

Montana Cattlemen's Association

Vaughn, Montana, 59487

re: bison / brucellosis

Gentlemen:

I have done several Google searches using different keywords and switching the syntax around, and I am unable to find even one documented instance of wild bison infecting domestic cattle with brucellosis.

I am certain this is an area of interest to your group, and wonder if perhaps you might have some information that would shed more light on this issue.

I am not interested in "potentials" or "possibilities". I am interested only in any actual DOCUMENTED instances in which wild bison have infected domestic cattle on the North American continent within the last 83 years (since 1934.)

Thank you sincerely for your time and consideration.

I anxiously await your reply.

Brian Kirk

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Dear Mr. Kirk:

I volunteered to respond to your question on the part of the rest of the board and officers of the MCA. I believe that you are correct that there have been no documented direct transmissions of Brucellosis from bison to cattle in recent decades. This is a good testimony to the effectiveness of Park and Veterinary Authorities efforts to keep bison and cattle from comingling. I mention recent decades because I really don't know what occurred pre-Google. I am not an expert on these issues and for a definitive answer you should contact the US Chief Veterinary Officer, Dr. Jack Shere at USDA/APHIS/Veterinary Service. Someone in his Agency most certainly knows the answer to your question.

Recent incidents of Brucellosis in cattle in the areas adjacent to Yellowstone Park appear to have been caused by elk. Again, I am not an expert on these issues but elk and bison have been shown to have

cross-infected each other a number of times over a long period. The direction of transmission tends to be from bison to elk because bison have a higher rate of incidence, but elk now harbor their own self-sustaining infection. The extent of the range where infected elk have been recorded is increasing. It is a worrisome issue. Having one's herd quarantined is a really traumatic experience in more ways than just financial, and financially it can put you out of business.

I noticed from the wording of your letter that you preface your question from 1934, the year that the Brucellosis eradication program began. This means that you understand that Brucellosis is a life-threatening disease in humans and therefore it's eradication is a public health issue. If it were not a zoonotic disease, there would not be an eradication program. Livestock producers deal with a number of abortive diseases and Brucellosis would be just one more except for the fact that it is dangerous for humans.

I visited Yellowstone Park just a few weeks ago and it was very disturbing to see the walking skeletons. Not a blade of grass from Gardner to the Roosevelt Lodge. A good prolonged spring storm would certainly kill a number of bison. I don't understand why some people feel that starvation is preferable to rounding up a big bunch and culling out the older ones.

The news reported that they were able to cull 1200 head this year. Those without Brucellosis were given to Native American Tribes to stock their herds. A few were harvested by Native Americans, and the rest sent to slaughter. However, there are still 2000 head more than what wildlife and range experts say is sustainable in the park. Why there is such public reaction opposing proper conservation management of the Park's range and animal resources is beyond me. I know that if I allowed my cattle to starve like the Park bison do, I would be prosecuted for cruelty to animals. Overgrazing such as what is happening in the Park should also be a crime.

I don't think that I answered your question definitively. You really should contact USDA as they are the ones in charge of the Brucellosis eradication program.

Sincerely yours,

Gilles Stockton

Board Director – Central District

Montana Cattlemen's Association

The Buffalo Divide

Gilles Stockton July 15, 2018

Recently a dear friend sent me an online appeal from the Montana Wilderness Association, an organization of which I know nothing. Their mission was to urge likeminded people to write the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to enhance the protection of the Musselshell Breaks. It so happens that I own land and have BLM grazing rights at the junction of the Missouri and Musselshell Breaks. After reading the attached material I wrote the following response and sent it to everyone on the email list.

Dear Sue,

The people behind this letter obviously have a long-term plan to displace ranchers from grazing cattle in the Musselshell Breaks. There is nothing, as they allege, that needs enhanced protection. Wildlife is more than abundant, range grass condition is excellent, the land cannot be used in any other manner such as farming because it is too hilly. BLM management regulations preclude other forms of development. In short, these people want to replace cows with free roaming buffalo, which will never happen. There will be a range war first. All that the proponents are doing is intentionally creating a division between rural Montanans and responsible conservation minded people.

