

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Species: Bison
Region: 3
Hunting District: 385
Year: 2018

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

FWP proposes to close an approximately 0.4 square mile portion of Bison Hunting District 385 in Beattie Gulch to state license holders for safety reasons.

Legal description of proposed closure (Figure 1):

The National Forest Service lands within those portions of Park County lying within the following-described boundary: Beginning at the intersection of Yellowstone National Park (YNP) and Custer-Gallatin National Forest boundaries at the confluence of Reese Creek and the Yellowstone River north of Gardiner, then northerly and westerly along the US Forest Service boundary for approximately 1.2 miles to a posted line at the mid-point of section 7 in Township 9 south, Range 8 east, then southerly along said posted line to the intersection with the YNP Boundary, then easterly along said boundary to the intersection with the Custer-Gallatin National Forest at the Reese Creek-Yellowstone River confluence, the point of beginning.

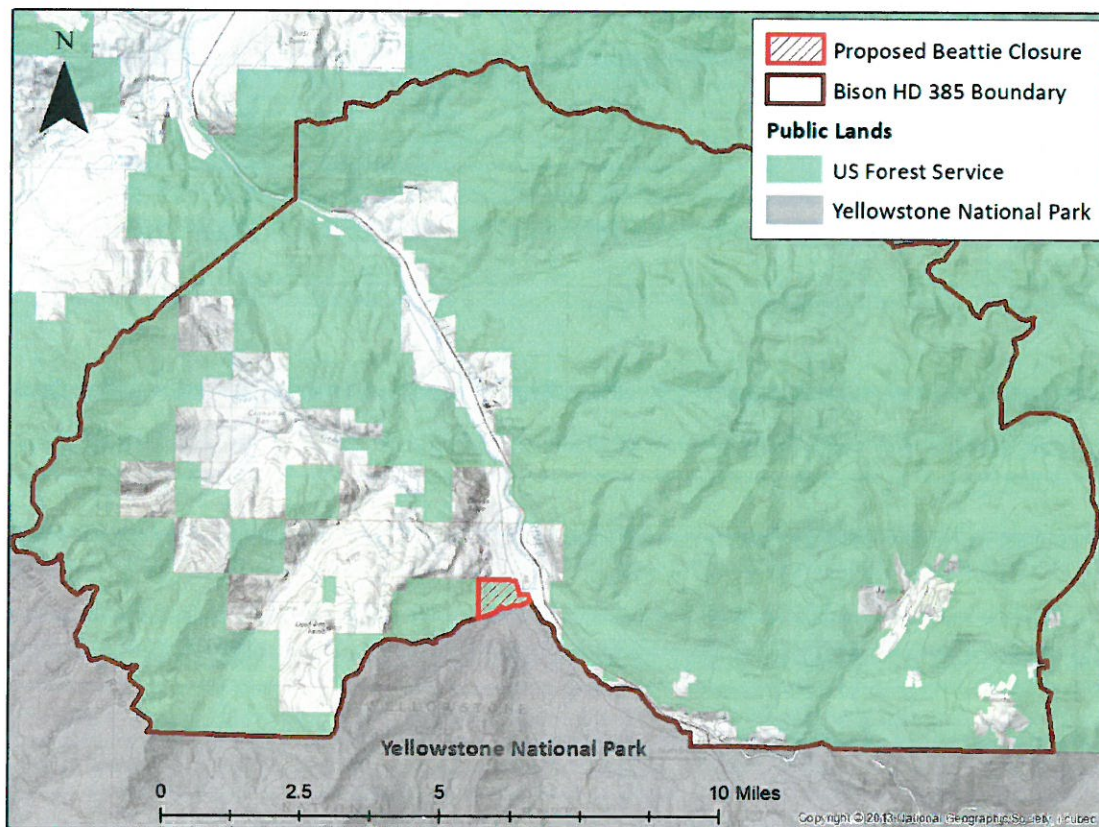


Figure 1. Proposed Beattie Gulch Closure Area

Bison hunting was re-established in Montana in 2005 after a 14-year hiatus. The bison season structure was based on hunting guidelines required by MCA 87-2-730 and within the provisions of the Dec. 22, 2000 Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP). The intent of MCA 87-2-730 and the 2004 Bison Hunt EA (revised in 2008) was to allow hunters to harvest wild bison under fair chase conditions without endangering the bison population or creating public safety issues.

