

## **Don't Feed the Bison: Farmer 101 for Yellowstone**

By Bob Jackson

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Yellowstone National Park is still reeling from its early winter stance of hard-line bison management. With the killing of a thousand bison and a distinct possibility of another thousand being sent off to slaughter, Yellowstone administration has abruptly changed course. It is now planning to once again feed "brucellosis free" bison at its North Boundary.

The Park has fed bison on its boundary in years past, but this year said it would stop, citing possible habituation of its bison as the basis for this decision. Then, the extent of the record slaughter – more than one in four of all of Yellowstone's bison have been eliminated – appeared to cause a reversal.

In two February press releases, the Park signaled its latest stance. These announcements required careful reading because each had a qualifier. They said the Park would not feed bison for "a long period of time" due to habituation concerns. What the heck does "long period of time" mean? From my own experience I know any hoofed animal habituation occurs with the first pleasant mouth full.

On my bison farm, if a calf or yearling eats corn just once they will search it out again as an adult. Every rancher knows that choice hay is hard to resist for any four-hoofed animal, be it cow, elk, or buffalo... especially if graze is covered by snow. The 100 mile migration by Yellowstone Elk to the feeding grounds at the Jackson Hole Elk Refuge is proof for any state or federal biologist that feeding "works" – works for hunters that is.

As a Yellowstone ranger for 30 years, I also know outfitters illegally salt elk on the boundary in the spring because it means elk come back to that same spot during the hunting season. Not feeding for "long periods of time" is a phrase pulled out of spin politics, not animal husbandry.

Yellowstone's knowledge of the adverse affects of feeding wildlife and the effort it expends to curtail it is more extensive than anywhere else in the world. Yellowstone hammers this message into every tourist coming through its gates: **DO NOT FEED THE WILDLIFE**. One always hears Park biologists say, "Feed a bear once and he's hooked" or, more to the point, "a fed bear is a dead bear."

Although feeding is a big no-no when it comes to wildlife management in Yellowstone, park staff in the Ranger Division are assigned to roll out the big bales of hay everyday for its bison on its North Boundary. As the Doc Holiday character said in movie *Tombstone*, "It appears my hypocrisy has no bounds."

Of course, the park sees no connection between what they are doing and what a tourist is doing...only the effects of what the Park is doing are a hundred times worse. Where are the Park biologists when feedlot decisions like this are made?

Feeding means bison become "addicted" to that feed, and in the coming years these animals bring more and more of their buddies to the cookie jar. The feeding in years past means Yellowstone is culpable now. It is the reason killing is going on to the extent it has this year and the reason, why, right now, so many more bison are in pilgrimage to hay.

The decision to continue feeding, then later release brucellosis free bison back into the Park, insures even more travel to what for the bison is Mecca next year. What is worse is that all

this pied piper-ing takes place on its boundaries where no member of the Interagency Bison Management Plan wants these supposedly “diseased” animals.

With the need to convey that “all is well,” Yellowstone fends off critics by contending that its bison management program is run according to the “best available science.” Sadly, Yellowstone’s “best science” is way off the mark and its administrators could use a refresher course of Farmer 101.

Yellowstone is now on a slippery slope. Its actions are sure to fuel demands by its agriculture adversaries to continue feeding its “diseased” bison, but to do it well within Park confines. Most of the Bison Management team members (Division of Livestock, Montana Parks and USDA-APHIS) are livestock savvy. Maybe this is why livestock components of this interagency team are keeping their mouths shut when the Park panics and resumes feeding. They know what the outcome is and they know what they are going to insist on in the future.

If the Park stays on course with political feed grounds they are in jeopardy of not only reconstructing a former environmental disaster, the Lamar Buffalo Ranch, but also building a similar one on its West side to keep those bison in the Park interior. I can see it now, another buffalo “ranch” at Old Faithful with tourists ducking all those cow pies being blown out of the geysers.

The long term consequences of the Park’s feeding practices for the welfare of Yellowstone’s buffalo add still another element. Its wild herds are being transformed into domestic cattle. Spiritually, the buffalo are being taught how to moo instead of roar.

What are Yellowstone administrators’ plans for dealing with this dilemma? From what I can tell, the secret plan is to leave this escalating mess for future administrators.

The reality on the ground demonstrates to me that the Park’s panicked collective bison management team does not understand bison and the reasons why bison are doing what they are doing. They need to start thinking of bison being composed of families, the same structure as elephants possess. Then the answers become clear. The Park needs to provide security for its bison in the summer after all the hazing it does in the winter. Then bison mothers and fathers do not seek out new homes. It also needs to stop splitting up these families when they get to the boundary. It is causing chaos and the effect is an environmental disaster in itself.

Something has to change in Yellowstone. Unfortunately, none of the Park rank and file, the majority of who understand the consequences of feeding bison, can expect to override career administrators, but they should have at least the ability to register their thoughts without fear of reprisal.

In the end, regardless of whether Yellowstone’s bison mismanagement is inadvertent or knowing, a national treasure is being lost.

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