Yellowstone Area, conditions have already been variable. Forecasts suggest we may see dynamic and occasionally severe weather across Montana’s portion of the ecosystem—so it will be interesting to see how that shapes bison migration and management as the season unfolds.

Looking ahead, I’m hopeful the coming year will bring new opportunities for collaboration and that we’ll be able to gather again in person to continue strengthening our partnerships for the benefit of Yellowstone bison and the communities we serve.

The IBMP Partner Primaries, Seconds, other staff, and Treaty Hunt Tribes introduced themselves.

Christy asked for changes to the agenda ([Ref#1: Fall IBMP Partners Agenda](#)) and there were none. She asked for approval of the fall IBMP meeting agenda, and there were no objections.

**IBMP Partners Decision #1—The Fall 2025 IBMP Partners Meeting Agenda was approved by all Partners present.**

## II. IBMP PAST BUSINESS

### A. Approval of Spring 2025 IBMP Partners Meeting Report & Annual Calendar

Deb shared her screen with track changes and noted that she received only minor edits to the Spring 2025 IBMP Partners Meeting Report ([Ref#2: Spring 2025 IBMP Partners Meeting Report](#)). After letting partners read the changes, she asked for approval of the report. There were no objections, and the Spring 2025 IBMP Partners Meeting Report was approved as final.

**IBMP Partners Decision #2**—The Spring 2025 IBMP Partners Meeting Report was approved by all Partners present.

The IBMP 2025 Calendar (**Ref#3: IBMP Calendar 2025**) only contained one change since the spring meeting, and that was changing the fall meeting to a virtual meeting. Deb asked for approval of the calendar. There were no objections, and the IBMP Partners 2025 Calendar was approved as final.

**IBMP Partners Decision #3**— The IBMP 2025 Calendar was approved by all Partners present.

### III. IBMP PARTNER UPDATES

The Partner Primaries and their Seconds (**Ref#4: IBMP Partners Directory**) were invited to share any updates on their entity's activities since May 2025.

**Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes (CSKT)**—Tom McDonald shared that it is an election year for the Tribe's governing body, and half the council, including him, is up for reelection. Bing is not, as he was elected two years ago. The election will conclude mid-December and council members will take office on January 1, 2026.

The construction of a slaughterhouse facility is underway, and they hope to have it operational by spring 2026.

Whisper and staff have conducted bison hunt orientations. The number of permits given out were as per usual. CSKT Tribal members are excited to go to Yellowstone and exercise their treaty rights to hunt bison. The regulations have been approved, and there is nothing out of the ordinary. Tribal game wardens will be on site to assist hunters. The Beatty Gulch MOU is still in effect for the signatories. Some [Tribes] have not signed on. CSKT will be participating in the hunt calls this year.

**InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC)** – Majel Russell shared that ITBC has a new director, Bo Vacu. He started in the summer and has a steep learning curve. ITBC is comprised of 87 Tribes in 22 states. Starting in January, ITBC transported 89 bison out of Fort Peck. The animals were distributed to various tribes in White Earth, Grand Portage, and Prairie Island, Minnesota; Standing Rock, North Dakota; the Modoc Nation in Oklahoma; the Yakima Nation in Washington; the Rosebud Sioux Tribe; the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe; Ogallala Sioux Tribe; and Lower Borough. ITBC remains an active partner in the conservation and translocation of the Yellowstone bison. ITBC is waiting and hoping that legislation will be successful to create a permanent program for Tribal buffalo restoration, through the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Bo Vacu introduced himself and shared he was looking forward to being part of the group. He is looking forward to continuing to facilitate translocations from Yellowstone to Indian Country.

**Montana Department of Livestock (MBOL/MDOL)**—MBOL Executive Officer Mike Honeycutt communicated that they are continuing to work with the park and APHIS on quarantine and the food transfer program. He is appreciative that CSKT will have an additional processing facility, as that is a bottleneck in the food transfer program. Fall is a busy time for livestock, particular cattle, producers in MT. Overall, the mood is good. MT's cattle herd is the lowest it's been since the 1960's, but profits are as high as they've been since the 1970's; there is a counterbalance. The agency is dealing with

additional work coming from the federal shutdown. The department is also dealing with unusual issues – feral pigs and horses – around the state. It's just very busy.

Dr. Tahnee Szymanski reported the department did have one lethal bison removal on July 27. It was a single bull in Zone 3 on the west side. Because of the distance, and problems surrounding hazing a single bull, they decided to dispatch it. There was a brucellosis detection in a domestic bull this summer, and a subsequent investigation declared it was a brucellosis-infected herd in Beaverhead County. They completed testing on the entire herd and put in quarantine. The herd was released from quarantine last week. The department still has two other brucellosis-affected herds in quarantine and are undergoing testing. The department does annual compliance with domestic bison and cattle in the Greater Yellowstone Area for Designated Surveillance Area regulations. We do this to ensure that individuals are complying with regulations to make sure we are not exporting a brucellosis-positive animal out of the area. The department finds a high level of compliance. One of the items that has been discussed at previous IBMP meetings is the APHIS Veterinary Services three-year review of state brucellosis programs. Montana has been subject to three of them, and 2025 would have been the fourth. USDA recently made a policy change that they would not be doing these triennial reviews unless there was evidence of a problem or a specific request made. The department has been very busy with HPAI. There have been at least six detections in the past 30 days in MT. Additionally, the department is working on New World Screwworm Preparedness. MT is cold enough to be considered a low-risk state for detections or long-standing infections, but MT needs to be prepared as there are concerns about northern movement in Central America and Mexico.

Dr. Emily Kaleczyc has joined MDOL as the new Assistant State Veterinarian. She previously worked for the department and USDA. She has a strong regulatory background and familiarity with brucellosis. They are excited to have her on board.

CSKT stated they have seen an outbreak of EHD and blue tongue. They wondered if these diseases were being seen in the Gardiner or Yellowstone areas, or if the outbreaks were only in western MT. Warren Hansen (FWP) responded that while EHD has been seen across the state, EHD has not been reported in Region 3 or the Gardiner Basin. CSKT said they are seeing a slow down of carcasses, but want to let bird hunters know to watch out for carcasses and bears.

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP)**—Director Christy Clark shared the 2024-2025 state bison hunt was limited by mild weather conditions and low migration outside YNP. Only one bison was harvested from the Yellowstone area and four from the Absaroka Beartooth backcountry portion of the Gardiner district. The 2025-2026 bison regulations remain largely consistent with previous years, with one minor adjustment to the distribution. This coming year, the license distribution across hunt districts has changed to: 40 licenses for the Gardiner Basin area and 25 licenses for the West Yellowstone area. Season dates are the same as previous years, November 15 through February 15. An additional five licenses are valid only in the Absaroka Beartooth backcountry portion of the Gardiner Hunt District, with season dates being September 15 through November 14. Four bison have been harvested so far this season. The 2025-26 regulations continue to emphasize safety, coordination with Tribal and federal partners, and adaptive management based on bison migration and snow conditions.

FWP looks forward to continued collaboration and communication during the coming season's hunt manager calls and throughout the upcoming operations season to maintain coordination, transparency, and share success in Yellowstone bison management.

NPS asked Warren about the change in administrative oversight for Gardiner Basin. Warren explained that enforcement for the area comes out of FWP's Region 5 office in Billings instead of Region 3 in Bozeman. Wildlife management oversight of the area still comes out of Region 3.

**National Park Service/Yellowstone National Park (YNP)** – Tim Reid reported YNP had a near record summer/fall season, and roads are closing for the majority of the park on October 31. The road from Mammoth to Cook City will remain open as usual. The park is continuing to work with state partners, APHIS, ITBC, and the Fort Peck Reservation for the Bison Conservation Transfer Program (BCTP). They are getting ready for operations and getting their facilities into a state of readiness, while navigating the government shutdown. Only essential staff is working to provide for public safety. Essential staff extend to a skeletal bison program staffing, including Chris Geremia. This staff primarily are working at the BCTP facility. There have been no outbreaks or detections of any wildlife diseases.

There has been a change in enforcement staff, with Dan Kowalski being replaced by Jackie Seen. Jackie has been at YNP for a long time, and has past experience with bison management. YNP's primary enforcement staff at the boundary will be led by Kevin Dooley, with Jackie and Cody Cable supporting him.

Chris will cover the rest of the update in his report later in the agenda.

**Nez Perce Tribe (NPT)** – Eric Cole and Mike Lopez provided the update for NPT. NPT opened the season for their Tribal membership, and it will end on April 12, 30 minutes after sunset. NPT is implementing their orientation schedule for members and will be conducting this through November and December. Mike echoed what CSKT mentioned earlier. NPT is a signatory to the Beatty Gulch MOU and will continue to adhere to the provisions in that MOU.

CSKT asked for an update on their lead-free grant application. Erik Cash shared the application was not accepted, but will be resubmitting next year.

**USDA Forest Service Custer Gallatin National Forest (CGNF)** – Kathy Minor began the update by sharing CGNF completed several projects in accordance with their forest plan, to improve habitat and facilitate the movement of bison across the landscape. This included fuels reduction and weed treatments, monitoring, and improving road closures.

She mentioned that Clint Kolarich is the new district ranger in Gardiner, replacing Mike Thom. Additionally, Dan Kowalski moved to the CGNF and will be the lead enforcement officer in Gardiner for the bison hunt.

CSKT asked about the expansion of the bridge near West Yellowstone. This was where a large group of bison were hit a couple of years ago. They wanted an update on the road reconstruction. The CGNF shared that MDT is finalizing the construction plans and hoped to go out for bid this winter and have construction start next summer. MDT did not get enough funding to include heat-sensing motion detection lights. There will be fencing to funnel the animals into the underpass.

## **IV. ANTICIPATING THE NOVEMBER 2025-OCTOBER 2026 IBMP YEAR OF OPERATIONS**

### **A. Review of the 2024-2025 Annual Report**

Several Partners had responded to the IBMP Lead Partner's request that Partners submit their IBMP Annual Report sections before the Fall Meeting. Remaining Partners should submit their sections to Kelly by December 1, 2025. The Annual Report draft ([Ref#5: November 2024-October 2025 IBMP Annual Report Draft1](#)) is included in the meeting notes. The Annual Report will be finalized by FWP and posted on the IBMP website by December 31, 2025.

## **B. The NPS Yellowstone Bison Population Status Report – 2025**

Chris Geremia/NPS shared a PowerPoint presentation (see Appendix B) on [Ref#6: 2025 NPS Population Status Report to YNP Superintendent](#).

He said they are starting to see a decreasing trend. In 2022, they had a high of 6,000 animals, in 2024 they counted just shy of 5,500 animals, and in August 2025, they estimated 5,300 animals (900 in central herd and 4,400 in the northern herd).

Since the entire time IBMP has been together, we have identified two herds in the park- a northern herd and a central herd. The northern herd typically moves to Gardiner in the winter, and the central herd moves to West Yellowstone or to Gardiner. The trend the park is seeing is that the northern herd is increasing and the central herd is decreasing. The movements are not adhering to the herd "boundaries," so it is getting harder to interpret the counts. Also, there is enough genetic interchange between the two herds, that they cannot be detected as unique entities anymore.

The park's aim is to have the number of calves and yearlings average 30% of the population, and they are close to that. Another goal is to have neither sex exceed 60% of the population. Right now, females are at 55%. Brucellosis prevalence has been consistent. Eight hundred and forty tests were completed last winter, and prevalence was estimated to be 45%, which is similar to what has been estimated since the 1920s.

Chris proceeded to review how many animals were removed by different techniques (e.g., BCTP, hunting). Most year harvest ranges from 50 to a couple of hundred animals. The food transfer program varies with the need to control numbers. He reminded everyone that one of the top reasons visitors come to YNP is to see bison. Conflicts remain low compared to where it was in the early 2000s. There is 30,000 acres in the northern range that IBMP has debated about. While it is only a couple of percent of the area bison occupy in the park, it provides the best opportunity for viewing. Bison engineer this area more than anywhere else on the planet. It looks fundamentally different, but the park believes the ecosystem is functioning well.

The park takes precautions to manage the summer population to be between 3,500-6,000 animals. For instance, if the late winter population starts to drop below 3,000 animals, the park will take action to prevent the population decreasing (e.g., holding bison in the quarantine facility to be released in the spring). When the population is in the 3,500-5,200 range, the general strategy is to capture and enter them into the TFTP and BCTP, and rely on harvest to control numbers. Above 5,200, the park is more aggressive at capture at the northern boundary of the park to ensure that the population does not exceed 6,000. Next year, the population should be smaller. The IBMP should collectively manage for a decreasing population this year. This means taking 700 animals this winter. Removals are dictated by weather and the migration. If it's a large migration, the park recommends removal up to 25% of the current population of 1,300. The park suggests to design the harvest to reduce the population and that it reflect the current population of 70% adults and 30% calves and yearlings and roughly half males and females. Doing this will give us the opportunity of being within desired demographic conditions and population size next year. The park is looking to capture between 700-1,000 animals this winter.

