

BISON RANGE UPDATE: By Susan Campbell Rneau

Boone and Crockett Club Defends National Bison Range

The Boone and Crockett Club and dozens of other conservation and sportsmen groups, plus thousands of other sportsmen and individual B&C members from across the United States, have spoken strongly in favor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service remaining in control of the management of the National Bison Range Complex (NBRC), a national wildlife refuge begun by an Act of Congress in 1908 under President Theodore Roosevelt. A controversy swirls around this national wildlife refuge as to who will control the professional and technical positions and the million-dollar operational budget. Since the Wildlife Refuge Administration Act was passed, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been responsible for the care and management of all federal refuges on behalf of American citizens.

For ten years, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) government of the Flathead Indian Reservation near Missoula, Montana, requested they be awarded the contract to take over all management tasks and positions, as well as all of the budgeted operational funds on the NBRC. On March 15, 2005, in the latest round of negotiations with top officials of the U.S. Department of Interior, the CSKT were awarded, non-competitively, 149 tasks representing 10 full-time federal positions and half the operational budget through September 30, 2006, totaling \$250,000 for salary and benefits of contract workers and \$250,000 for operations of those tasks. As of March 2006, as negotiations began for fiscal year 2007, the CSKT demanded the contract for all tasks, the entire operation budget, totaling \$1.2 million, and 19 federal positions.

The contract was abruptly terminated on December 10, 2006, by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dale Hall when it was learned that wild bison of the NBRC under the care of the CSKT were not being fed or watered properly as the bison were prepared for relocation to other national refuges. Another consideration was CSKT workers' "sexual harassment and hostility in the workplace" towards federal workers.

Formal evaluations by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of the CSKT work in 2005 and 2006 showed that less than half of the work assigned to the CSKT was performed satisfactorily.

The abrupt termination of the negotiations and contract prompted B&C members Robert Model and Stephen Mealey, Conservation Policy Committee Chairman and Co-Chairman, to write to Secretary of Interior Dirk Kempthorne

on December 13, 2006. They wrote, "The Boone and Crockett Club urgently requests that you support Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dale Hall's recent decision to terminate the Annual Funding Agreement (AFA) between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) at the National Bison Range in Montana.

"The terminated funding agreement is an experiment under the 'Tribal Self Governance Act' that unfortunately, appears to have failed," said Model and Mealey.

B&C member Leonard J. Vallender, chairman of the Conservation Committee of Forest and Wildlife for Camp Fire Club of America, wrote to Kempthorne on the same day, stating, "Membership of the Camp Fire Club of America are writing today to request termination of all future Annual Funding Agreements (AFA) between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the CSKT of the Flathead Reservation at the (NBRC) and additional public lands."

Vallender pointed out to Kempthorne that, "At issue is the central question of whether the federal government should cede its conservation management authority to any third party, whether tribal or otherwise. Our concerns are not based on some prejudicial view that federal lands should not be turned over to Native American management. The issue of privatizing government functions in the conservation arena is a parallel concern, raising similar questions of accountability and responsiveness."

Rep. John Dingell, a long-time supporter of much federal legislation that for decades has protected the National Wildlife Refuge System from contractors, went further in February when he headlined on his Congressional website his response to Hall's termination of the CSKT contract.

"Congress made it very clear that the nation's wildlife refuges would be managed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife when the National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act was passed. This attempt to move the National Bison Range to Native American tribes is not only a violation of this legislation, but also a threat to refuges throughout the United States," Dingell said to the chairman of the U.S. House of Representative's House Resources Committee Nick Rahall on February 15 of this year.

Dingell pointed to the *Federal Register*, published as a shopping book for any contractor wishing to do business with any federal agency, that urges self-governance Indian tribes to apply for similar contracts on more than 30 national wildlife refuges and more than 50 national parks, including all national wildlife refuges in Alaska representing

more than 75 percent of the total land mass belonging to the National Wildlife Refuge System. He reminded Rahall and House Chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans Madeline Z. Bordallo that the National Bison Range was established for all Americans with a herd of wild bison "from 40 animals purchased by the American Bison Society (founded by B&C member William T. Hornaday) using donations sent by people in 29 states, the District of Columbia, and three other nations."

Conservation and sportsmen groups and individuals from across the United States have reminded Kempthorne and others at Department of the Interior that sportsmen contribute



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substantially to national wildlife refuges when they purchase federal ducks stamps, buy hunting and fishing licenses, and pay taxes on hunting and fishing equipment under the Dingell-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson Acts.

Thanks to the efforts of the FWS employees at the National Bison Range working with the bison, Dingell said, bison of the Northern Plains have been permanently preserved and perpetuated throughout the United States on national wildlife refuges and private lands.

"I can vouch for the explicit congressional intent of the 1976 amendment to the Refuge Administration Act. The principle of the added provisions was that there should never be any attempt to establish a second refuge system by delegating its authorities or transferring units or responsibilities to any other entity," Dingell said.

The termination of negotiations and the contract with the CSKT was reversed by the U.S. Department of Interior on December 29, 2006, less than two weeks after Hall removed CSKT workers from the national refuge, and so remains the stalemate today. Due to the outcry from such groups as Boone and Crockett Club and Camp Fire Club of America, the DOI Inspector General's office instituted a comprehensive investigation of the entire situation at the National Bison Range and will issue a comprehensive report in the near future.

In the meantime, FWS employees, including a CSKT member, perform the inherently federal tasks that have been performed at the National Bison Range since its beginning by U.S. Fish and Wildlife employees. ■