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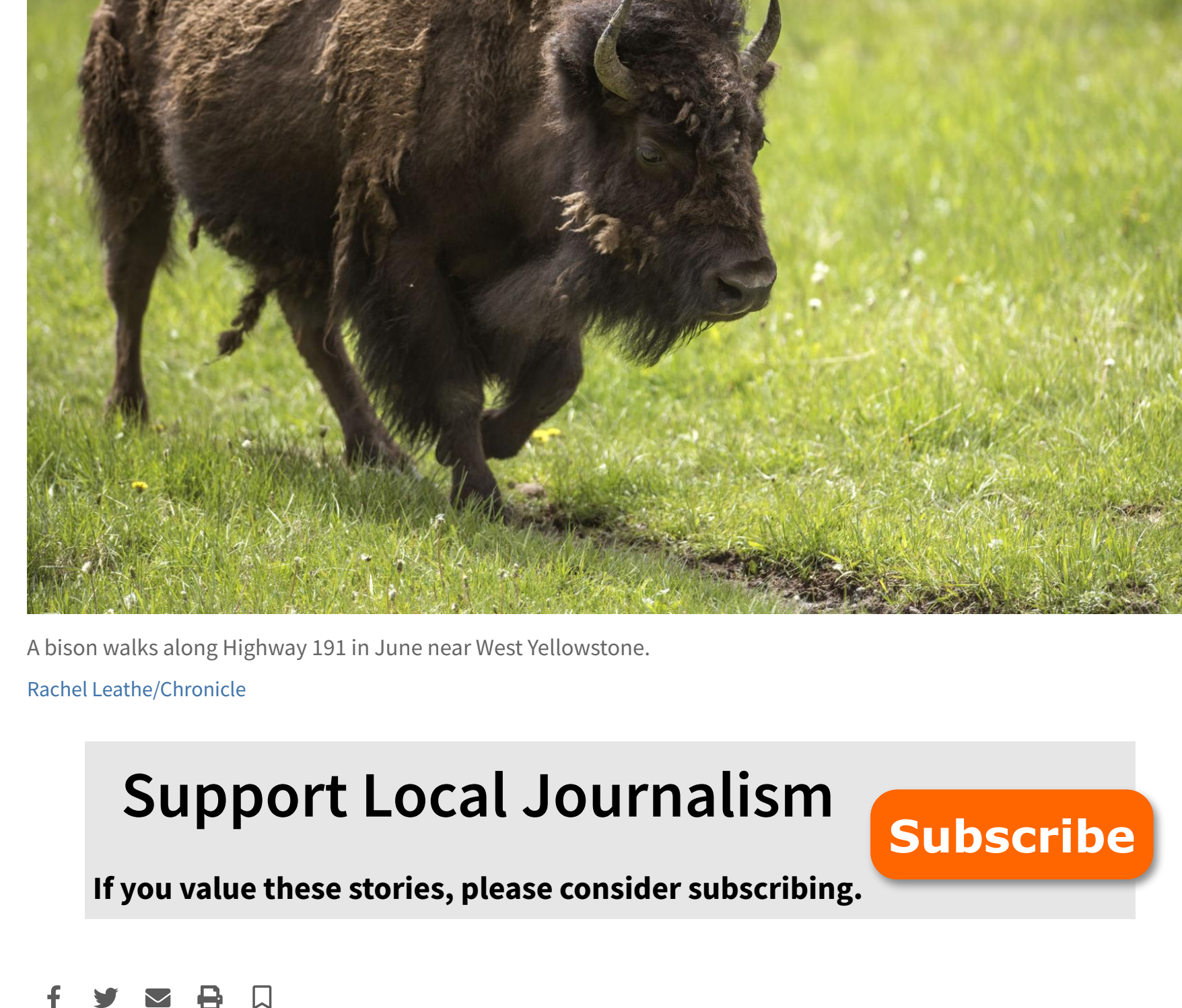
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Officials plan to cull between 500 and 700 Yellowstone bison this winter

By Helena Dore Chronicle Staff Writer Dec 3, 2020



A bison walks along Highway 191 in June near West Yellowstone. Rachel Leathe/Chronicle

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Officials are planning to have between 500 and 700 Yellowstone bison culled from the population this winter, and none of the animals will be enrolled in the park's brucellosis quarantine program.

