



National Wildlife Refuge Association

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Halloween Surprise at the National Bison Range *Draft Funding Agreement a Fiscal Nightmare for Refuges, Parks*

Washington, DC – According to new information obtained from the Department of the Interior by the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA), a draft agreement to transfer to local tribes positions and activities at the National Bison Range wildlife refuge in Montana threatens to cost American taxpayers as much as \$1 million, and could be repeated at as many as 70 other national wildlife refuges and parks.

“Just in time for Halloween, the Department of the Interior is asking Americans to pay a frightening sum for an agreement that provides no benefit to the National Bison Range and its wildlife,” said Evan Hirsche, president of the NWRA. “Our refuges and parks are already horrifically under-funded; the draft Bison Range agreement is a fiscal nightmare for our refuges, wildlife and the American people.”

The annual funding agreement, privately negotiated between the Department of the Interior and Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, would transfer approximately half of the positions and budget at the National Bison Range to the Tribe and incur significant costs to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). According to documents obtained by the National Wildlife Refuge Association, the FWS, who administers the Refuge System, estimates that negotiation costs for the agreement have exceeded \$350,000, and costs for the agreement’s first year of implementation are almost \$250,000. Depending on other factors, such as possible employee severance or relocation costs, the total price tag could approach \$1 million.

The Department of the Interior has significantly downplayed FWS estimates, grossly underestimating expected costs associated with the agreement. Documents show that Interior officials worked closely with tribal lawyers to low-ball projected expenditures. The result was a dramatically different assessment that downplays or eliminates a number of expected costs originally listed by the FWS. According to the Interior Department’s revised estimate, the agreement would cost just \$23,000, hundreds of thousands of dollars lower than the initial FWS estimate.

At least 34 national parks and 34 national wildlife refuges and fish hatcheries are eligible for annual funding agreements (AFAs) with tribes that claim a geographic, historical or cultural connection to the land. The Interior Department lands are subject to these

agreements under amendments made in 1994 to the Indian Self-Determination Act allowing for non-competitive contracts between tribes and Interior agencies. A current list of eligible refuges and parks published by the Interior Department includes such crown jewels as Glacier Bay National Park (NP) in Alaska, Redwood NP in California, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Alaska, and Olympic NP in Washington.

As the first AFA of this magnitude, the Bison Range agreement is viewed as a template for possible AFAs in about 80 national parks, wildlife refuges and other Interior lands across the United States. The combined cost of agreements at places ranging from the National Bison Range to Cape Cod National Seashore could severely drain much-needed funding from America's already cash-strapped public lands.

Years of inadequate funding have left refuges and parks unable to meet critical wildlife conservation and public visitation needs. Park Service staff struggle to provide services and educational experiences to visitors. The operations and maintenance backlog for the Refuge System alone exceeds \$2 billion. More than 1/3 of the nation's 544 refuges do not have any staff.

The National Wildlife Refuge Association is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, nationwide membership organization, established in 1975. The NWRA's mission is to protect, enhance and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System, lands and waters set aside by the American people to protect our country's diverse wildlife heritage. Over the years we have worked to make the Refuge System stronger and better able to address the growing challenges of conserving wildlife in our country.

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