

**Testimony of Dr. John Clifford, Deputy Administrator for Veterinary Services  
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U.S. Department of Agriculture**

**Before the  
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands  
House Natural Resources Committee  
Yellowstone National Park Bison Management Plan  
March 20, 2007**

Thank you for the opportunity to be here this morning. My name is Dr. John Clifford, and I am Deputy Administrator for Veterinary Services with the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). In this position, I also serve as USDA's Chief Veterinary Officer.

My Agency's role in the management of Yellowstone National Park's bison herd is to prevent the transmission of brucellosis, a serious bacterial disease of animals, and a threat to the health of livestock in the Greater Yellowstone area. I'd like to begin my testimony by providing information on the disease and the longstanding efforts of USDA, States, industry, and other cooperators to eliminate it from cattle in the United States.

**Background on Brucellosis and the Cooperative State-Federal Eradication Program**

USDA has been working with State and industry cooperators to eradicate brucellosis for many years. The disease affects many species of animals, including humans, and is caused by the bacteria *Brucella abortus*. Cattle, bison, and elk are especially susceptible to the disease.

The Brucellosis Eradication Program was launched on a national scale in 1934, and a cooperative effort among the Federal Government, States, and livestock producers began in 1954. All States participate in APHIS' Cooperative State-Federal Brucellosis Eradication Program and are assigned a brucellosis classification by APHIS. These classifications—Class Free, Class A, Class B, and Class C—are based on herd prevalence rates for the disease and require various levels of movement restrictions and surveillance activities. Most importantly to cattle producers, restrictions on moving cattle interstate become less stringent as a State approaches or achieves Class Free classification.

The program, which is predicated on cattle slaughter surveillance and milk ring test surveillance, has been highly effective. In 1956, 124,000 affected herds were found in the United States as a result of testing. By 1992, this number had dropped to 700, and as of March 13, 2007, no known affected domestic cattle or bison herds remained in the entire United States

Annual brucellosis-related losses due to aborted fetuses, reduced breeding efficiency, and lowered milk production have decreased from more than \$400 million in 1952 to almost zero today. Currently 48 States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands are free of brucellosis. Idaho and Texas—with herd infection rates of less than 0.1 percent in each State—both hold

Class A classification. States with Class A classification must demonstrate there are no infected herds within a two year period to obtain Free classification status. Idaho and Texas are currently in the qualifying stage for Free classification. USDA is hopeful the Cooperative State-Federal Brucellosis Eradication Program will achieve the goal of nationwide elimination of this disease from domestic cattle and domestic bison within the next year.

### **Brucellosis in the Greater Yellowstone Area (GYA)**

In 2004, Wyoming lost its brucellosis Class-free classification due to the detection of four brucellosis-affected cattle herds that were most likely infected by elk from the GYA. After additional surveillance testing and epidemiological investigation, APHIS approved Wyoming's Class Free classification in September 2006.

In November 2005, two cattle herds in Idaho were found infected with brucellosis and the State subsequently lost its Class Free classification. Again, these infections are also most likely linked epidemiologically to brucellosis-infected elk from the GYA. Idaho will be eligible to regain Class Free classification after completing a 12-consecutive month period of finding no additional brucellosis-affected herds, provided all other brucellosis Class Free requirements have been met.

Clearly, these recent situations involving brucellosis in Wyoming and Idaho illustrate that the GYA is the last known reservoir of brucellosis in wild elk and/or wild bison in the United States. Surveillance testing of wild bison from the Yellowstone National Park herd indicates that approximately 50 percent of the bison in the Park have been exposed to and are potentially infected with the disease. Also, all elk (~100,000) and bison (~5,000) across the 20,000,000 acre GYA are known to be exposed at variable levels to brucellosis. There have also been published reports and scientifically documented cases of bison transmitting brucellosis to cattle under both range and experimental conditions. It is generally accepted that transmission can occur through direct contact between infected bison and non-infected cattle if they are allowed to co-mingle on lands adjacent to the Park. Transmission could also occur if susceptible animals come into contact with aborted fetuses and afterbirth that carry the disease.