The culled bison will either be shot by hunters as herds exit the northern boundary of the park to find food or rounded up and shipped for slaughter.

Yellowstone National Park biologist Chris Geremia said if that target is met, an additional 200 males could be culled later in the winter.

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"There's no space in the quarantine facilities. Right now all quarantine pastures are at capacity," he said. "All animals that are trapped will be given to tribes and transferred to meat processing facilities."

The culling numbers were finalized Wednesday at a virtual meeting between federal, state and tribal agencies that manage bison under the Interagency Bison Management Plan.

The plan attempts to balance conservation of bison with strategies to prevent the species from spreading brucellosis to livestock.

Brucellosis is an infectious disease that appears in elk, bison and cattle. It causes abortions, low milk production, weight loss and infertility in infected animals. Many in the livestock industry fear bison could transmit the disease to cattle, though none of these transmissions have been recorded in the wild. Elk, however, have transmitted the disease.

Land managers organize annual culls to keep their populations stable in the park. Officials fear too many bison in the park could degrade the landscape.

Officials estimated there are 4,730 bison in the park right now, according to counts this summer. That's a slight decline from the estimated 4,900 bison counted last summer. Males outnumber females by a significant margin.

An estimated 834 bison were culled last winter, according to park data. An estimated 284 were killed by hunters, though reporting this year was incomplete. The winter prior, fewer than 500 bison were removed.

Geremia recommended that agencies only permit culling of males this winter if herds migrate later. In recent years, bison have left park boundaries to search for food further along in the season. The migration patterns are largely driven by weather.

While most culled bison that leave the park are hunted or slaughtered, in past years, managers have entered some into the park's brucellosis quarantine program.

Those bison are captured and kept in facilities inside Yellowstone, north of the park near Corwin Springs and at the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. The animals are isolated and tested for brucellosis over a period that lasts months, sometimes years. When the bison are deemed disease-free, they are transported to herds on tribal lands for cultural and conservation purposes.

Yellowstone's quarantine program is at capacity. Cam Sholly, superintendent of Yellowstone, said officials are evaluating plans to expand quarantine facilities in the park so more animals can be admitted in the future.

Erik Holt, vice chair of the Nez Perce Fish and Wildlife Commission, said the plans seem like forcing something on tribes that they don't necessarily want. Quarantining more animals might result in fewer opportunities for tribal hunters, he said.

Members of seven federally-recognized tribes hunt bison in the annual cull to exercise their treaty rights. At Beattie Gulch, just outside the park border near Gardiner, hunters line up and wait for bison to cross the park border onto Forest Service land, where they can be shot.

hunting typically takes place near Gardiner and near West Yellowstone. However, park officials are recommending this year that hunters avoid shooting bison near West because of concerns over killing too many members of Yellowstone's central bison herd, which migrates out of that side of the park each winter.

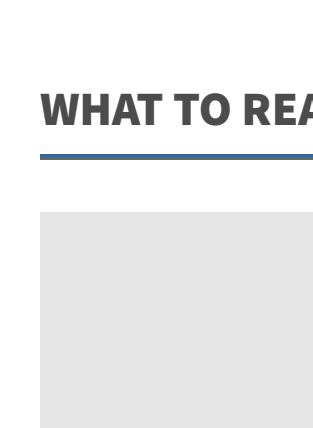
The practice of shooting along Beattie Gulch has drawn lawsuits from residents and conservation groups, who say it is unsafe. The Forest Service and National Park Service agreed this July to update the [Interagency Bison Management Plan](#) in response to the litigation.

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