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BLM APPROVES AMERICAN PRAIRIE BISON GRAZING APPLICATION
Grazing plan will improve land health and create Montana jobs

After four years of thoughtful consideration and public input, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has given approval of American Prairie's application to graze bison across 63,500 acres of public lands in Phillips County.

The BLM has the legal authority to issue grazing permits or leases and modify existing permits to substitute many different types of livestock for cattle, including bison. It has done this for decades in several states across the West, and in the case of American Prairie, the BLM has approved similar grazing modifications twice before.

"We are extremely pleased with this decision," said Pete Geddes, Vice President and Chief External Relations officer for American Prairie. "It allows us to exercise our legal grazing privileges to sustainability grow our conservation herd of bison, continue good stewardship of the land, and create more opportunities for visitors to experience Montana's prairie lands and wildlife."

The BLM asserts that this Proposed Decision is in conformance with the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLMPA), and Federal Grazing Regulations.

"We understand that not everyone agrees with allowing bison grazing on public lands, but the BLM's decision makes it clear that our proposal is based on sound science and will benefit wildlife, the rangeland, and riparian areas," said Geddes.

Management Impacts

The [BLM's proposed decision](#) authorizes American Prairie to graze bison, behind fences, on six grazing allotments in Phillips County where the organization holds priority grazing leases. The majority of internal fencing on BLM-administered lands would



remain intact. In addition to the proposed decision, the BLM released an associated Environmental Assessment (EA) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI).

American Prairie estimates the decision will allow them to sustainably grow their private conservation herd of bison, currently numbering 813 animals, to 1,000 animals by 2025. By comparison, there are currently more than 13,000 head of cattle grazing across American Prairie's total land base.

According to Scott Heidebrink, Director of Bison Restoration for American Prairie, any bison grazing on authorized BLM allotments will comply with a collaborative disease management agreement unanimously approved by Phillips County officials in 2020.

"The health of our bison herd is just as important to us as the health of the regional livestock industry," said Heidebrink. "We will continue to collaborate with Phillips County through our expansive disease management program and by sharing management information with our neighbors and local officials."

Improved land health and new jobs

The BLM's analysis predicts the decision will benefit local wildlife, improve land and water quality, and create new jobs, all without impacting the value of the ranching economy.

"Moreover, those areas being grazed by bison will experience improvements to vegetative communities including variation in vegetative communities, diversified vegetation and an increase in native plant species... This will improve habitat conditions for aquatic and riparian wildlife species, such as amphibians and riparian birds, by increasing the availability of habitat features, such as canopy cover and nesting sites, due to increased riparian vegetation diversity and abundance," reads the proposed decision.

That analysis is consistent with a new study by the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute and published in [Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution](#), which says bison restoration efforts in northcentral Montana have already improved the abundance of native grasses, forbs, and bird species in pastures where bison have grazed with minimal management.

According to that study, "Our results suggest that bison reintroduction, and a minimal intervention grazing management strategy, is associated with positive biodiversity outcomes in riparian habitats within the Northern Great Plains."



In addition, the BLM's [Environmental Assessment](#) predicts the proposed action will have numerous positive effects for local industry:

“Implementation of the proposed change in use would result in a gain of the equivalent of four full-time jobs at the county level (up from 24 jobs under Alternative A to 28 jobs under Alternative B), while labor income, value added, and total output would all see increases at the county level. The modest job gains would occur in the industry categories of veterinary services, crop farming, and non-cattle animal production.”

Comprehensive public process

The final proposed decision is a result of a comprehensive multi-year public process which included five public meetings and the collection of thousands of public comments during two separate comment periods. In addition, American Prairie modified their application in 2019 based on discussions with local cattle producers to better reflect conditions on the ground.

“Our application has been vetted, modified, and re-vetted by hunters, economists, biologists, land managers, and thousands of people who care about our nation’s wildlife and public lands,” said Geddes. “These are national public lands, and regardless of your opinion of how they should be managed, we want to thank everyone who took the time to participate.”

Since 2018, American Prairie’s grazing application has received support from the National Wildlife Federation, Property and Environmental Research Center, Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, Montana Wildlife Federation and from thousands of individuals from Montana and from every corner of America.

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About American Prairie

American Prairie’s vision is to create a vast and collaboratively-managed prairie destination that serves as a fully functioning ecosystem for wildlife, and offers visitors permanent access to the landscape that shaped our nation’s character. Already open to the public for recreation including camping and hunting, American Prairie offers visitors an opportunity to connect with nature on a truly grand scale. Learn more at americanprairie.org.

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