In recent years, the density of hunters in Beattie Gulch has evolved beyond what FWP considers safe where the harvest of about 200-300 bison, depending on the year, occurs within an approximately ¼-mile-square area at the mouth of Beattie Gulch at the YNP boundary. It is common for 20-30 or more hunters to shoot in close proximity as groups of bison cross the boundary. The safety risks posed by this situation necessitate a safety closure.

The boundary of the proposed closure area includes the relatively level area where high density shooting regularly occurs, as well as the adjacent hill slope to prevent state hunters from hunting in the line of sight and within rifle range of the high-density shooting, resulting in closure of 256 acres (0.4 mile²) that is currently open to hunting. In addition, there is an 18-acre (0.03 mile²) closure area that was put in place by the Custer-Gallatin National Forest in 2015 that is immediately adjacent to the proposed FWP closure. For simplicity in regulations, the existing Forest Service closure will be incorporated into the new proposed closure area, resulting in a total closure area of 274 acres (0.44 miles²; Figure 2).

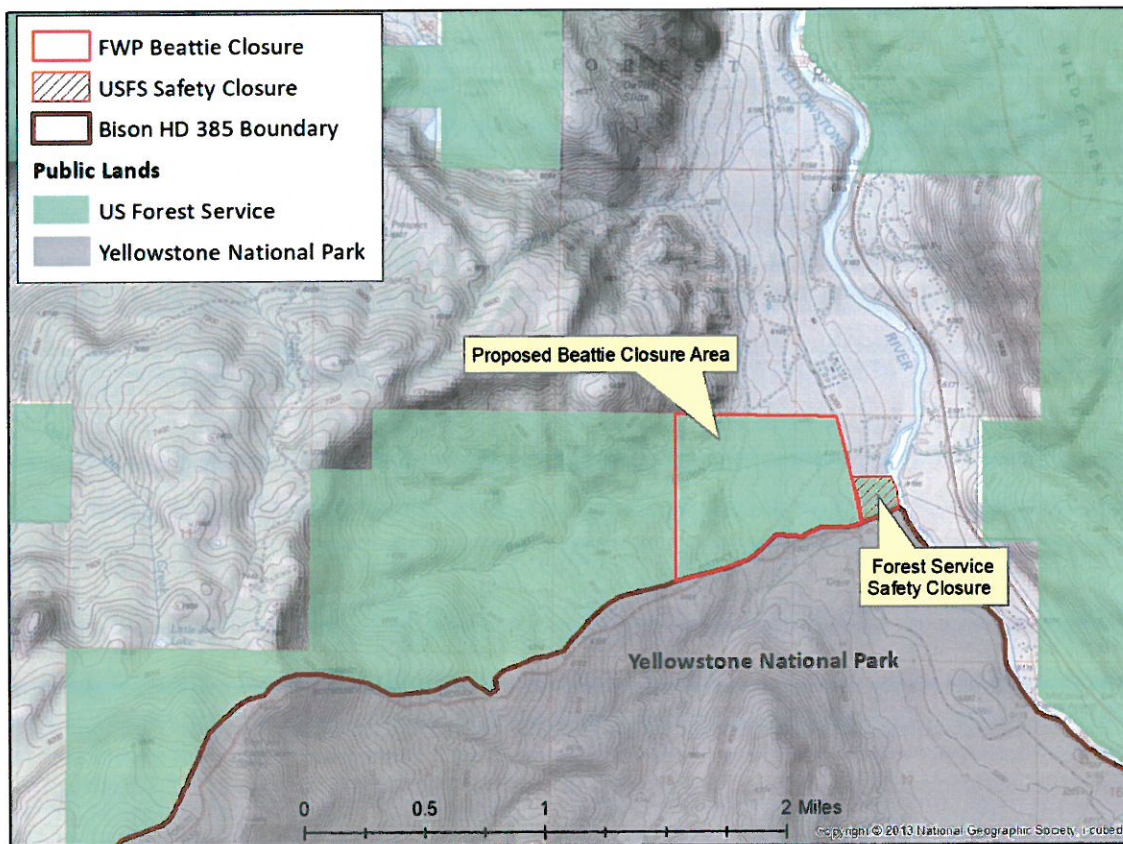


Figure 2. Proposed Beattie Gulch closure and adjacent area that is subject to Forest Service safety closure.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of this proposal is to implement measures for hunter safety while maintaining hunter opportunity and success in the rest of the hunting district. This closure will only apply to holders of a state bison license (state hunters). FWP has limited ability to regulate the exercise of off-reservation treaty hunting by tribes. If FWP and the tribes exercising off-reservation treaty hunting rights are successful in working out safety measures acceptable to all parties, FWP will reconsider the safety closure.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

