

Wyo official, tribes, conservation groups oppose privatization plan

## Turner secures bison deal

By MATTHEW BROWN - Associated Press writer | Posted: Wednesday, February 3, 2010 12:15 am |



A rutting bull bison gives a stern look in Yellowstone National Park's Hayden Valley in this photo taken in late August. (Mark Gocke/Star-Tribune correspondent)

BILLINGS, Mont. -- Billionaire Ted Turner is getting 88 Yellowstone National Park bison from a faltering Montana program that was supposed to put the disease-free animals on public or tribal lands.

The animals were spared several years ago from a periodic slaughter of bison leaving Yellowstone because of worries about animal disease.

They are now in a joint federal-state quarantine compound in southern Montana's Paradise Valley but could be moved to Turner's ranch within weeks, state officials said Tuesday.

Montana turned down requests from a Wyoming state park and at least two American Indian reservations that wanted some or all of the bison.

Turner will care for the animals for five years and in return wants 75 percent of their offspring, an estimated 188 bison. Montana would get an estimated 150 bison back in 2015.

Conservation groups, a coalition of tribes and U.S. Department of Agriculture veterinarians opposed the proposal as a privatization of public wildlife.

"There were a lot of people that wanted them on public lands. We're not ready," said Montana wildlife chief David Risley. "The Turner option, all it does is buy us time to come up with a long-term solution."

Turner, founder of CNN and former owner of the Atlanta Braves, already owns more than 50,000 bison at sites across the country. He sells bison burgers through his namesake restaurant chain but wants the Yellowstone animals because of their pure genetics.

Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer invited Turner to submit an offer last fall, after an earlier plan to move them onto the Wind River Indian Reservation fell through.

The Indian reservation was not equipped to take the bison and there were fears Wyoming would sell some of the animals, Risley said.

Wyoming state veterinarian Jim Logan said there was no such intent. He argued the animals should have been kept in the public domain instead of given to Turner.

"But politics and money and names talk," Logan said.

Guernsey State Park had sought 14 of the animals. Tribes on Montana's Fort Belknap Indian Reservation and Fort Peck Indian Reservation also asked for some of the bison but were denied.

Turner had said that if some of the animals went to Wyoming, Montana would get fewer bison back because he needed a certain number to justify his expenses. Those costs are estimated to be \$480,000 over five years, or about \$2,500 for every bison he will keep.

State and federal agencies have spent up to \$250,000 annually on the quarantine program since 2005.

The bison will be kept on 12,000 acres on Turner's Flying D Ranch south of Bozeman.

The ranch already has about 4,500 commercial bison and thousands of wild elk hunted by paying clients and members of the public. A Turner spokesman said Tuesday that the Yellowstone bison were too valuable to hunt and could be mixed in with a herd of bison he owns in New Mexico.

"We welcome the opportunity to be partners with FWP (Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks) in the stewardship of these iconic bison," said Russell Miller with Turner Enterprises.

Miller said the deal with the state "conserves Yellowstone bison genetics and increases the number of bison available to populate public and tribal lands."

Opponents of Turner's plan questioned whether turning the bison over to a private enterprise was legal. But Montana officials contended that under state law, they had broad latitude with the animals because they are part of a research project.