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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-638T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, Committee on Natural Resources, U.S. House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Yellowstone National Park, in northwest Wyoming, is home to a herd of about 3,600 free-roaming bison. Some of these bison routinely attempt to migrate from the park in the winter. Livestock owners and public officials in states bordering the park have concerns about the bison leaving the park because many are infected with brucellosis—a contagious bacterial disease that some fear could be transmitted to cattle, thus potentially threatening the economic health of the states' livestock industry. Other interested groups believe that the bison should be allowed to roam freely both within and outside the park.

In an effort to address these concerns, five federal and Montana state agencies agreed to an Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) in December 2000 that includes three main steps to “maintain a wild, free-ranging population of bison and address the risk of brucellosis transmission to protect the economic interest and viability of the livestock industry in Montana.”

This testimony discusses GAO's preliminary observations on the progress that has been made in implementing the IBMP and the extent to which bison have access to lands and an easement acquired for \$13 million in federal funds. It is based on GAO's visit to the greater Yellowstone area, interviews with federal and state officials and other interested stakeholders, and review of related documents.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-638T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaro@gao.gov.

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

Preliminary Observations on the Implementation of the Interagency Bison Management Plan

What GAO Found

More than 6 years after approving the IBMP, the five federal and state partnering agencies—the federal Department of the Interior's National Park Service and Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and Forest Service, and the state of Montana's Departments of Livestock and of Fish, Wildlife and Parks—remain in step one of the three-step plan primarily because cattle continue to graze on certain private lands. A key condition for the partner agencies to progress further under the plan requires that cattle no longer graze in the winter on certain private lands north of Yellowstone National Park and west of the Yellowstone River to minimize the risk of brucellosis transmission from bison to cattle; the agencies anticipated meeting this condition by the winter of 2002/2003. Until this condition is met, bison will not be allowed to roam beyond the park's northern border in this area. While a prior attempt to acquire grazing rights on these private lands was unsuccessful, Montana's Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks is currently negotiating with the private land owner to acquire grazing rights on these lands.

Yellowstone bison have limited access to the lands and conservation easement that federal agencies acquired north of the park. In 1998 and 1999, as part of a larger conservation effort to provide habitat for a variety of wildlife species, protect geothermal resources, and improve recreational access, federal agencies spent nearly \$13 million to acquire 5,263 acres and a conservation easement on 1,508 acres of private lands north of the park's border—lands towards which bison frequently attempt to migrate in the winter. The conservation easement prohibits development, such as the construction of commercial facilities and roads, on the private land; cattle grazing rights were retained by the land owner. The Yellowstone bison's access to these lands will remain limited until cattle no longer graze on the easement and certain other private lands in the area.

Bison in Yellowstone National Park



Source: GAO.