

INFORMATION MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY

SECRETARY ZINKE VISIT TO NATIONAL BISON RANGE

DATE: March 9, 2017

FROM: Noreen Walsh, Regional Director, Mountain-Prairie Region, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, (303) 236-7920

SUBJECT: National Bison Range

I. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

To inform the Secretary about the National Bison Range in Montana.

II. BACKGROUND

The National Bison Range (NBR) was established on May 23, 1908, when President Theodore Roosevelt signed legislation authorizing funds to purchase suitable land for the conservation of bison. The overall mission of the 18,800-acre NBR is to maintain a representative herd of bison to ensure the preservation of the species for continued public enjoyment. The NBR is one of the last intact publicly-owned intermountain native grasslands in the U.S. NBR is located completely within the boundary of the Flathead Reservation, home to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT).

III. DISCUSSION

Twenty years of negotiation for an Annual Funding Agreement (AFA) with CSKT has been met with mixed success due to litigation, personnel management issues, and differences in expectations regarding how the agreement should be crafted. In June of 2016, CSKT released draft legislation that would transfer management of NBR from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to be held in trust for the CSKT, maintaining its management for bison and other wildlife. This action would support Indian Self Determination while maintaining these lands in federal ownership.

A Notice of Intent (NOI) in the *Federal Register* on January 18, 2017 announcing FWS's development of a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for the management of NBR began a scoping and engagement process with partners and the public. Included in the NOI, is an alternative that would transfer NBR to BIA. The CSKT will be invited to participate in the CCP development process. The comment period for the NOI closed on February 17, 2017.

IV. NEXT STEPS

Consolidate and analyze comments from the NOI.