### **Addressing Brucellosis in the GYA**

As the Agency responsible for protecting the U.S. cattle industry from serious diseases like brucellosis, APHIS is responsible for working with the GYA States, the cattle industry, and the National Park Service to address the risk of brucellosis transmission from wildlife leaving the Park to cattle that graze in surrounding areas. Our sister agency within USDA, the U.S. Forest Service, also plays a key role in managing the public lands on the Gallatin National Forest, adjacent to Yellowstone National Park in Montana.

We acknowledge that this is a complex issue on a number of fronts. For our part in the Greater Yellowstone Interagency Brucellosis Committee (GYIBC), USDA has pledged its full cooperation to protect the economic viability of the livestock industry by eliminating brucellosis while sustaining populations of free-ranging wild elk and bison in the GYA.

The only way we can accomplish these dual goals is to continue cooperating with Federal and State agencies in the management of the livestock and wild bison and elk in the GYA. We recognize the risk this disease poses to livestock and wildlife, as well as the financial hardship it has caused producers. Eliminating brucellosis in the GYA is of vitally important to achieving our ultimate, shared goal—eradicating the disease throughout the entire United States.

### **Current Interagency Bison Management Plan**

The current Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) that the cooperating partners operate under carefully balances the need to preserve the Yellowstone bison herd with the need to prevent the spread of brucellosis from bison to cattle that graze on lands surrounding the Park.

The bison management plan relies on the spatial and temporal separation of bison from cattle that graze in areas surrounding the Park. As bison leave the Park, management zones are used to monitor the movement of bison and ensure that bison and cattle do not commingle. Depending on the bison population size, there is an array of risk management options to prevent transmission of brucellosis from bison to cattle during the winter, including non-lethal hazing, shooting, capture, testing, and shipment to slaughter.

Any bison that remain outside the Park's boundaries in the spring are hazed back into the Park, captured or removed. As an additional disease safeguard, cattle are not allowed to graze on public land outside the Park until a sufficient amount of time has passed after the bison leave to ensure that the brucellosis bacteria is no longer viable in the environment. However, at this time, the Gallatin National Forest has vacated all grazing allotments located in the bison Management Zone next to the Park.

While it is unfortunate that National Park Service employees must sometimes remove bison that have left Yellowstone National Park, we must emphasize that these operations are targeted and only one component of a much larger effort to preserve the health and viability of the entire bison herd. In this regard, all of the Federal bison management actions are in accordance with the provisions of the bison management plan and the requirements of Federal law; the management plan also includes a commitment to treating bison in a humane fashion during hazing, capture, and other handling.

### **The Roles of the U.S. Forest Service Under the Interagency Bison Management Plan**

As a full partner in the Interagency Bison Management Plan, USDA's Forest Service provides these main functions:

- Management of wildlife habitat on National Forest System lands (NFS) outside of the Park in Montana;
- Law enforcement support to the counties and the State of Montana during bison management operations outside the Park; and
- Administration of a special use permit for the State's (Department of Livestock) bison capture facility located in the Horse Butte area, west of the Park.

Under federal laws and the Land Management Plan, the Gallatin National Forest lands are managed for multiple use purposes which include livestock grazing. Federal grazing permits are issued to private producers. However, given the Forest Service management emphasis to provide for wildlife habitat, all Gallatin National Forest cattle grazing allotments located in the Bison Management Zone next to the Park have been held vacant for 3-10 years. Holding these allotments vacant from cattle grazing fulfills one of the objectives in the Interagency Bison Management Plan, which calls for creating spatial and temporal separation of bison and cattle. Outside of Yellowstone Park, but within the Bison Management Zone closest to the Park, domestic cattle graze on approximately 6,000 acres of private ranch lands on the west and north sides of the Park; outside of this Zone there are numerous private cattle ranches as well as several active grazing allotments on NFS lands.

### **Royal Teton Ranch Land Conservation Project**

The 12,000-acre Royal Teton Ranch (“RTR”) owned by the Church Universal and Triumphant, is located north of Yellowstone National Park but within the Gallatin National Forest proclamation boundary. This property provides critical wildlife migration and winter range habitat for numerous species, including grizzly bear, Yellowstone cutthroat trout, elk, bighorn sheep, antelope, bison and mule deer.

In 1997, the Forest Service partnered with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation to develop a multi-component agreement with the Church that included fee purchases, conservation easements and a long-term right of first refusal for potential acquisition of the remaining RTR lands.

The stated purposes of the 1997 RTR project were to:

- Conserve critical wildlife habitat north of Yellowstone Park for numerous wildlife species.
- Improve public access for recreational opportunities, and
- Protect the geothermal resources on the RTR lands.

The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Forest Service, and Department of the Interior (DOI) successfully completed the RTR fee and easement purchases in 1999 using \$6.7 million in LWCF funds appropriated to the Forest Service and \$6.3 million in LWCF funds appropriated to DOI. In the project, about 5,300 acres of RTR lands were acquired by fee purchases and another 1,500 acres were protected through a conservation easement. In addition, the Church granted a conservation easement prohibiting development of geothermal resources on the entire ranch. All the acquired RTR lands and easements are held and managed by the Forest Service.

All cattle grazing allotments located on the lands acquired by the United States in this purchase are held vacant. The Church waived their federal grazing permit back to the Gallatin National Forest in 2004, and this land is also held vacant.

From the project onset (1999), the Forest Service, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and conservation partners all clearly recognized that the RTR project would be a positive step for

wildlife conservation, but that it would not, by itself, fully resolve the bison management issues in that area. Acquisition of the RTR lands and conservation easements do, in fact, protect some of the historic migratory and winter range habitat for bison, and have kept future options open. However, nearly half of the RTR ranch remains private land, and the Church has elected to continue to graze its cattle on those remaining private lands.

### **New Draft Memorandum of Understanding Among the GYIBC Partners**

As I mentioned a moment ago, the current bison management plan is a tool for preventing the spread of brucellosis from bison to cattle on grazing lands in Montana adjacent to Yellowstone National Park. USDA and the Department of the Interior (DOI) believe the next step is to develop a long-term plan for the elimination of brucellosis from the GYA. We are in the initial stages of this process, but fully acknowledge that any disease elimination plan must maintain the wild and free-roaming bison and elk herds in the Park.

Our concept is for this plan to be developed by disease and wildlife management experts and to include public input. Once brucellosis is eliminated from the Greater Yellowstone Area, bison and elk can roam more freely without the need for brucellosis intervention strategies. The animals may also be moved to other parks and tribal lands as desired by wildlife managers and other interested parties.

In this regard, USDA and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) agreed upon a revised GYIBC memorandum of understanding (MOU) after the previous MOU expired. In May 2005, the Federal agencies presented the draft to Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming for consideration. Finalizing the updated version of the MOU originally presented in 2005 (the updated version reflects Idaho's loss of brucellosis Class-Free status earlier this year, as well as Wyoming's September 2006 upgrade to Class-Free status) is a priority for USDA. To that end, USDA and DOI will soon send out a letter enclosing a copy of the updated version of the MOU and urging participating States to sign the document.

The draft we will soon share with our State partners apprises the Governors that we will take into account their views, as well as the input of all our stakeholders, as we move forward with finalizing the MOU. I'd like to note, however, that we strongly believe that we need to develop a disease elimination plan that also contains effective means of managing the bison herd. In the near term, management of the risk of disease transmission from wildlife to livestock is a prudent approach to maintaining the brucellosis-free status of the GYA states. In the long term, elimination of brucellosis from GYA wildlife concurrent with protection of the elk and bison populations will require continued development and implementation of best management practices, vaccines, vaccine delivery systems, and diagnostic techniques.

We know that finalizing this MOU is an important priority for all parties. Implementing the final MOU—in full cooperation with our Federal and State partners—is an integral part of our efforts to eliminate brucellosis from elk and bison herds in the GYA and to prevent reintroduction of this destructive disease into cattle herds in surrounding States.

### **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman, while eliminating brucellosis from elk and bison herds in the GYA—and preventing reintroduction of the disease into those herds—is challenging, it is not an impossible task. It will require the use of a number of innovative and time-proven disease elimination and management tools and the cooperation of our State, Federal, and industry partners.

As I indicated previously, this is a goal we are striving very hard to achieve. I believe finalization of a new GYIBC MOU, one that reflects the need for all parties to come together to develop a long-term plan for eliminating brucellosis from the GYA ecosystem, is the most important step we can take in the short-term to help accomplish our goals. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify this morning, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.