The success of this proposal will be evaluated in terms of safety and hunter success. It will be considered successful if state hunters are able to pursue bison outside the closure area without encountering unsafe hunter densities, and if harvest success for those hunters remains near the 5-year average (see #4 below). If the boundaries of the safety closure do not adequately address safety concerns, FWP will consider proposing adjustments to the area subject to closure.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

FWP does not have a population objective for bison within the hunting district 385, nor the small area proposed for closure. The IBMP stipulates an objective of 3,000 bison for the entire population that spans the boundaries of YNP and Montana. Bison in this area reside primarily within YNP and seasonally migrate out of the Park into Montana when pushed by winter conditions. Bison migration into HD 385 is driven by winter severity, and bison abundance and distribution in the Gardiner Basin portion of HD 385 is limited by harvest pressure as well as trapping operations at the YNP boundary. The effectiveness of FWP hunter harvest as a population management tool for bison is limited by these conditions, as most bison remain within YNP, and hunter densities have reached the saturation point for this hunting district given the limited distribution of bison outside YNP. The objective of the FWP hunting season is to provide safe hunting opportunity and contribute to the IBMP collaborative effort to maximize the use of hunting for population management.

Harvest by state hunters has averaged 29 bison per year since 2013 in the entirety of HD 385 for an average hunter success rate of 68% (range 62% - 78%, Table 1). Tribal treaty harvest during this period has averaged 260 bison per year, ranging 173 – 334 (Table 1). There are currently six tribes that exercise treaty rights in this hunting district, and additional tribes with similar rights may seek to hunt in the future. The level of participation varies among tribes and across seasons, depending on bison migration, ranging from a handful of hunters to over 100 hunters per tribe. During the 2017 season, state hunters harvested 22 bison in the Gardiner Basin portion of HD 385. Of these, eight were harvested within the proposed closure area, eight were harvested elsewhere in the Gardiner Basin portion of HD 385 including public and private lands, and harvest locations for the remaining six are unknown. These data indicate that the closure has potential to impact state hunter opportunity and success, but also indicate there are opportunities to harvest bison outside of the closure area throughout the season.

Mitigations for impacts to hunter opportunity were considered, including expanding validity of the HD 385 license to include HD 395 (West Yellowstone), and offering hunters the opportunity to return their license. FWP is not recommending expanding the HD 385 license to include HD 395 for the 2018 season due to concerns with hunter crowding and loss of opportunity for HD 395 hunters, however FWP does recommend hunters have the opportunity to return their licenses for a refund if they feel the safety closure will

significantly impact their hunt. Any returned license could be made available to other hunters who did not draw a tag. FWP will monitor the impacts of this proposed closure on hunter success through the 2018 season and will consider adjustments to the 2019 season if needed.

Table 1. Recent harvest history for bison Hunting District 385, and tribal harvest in Gardiner Basin

Winter*	Hunting District 385			tribal treaty harvest
	License quota	hunter harvest	hunter success	
2017-18	45	28	62%	251
2016-17	45	35	78%	310
2015-16	40	26	65%	334
2014-15	40	29	73%	173
2013-14	40	25	63%	233
5-year Average	42	28.6	68%	260.2

*For each winter, the FWP "license year" was the previous fall; i.e. the 2017 license was valid for winter 2017-18

5. **Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).**


Hunting district 385 is mostly public land, however there are areas of private land that bison may utilize. There is no private land included within the proposed Beattie Gulch Closure. Bison are more likely to move into the hunting district from YNP during and following periods of severe winter conditions. Hunter opportunity generally increases as winter progresses, and although concentrations of bison are highest in the Beattie Gulch vicinity, individual and small groups of bison are regularly found in other areas of the larger district. The primary challenge for hunter access to bison is competition among hunters where bison concentrate, and sparse bison presence throughout the remainder of the district. There have been ongoing efforts among IBMP partners to disperse hunting pressure to allow bison movement further into the hunting district.

6. **Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).**

Public contacts have not been made due to the short time-frame on this proposal. Contacts will be made through the course of the public process.

Submitted by: FWP Staff

Approved:

 9/19/18
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by:

Name / Date

Reason for Modification: