Brucellosis in bison, elk threatens livestock

By LISA SCHMIDT

Druska Kinkie is no longer tired, but she cannot quit now.

The Park County, Mont., cattle producer has been working to keep her family’s ranch sale from the political and biological implications of abortion-inducing brucellosis for more than five years, but her battle is hardly over.

Druska and her husband, Rich, raise cattle on private land within Montana’s Designated Surveillance Area, or DSA, near Yellowstone National Park, where the infected bison and elk migrate from.

Federal Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service agents estimate more than 50% of the Yellowstone bison test positive for brucellosis. Montana cattle producers would lose their valuable market for replacement heifers and high-quality cattle if the abortion-causing disease passed to domestic livestock.

One producer had a five-year deal to sell replacement heifers to a producer outside the DSA. But regulations require that those heifers be bled now and again in the spring, and that was a red flag for the buyer. He didn’t want to bring problems to his herd, and he got a lot of pressure from his neighbors to not buy from within the DSA, Kinkie says.

People who raise cattle within the surveillance boundary “who want to pasture their cattle outside the DSA futilitie a brick wall,” says Dick Raths, a Lewistown veterinarian who chairs the Montana Stockgrowers Association Cattle Health, Brands and Theft committee. “This issue definitely inhibits commerce.”

Bison management plan

For years, Montana officials received a political black eye because they and their federal bison management partners authorized hazing and lethal population control to keep the bison within park boundaries.

Rangeland studies suggest Yellowstone National Park can provide habitat for only about 650 bison, yet the park’s bison population has remained above 3,000 since 2001. The latest population count estimated 3,700 bison.

So the Interagency Bison Management partners asked for a bison management plan to be developed.

The Citizens Working Group came up with recommendations to address disease risk reduction, bison population control and habitat.

The group’s recommendations emphasize fair chase hunting, rely on producers to vaccinate their cattle instead of controlling the disease in bison, and support removing obstacles to further research on brucellosis.

Also, the group supports modern range management and establishing year-round bison habitat outside Yellowstone National Park.

Residents speak up

At listening sessions across Montana, the public voiced concerns about containing bison that might live outside the park. But Montana, like much of the West, is a fence-out state. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks management documents recognize fencing is more effective when bison are excluded from areas instead of contained.

In other words, livestock producers will fence bison out instead of the department fencing them in. “It may take five or 10 or 15 years, but eventually this issue will affect every producer in Montana,” says Druska.


Bison listed as species of concern

NORTH American bison are considered a species of concern because of severely limited populations and habitat throughout the world.

Some scientists estimate a minimum viable population of 400 animals in a herd to keep genetic diversity; others say 1,000 per herd is best.

In Montana, bison are listed as S2, or a species of concern “at risk because of very limited and/or potentially declining population numbers, range and/or habitat; making it vulnerable to global extinction or extirpation in the state,” notes a background document by the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks department, titled “Plains Bison Ecology, Management and Conservation” (see fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/management/bison). Besides Yellowstone National Park, Montana hosts a public captive bison herd of 400 head at the National Bison Range in the northeastern part of the state.

Bison management timeline

1939 and 1943: Yellowstone National Park officials estimate the average winter carrying capacity on the northern range as 7,059 elk and 245 bison.

1943: The director of the U.S. Park Service accepts a recommendation to maintain the northern range bison herd at 350 and the central population at about 650.

Before 1969: Yellowstone officials cull and manage bison.

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1969: Yellowstone officials place a moratorium on culling, instead allowing bison populations to fluctuate with weather, predators and resource limitations.

1980s: Bison regularly migrated out of Yellowstone during winter.

2000: Interagency Bison Management Plan, or IBMP, established parameters, including bison not being allowed to maintain a year-round population outside the park, except in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness north of Yellowstone. Bison would be hazed back into the park by May 15.

2005: Hunting permits issued for areas adjacent to Yellowstone National Park.

January 2010: Montana Department of Livestock implements the Designated Surveillance Area, or DSA, of about 6,000 square miles, where livestock producers within DSA boundaries are required to vaccinate for brucellosis and test sexually-intact cattle prior to sale or movement beyond the DSA boundaries.

March 2011: IBMP allows bison more area to migrate on to U.S. forest Service land. Bison migrate to private land.

April 2011: Park County Stockgrowers and Park County Commissioners file suit to reverse management changes.

November 2011: Citizens Working Group, or CWG, offers recommendations for bison management.

February: IBMP partners are expected to implement CWG recommendations.