In response to this email I received a rebuttal from a man name Dave, whom I do not know. I in turn responded adding comments to his message where I had an opinion to express or rebut. The exchange went as follows:

Gilles, you said that "Wildlife is more than abundant..." Millions of bison used to roam across the plains of Montana. Today we have about 5,000 that are confined to Yellowstone and a small area outside of the Park.

Me: According to Wikipedia there are over 500,000 bison in the United States. Ted Turner claims to own more than 50,000. If you want even more bison, there is nothing to stop you from raising more. Just don't expect someone else to pay to raise them for you.

Dave: The reason is private grazing on public lands. Brucellosis is a disease that was brought to the U.S. in cattle and transmitted to wildlife. There has never been a documented case of bison transmitting brucellosis back to a cow in the wild.

Me: The reason there is a program to eradicate brucellosis is to prevent the transmission of Undulant Fever to humans. If it was just a livestock disease there would not be such strict regulations. As it stand, the discovery of a brucellosis positive cow in a herd is a financial catastrophe for the owner. It is true that there is no documented case of a bison transmitting brucellosis directly to cattle, but this is because suspected brucellosis positive bison are not allowed to co-mingle with cattle. However, the bison cross transfer brucellosis to elk and elk give it to cattle. There is no easy solution to this dilemma. Vaccination is the only possibility.

Dave: So why would the ranchers care if bison are on public lands? Grass!

Me: It is about brucellosis and it is also about grass. I contribute a lot of grass to mule deer, white tail deer, and elk, not to mention smaller critters such as prairie dogs. Why would I or any other rancher want to add bison to that list. As a matter of record, how much grass do you contribute to wildlife?

Dave: It costs \$1.41 per AUM on public land. In contrast, it costs between \$20-30 per AUM on private land adjacent to the public land. In short, ranchers disguise their sweetheart deal by scaring the public with unfounded concerns about brucellosis.

Me: A trophy elk hunt on private land costs a lot more than the BLM recreation fee. This morning I was fixing fence on my FLM pasture. There were no hunters or recreationalists helping. A BLM permit is actually a property right. This come from the debut of BLM in the 1930's. With the collapse of the homestead area, much of what is now BLM was land abandoned by

homesteaders. The survivors used that land in an unregulated manner. BLM was established as a compromise. The surviving farmers and ranchers were granted permanent and inexpensive use of the grass and the government reserved the right to regulate the grazing levels and the rest of the public were given the right of multiple use. Needless to say, in the 1930's the rest of the public was not much concerned with the multiple use aspects. It is only in recent years that people like you want to expropriate the ranchers from using BLM and of course you do not seem to want to pay anything for the privilege of recreating. Ranchers may not pay much but they do pay, and they pay even in the case of fire or drought.

Dave: If you care about the truth don't worry, my organization is currently suing Zinke to let bison out of Yellowstone.

Me: Congratulations on suing Zinke. He is obviously a corporate shill.

Dave: A congressional oversight hearing was held last week on public lands grazing. The chairman of the committee complained that land management agencies are abandoning sound scientific principles for fear of disastrous and overzealous litigation.

Me: During my ranching career, we have gone through 2 droughts as severe as the drought in the 1930s and most BLM pastures are still in excellent range condition. Overall, they have been successful in their mission.

Dave: As a former biologist for the U.S. Forest Service, I vigorously disagree with that unfounded assertion. As an example that Sue referenced, there is a mountain in the Gravelly Range of southwest Montana called Bighorn Mountain. The reason that there are no bighorn sheep on Bighorn Mountain is because the U.S. Forest Service permits 15,000 domestic sheep to graze in the heart of the range. Domestic sheep carry diseases that are easily transmitted to bighorn sheep and cause immediate and massive die-offs.

Me: The disease has already been transmitted and is now endemic in the Bighorn sheep. The solution is vaccination not exclusion of domestic sheep. There is a case to be made that the Forest Service should pay shepherders for control of noxious weeds and fire mitigation.

