



National Wildlife Refuge Association

1010 Wisconsin Avenue, NW, Suite 200, Washington, D.C. 20007
202.333.9075 ♦ Fax 202.333.9077 ♦ www.refugenet.org

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CONTACT: Michael Woodbridge
(202) 333-9075
mwoodbridge@refugenet.org

Draft National Bison Range Tribal Agreement: Raw Deal for Refuge, Wildlife and Taxpayers

Washington, DC – A draft agreement released for public comment July 14 by the Department of the Interior detailing a proposed transfer of activities on the National Bison Range from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) would create an administrative nightmare for the FWS, diminish resources for conserving wildlife and force the American taxpayer to write a blank check for undisclosed costs.

“With this agreement, the Department of the Interior is effectively saying ‘wildlife comes second’ on a national wildlife refuge,” said Evan Hirsche, President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA). “If signed, this agreement will hinder the FWS’s ability to manage the National Bison Range as a national wildlife refuge; it will result in reduced resources for wildlife conservation; and the American taxpayer will be asked to foot the undisclosed bill with a blank check. The message to Congress and the public is, ‘buyer beware,’ this agreement is a lemon.”

Established in 1908, the National Bison Range is one of the oldest refuges in the country. In addition to the famous bison herds that roam the Range, the refuge is also home to deer, elk, bighorn sheep, black bear, pronghorn and more than 211 bird species, just to name a few of the animals found on this spectacular wildlife refuge in northwest Montana. National Bison Range is one of the most popular refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), experiencing some of the highest visitation and public use. Visitors come from all over the world to see the bison and other animals on the Range.

Announced in a July 14 Federal Register Notice, the draft “annual funding agreement” would hand over approximately 11 FWS jobs and key refuge functions to the CSKT while restricting FWS oversight of management decisions such as the hiring of subcontractors. As drafted, the agreement would effectively abrogate or, at a minimum, seriously diminish the authority of the FWS to manage the Refuge. According to the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, refuges and the Refuge System must be managed by the FWS. Further, the refuge currently enjoys tremendous support from volunteers, who contribute more than 5,000 hours—equal to 2.5 full-time staff positions—to the refuge annually. These volunteers have liability coverage through

the federal government. However, because there is nothing in the agreement making considerations for volunteers, the CSKT's sovereign immunity as an independent government will cause the volunteers to lose their liability protection once the agreement takes effect and the Tribe takes control, putting them at risk if they want to continue their volunteer work for the Refuge.

Although it is called an annual funding agreement, the 57-page document does not list funding amounts or costs for the one-year contract. As a result, just how much the agreement will cost taxpayers is a mystery. According to the NWRA's "guiding principles" document for annual funding agreements, an agreement must be "cost-effective and a value added to administration of the refuge and Refuge System." The draft agreement fails on both counts.

The NWRA plans to issue detailed comments on the proposed annual funding agreement for the National Bison Range Complex in the coming weeks.

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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