NPT asked how the park will support the Treaty Hunts this coming season. The park responded that they will do their best to balance (through active and passive trapping) hunting opportunities outside of the park with the need to decrease the population through trapping. If we are below the threshold next winter, then trapping will be confined to capturing only if there is room in the BCTP. Hunting would be the method of removal next year. NPT is frustrated with the park trapping during the hunt, and would like to know when the park intends to start trapping this year. The park responded that they would immediately start trapping passively as soon as the bison move to the boundary. They hope to discontinue trapping early, and would continue coordination during the hunt calls. NPT felt that the BCTP takes precedence over the treaty hunts and wants assurance that the Tribes will have some success this year. Successful hunts are impacted by trapping and hazing. The park responded that they let a lot of animals through last year, despite their aggressive trapping. They reminded all that they have an agreement to provide animals to the TFTP and are willing to provide to more Tribes. The park looks to partners to help with this program (e.g., transport, security, processing).

The park has about 137 bison in quarantine that will be cleared for release this winter, and another 13 to be released next winter. They have 58 in initial testing and expect to be able to take 80 in this winter. APHIS has 60-80 animals that will be cleared this winter and they have asked the park to capture 40 for them.

The park made a plea to Tribes (present and not) to let the park know what Tribal needs are.

After the public feedback session, the park added the following: The park does look at bison genetics, and has seen the same amount of variation and diversity since they started tracking in the 1990s. Also, the park sees no reason to vary from managing 3,500-6,000 animals in order to accommodate different needs, values, and tolerance. The threshold of 5,200 animals was established, because if there was no migration, the park population would then exceed 6,000 animals. Tim also added that the park can support 10,000 bison, but that was never a goal for the park.

## V. IBMP OPERATIONS PLAN REVIEW & APPROVAL

### A. Adopting the IBMP Operations Plan

Deb shared that no changes were received for the Operations Plan, and this was the partners' opportunity to discuss any changes. Christy shared that this year's Operations Plan is identical to last year's and asked for discussion. She said once this discussion concludes, FWP will send out the plan to collect electronic signatures. There was no discussion and the plan was approved without objection.

**IBMP Partners Decision #3** – The 2025-2026 Operations Plan was approved by all partners present.

## VI. PUBLIC FEEDBACK SESSION

Five members of the public raised their hands to indicate they wanted to speak during the feedback session. They were given the opportunity to speak for six minutes (30 minutes (as stated in the Protocols) divided by five). The following members of the public spoke during this session:

- Joseph Demare, member of the public

- Stephany Seay, Roam Free Nation
- Clint Nagel, Gallatin Wildlife Association
- Michelle Uberauga, National Parks Conservation Association
- Cin Dee Rosin, Roam Free Nation

## VII. IBMP CALENDAR WITH LOOK TO 2026

Christy thanked the partners and public for attending. She shared it was a privilege to be lead partner for the past year and thanked Kathy for her guidance at the transition. FWP will hand-off lead partner responsibilities to APHIS on January 1, 2026.

## VIII. CLOSING

Deb reviewed the action items.

- Annual report edits are due to Kelly by December 1. FWP will post the final annual report by December 31.
- The Operations Plan will be sent out for electronic signatures.
- FWP and Deb will schedule a meeting with APHIS in December to ensure a smooth transition.

The Spring 2026 IBMP meeting will be held in West Yellowstone on May 13-14 and will include a field trip. The Fall 2026 IBMP meeting is tentatively scheduled for October 28 in Butte. Deb will reach out to APHIS to see if that date works for them.

CSKT closed the meeting with a prayer.

The meeting adjourned.

## APPENDIX A

### Attendance Record

(In addition to IBMP Partner Primaries and Seconds listed on page 1)

#### IBMP Partner Staff

**FWP** – Warren Hansen, Region 3 Wildlife Biologist

**CSKT** – Whisper Camel-Means, Fish, Wildlife, Recreation, and Conservation Division Manager; Kari Kingery, Wildlife Program Manager; Joe Paul, Biologist; Dan McClure, Chief Tribal Conservation Officer; Shannon Clairmont, Lead Biologist

**USFS/CGNF** – Josh Hemingway, Wildlife Program Manager

**Governor's Office** - Rachel Meredith, Legal Counsel; Rich Roth, Natural Policy Advisor