Dave: MT FWP said that it would reintroduce bighorn sheep if the domestic sheep were removed. We asked the permit holders to sit down with us and discuss alternatives to grazing on public lands. When they refused, we filed a lawsuit.

Me: I wonder why they refused !!!

Dave: I understand that ranchers have grazed domestic sheep for a long time since they pushed the Shoshone Bannock Tribes out of the Gravelly Mountains and their other homelands.

Me: I don't think you can lay that all on just ranchers, all of our ancestors were implicated in that injustice.

Dave: I also understand that in 2016, it cost \$130.9 million to manage grazing on public lands, while the government brought in less than \$30 million in receipts. In short, it is costing tax payers more than \$100 million per year to allow livestock to graze on our public lands.

Me: Again, what have hunters and hikers contributed?

Dave: Our country has a serious national debt problem. Despite the low unemployment rate, we are spending more than we are taking in. Every state has an obligation to start cutting into our national debt so that we do not saddle our kids with this unnecessary burden. And it is an unnecessary burden. There are several groups that pay fair market value to ranchers to retire their public lands grazing permits. It makes economic and biological sense, so why not do it for our country?

Me: I think \$5000 is a reasonable fee for taking an elk and \$100 per night of camping on BLM is not out of order.

Respectfully,

Gilles

I then received the following response from Dave:

I am thankful we can have a conversation in which we do not agree but still learn about the other's perspective.

From Wikipedia: "As of July 2015, an estimated 4,900 bison lived in Yellowstone National Park, the largest U.S. bison population on public land."

Bison on private land behind fences are not wildlife, they are livestock.

Undulant fever is caused by the disease brucellosis. There has never been a documented case of brucellosis being transmitted to cattle in the wild.

Grazing on public land is a privilege, not a right.

The difference between me hunting and hiking on public land and people grazing on public land is that I am not making a profit from the public land. Livestock grazers use public land to make money.

I tend to disagree that we should administer vaccines to wildlife. That would make them domestic life, not wildlife.

Again, the public is not profiting economically from public lands. The same cannot be said of livestock grazing. People that profit from the public's resource should pay for it. Instead, our nation is going into debt so that special interests can profit. That does not seem equitable from a purely economic perspective.

Have a great night,

Dave

My response was: Perhaps I am just unlucky but every time I have taken a vacation or went somewhere for recreation or just to enjoy the surroundings, it has cost me money. I wonder, when you worked for the Forest Service - did they pay you a salary?

I am not reiterating this exchange to be pedantic although it might certainly look that way. In the 2016 presidential election every rural county in America voted for Donald Trump. Two years later, forty percent of the electorate fervently supports his inanities, misogynies, vulgarities, and illegalities.

Although not necessarily united over their primary concern: whether it is lingering fear that Barack Obama will show up to confiscate their guns; or that a gang of drug crazed illegal aliens will rape their women; or the ease of having an abortion encourages promiscuity; or perhaps the lingering anxiety that they will not be called for the rapture. Nothing Mr. Trump does or say adversely affects his base support.

Within those more nebulous fears, are fears that are more tangible: will a terrorist bomb the fourth of July parade; will some troubled teenager commit suicide while taking out his classmates, including one of yours; will one's grandson or granddaughter overdose on drugs; will you lose your job and retirement to outsourcing or a robot.

On the other end of the presumed political spectrum we have a man who makes a distinction between a bison that is born free and a "non-bison" that lives behind a fence. He is joined by people, some with their own totem animal to protect and their own special area of the planet that they wish to cover with a bell jar. They are in a very loose coalition with people enraged by police misconduct; or upset by other injustices and indignities; or alarmed by melting ice caps and rising sea levels; or maybe just fed up with long commutes and broken government.

As a nation and as a people we are dangerously divided: rural from urban; ethnicity and cultural antecedents; occupation and class; religion and sect; gender and sexual proclivity. One person's solution is a wall high enough to stop even the nimblest Mexican. For another, the world will begin to be better if there are 4901 free roaming buffalo.

We are divided – not by our fears – but by our perceived solutions.