

**National Parks Conservation Association  
Greater Yellowstone Coalition  
Montana Wildlife Federation  
National Wildlife Federation**

Honorable Senator Max Baucus  
511 Hart Senate Office Bldg.  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Honorable Senator Jon Tester  
204 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510-2604

Honorable Representative Dennis Rehberg  
516 Cannon HOB  
Washington, DC, 20515

Delivered via fax and e-mail

March 11, 2008

Dear Senators Baucus and Tester and Congressman Rehberg:

We write to urge your leadership in helping to finalize an historic agreement that will benefit Montana's livestock industry, hunters, wildlife-based tourism and Yellowstone National Park's iconic bison population.

The Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP), finalized in 2000 and signed by the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service, U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Montana Department of Livestock, is a three-step plan for managing bison on the northern and western sides of Yellowstone National Park. The dual goals of the IBMP are 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.”

Our organizations support the dual goals in the IBMP. However, in the nearly 8 years after completion of the IBMP, Yellowstone's bison remain restricted to Yellowstone National Park because of the five federal and state partner agencies' failure to move beyond step one of the plan. As a result, bison attempting to leave Yellowstone are shipped to slaughter, and over 900 bison have met this fate in just the past five weeks.

A key condition that the IBMP prescribes for moving past step one requires that cattle no longer graze in the winter on lands owned and managed by the Royal Teton Ranch (RTR) adjacent to Yellowstone National Park. The IBMP anticipated meeting this condition by the winter of 2002/2003, but the agencies have heretofore failed to complete an agreement with RTR.

As you are aware, representatives from the state of Montana and the Royal Teton Ranch (RTR) have recently finalized a 30-year agreement that will retire livestock grazing and create a 2,500 acre bison migration corridor through the RTR, which will provide access to an additional 7,500 acres of winter habitat on public lands. In exchange, the Royal Teton Ranch will receive payment from a combination of public and private partners. The agreement will allow limited numbers of bison to access key winter range on public lands outside of the park, will continue to achieve separation of bison and livestock and will also open up new opportunities for public hunting, and viewing of bison.

To pay for the estimated \$2.8 million dollar cost of the agreement, it was anticipated that the federal partners would do their part by providing the final \$1.5 million to complete the funding package. Our organizations, along with others, have expressed our willingness to raise private financial support to help fund this voluntary agreement. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks has also expressed a willingness to support this agreement as part of its obligation to honor both goals of the plan.

Unfortunately, while the state of Montana and local partners have committed massive amounts of time, effort and their own resources to help move the IBMP beyond step one, the federal agencies have thus far failed to commit any resources toward completing the RTR agreement. More specifically, a request was made to APHIS for a \$1.5 million contribution, but thus far APHIS has been unwilling to commit its resources to this project. This apparent refusal comes at a time when APHIS is spending over \$1.5 million each year (\$1.6 million in 2007 and \$1.8 million in 2006) on hazing, capturing and slaughter of bison, quarantine research, and other disease management programs. APHIS' unwillingness to complete the deal that will allow the IBMP to move from step one to step two causes us to question whether they are truly committed to implementing all parts of the IBMP.

Without a \$1.5 million commitment by federal partners, the RTR agreement will fail, the IBMP will remain stuck in step one and the annual slaughter of Yellowstone's bison will continue unabated. The RTR agreement represents the biggest step forward for Yellowstone bison in over a decade, and will result in brucellosis-free bison roaming onto traditional winter habitat outside Yellowstone, as planned for in the IBMP. If the agreement is not funded with help from federal partners, such an opportunity will likely not present itself again in our lifetimes, if ever.

We therefore ask for your leadership in helping secure the \$1.5 million federal portion of the RTR agreement. Specifically, we ask that you work with other Congressional leaders as well as with the leaders within APHIS, NPS and USFS—to secure the \$1.5 million commitment during this next appropriations cycle.

We thank you for your leadership in helping the agencies live up to their responsibilities articulated in the IBMP.

Sincerely,

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CC:

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Hon. Senator Herb Kohl  
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Hon. Rep. Norm Dicks  
Hon. Rep. Maurice Hinchey  
Hon. Rep. Jack Kingston  
Hon. Rep. Nick Rahall  
Hon. Rep. Todd Tiahrt  
Secretary of Agriculture Ed Schafer  
Director Mary Bomar, National Park Service  
Hon. Bruce Knight, Undersecretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs, USDA  
Chief Gail Kimbell, U.S. Forest Service  
Cindy Smith, Administrator, APHIS