

## Wyoming brucellosis group examines federal proposal

'Elimination zone' around Yellowstone area receives mixed reviews

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CODY - Members of the Wyoming Brucellosis Coordination Team and others met Thursday to discuss a federal proposal to declare most of the nation outside the greater Yellowstone area "brucellosis free." The group also reviewed a plan to move bison from Yellowstone National Park to a Wyoming Indian reservation.

The proposal to create a National Brucellosis Elimination Zone got a mixed reaction from committee members, with one federal manager saying that an early draft of the scheme was pulled from a U.S. Department of Agriculture Web site after being criticized as incomplete.

A revised version will be published soon in the Federal Register, and public meetings will follow in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming, said Bret Combs, head veterinarian in Wyoming for the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

Combs said that establishing an elimination zone in the greater Yellowstone area would save the agency money on nationwide brucellosis testing and administration duties. But he did not know how much would be saved and could not promise that money would be spent on addressing the disease within the zone.

Brucellosis can cause miscarriages in animals, and livestock producers in other areas often demand negative test results before accepting cattle raised around Yellowstone. Rare cases of infected cattle can lead to expensive testing, and sometimes the elimination of entire herds, costing the industry millions of dollars.

"For the last three years, all of the brucellosis that has been found in the country in domestic cattle has been found here around the greater Yellowstone area," Combs said.

He said that while the USDA remains focused on eradicating the disease, its persistence in Yellowstone-area elk and bison means that eradication may not happen for the foreseeable future.

### Out of business

"We want to get out of the brucellosis business. We've been in it for 70 years, and we want to put this behind us," Combs said.

Walter Cook, state veterinarian, said creation of an elimination zone would be beneficial to ranchers in outlying parts of Wyoming and the rest of the country.

"No one there would have to worry about testing cattle for brucellosis ever again," he said

"People within the zone would still have restrictions," he said, but they would probably amount to about the same restrictions in place for managing the disease under current rules.

Frank Galey, dean of the University of Wyoming College of Agriculture, said he worried that the zone might amount to a "scarlet letter" for Yellowstone-area cattle herds.

Others worried that state and federal funding for research, testing and management of brucellosis would shrink or disappear as the problem was relegated to a relatively small number of ranchers inside the zone.

"I think it amounts to a National Brucellosis Expedience Zone for the federal government," said Pinedale rancher Albert Sommers.

"It's not going to do anything to eliminate the disease in this area," he said, adding that federal monitoring and testing requirements under the plan "could be so restrictive that it could put people out of business."

Sommers said that Wyoming's best option is to take a "unified approach between wildlife and livestock" interests.

Robert Wharff, executive director of Wyoming Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, said that the USDA and the National Park Service were "diametrically opposed" in their approach to the disease, and he called on the Park Service to do more to eradicate it.

## Millions spent

The Park Service has spent millions on bison hazing and quarantine, research into vaccine development and delivery and other efforts, said John Keck, Park Service coordinator in Wyoming.

"But a lot of the problem in Wyoming is from the elk, and there are major populations on public lands" outside the park, he said, adding that the only certain solution - destroying entire infected elk herds in Yellowstone and elsewhere - was not politically or practically feasible.

Members of the Northern Arapahoe Tribe are working to move 41 Yellowstone Park bison from a Montana holding facility to the Wind River Reservation, where they will be quarantined for five years and monitored for brucellosis.

Jim Logan, assistant state veterinarian, said the tribe was installing fencing on a 32,000-acre enclosure and was working in the meantime to contract with nearby private ranches to temporarily accept the bison, which were desirable because they were genetically linked to the nation's last group of wild bison.

Before the bison could be moved to Wyoming, herd management agreements would have to be drafted among federal regulators, the tribe and any ranchers involved, Logan said.

He said the bison had been quarantined near the park for three years and each animal had tested negative for brucellosis at least nine times; some have been tested 17 times.

The tribe would eventually like to manage a herd of up to 300 bison, but there is no target date for when the first group of animals will be transferred, he said.

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