



Fall 2015

Badlands National Park
South Dakota



Preliminary Alternative Newsletter

Dear Friends and Neighbors of Badlands National Park,

We are in the process of exploring options to expand the current bison range within the North Unit of Badlands National Park.

As you may recall, during the scoping phase of this project in summer 2013, we invited you to help us envision the future of bison in the North Unit of the park. Many of you participated in our two public open house meetings on June 4, 2013 (Wall, South Dakota) and on June 11, 2013 (Rapid City, South Dakota). You expressed very specific ideas and concerns about bison grazing in the North Unit of the park. Thank you for your thoughtful comments. This information was instrumental in helping the planning team develop the preliminary action alternative.

We are now asking you to share your ideas on the preliminary action alternative before we proceed with

the next steps in the planning process. As we move forward in exploring different ways to manage Badlands National Park in the future, I encourage you to stay connected and be an active participant in this planning process. In this newsletter, you will find a number

of ways to contact us and access information.

Thank you for your continued interest and participation in the development of the Badlands National Park North Unit Bison Resource Stewardship Plan. I hope to hear more from you soon!

Sincerely,

Michael D. Pflaum, Park Superintendent
Badlands National Park





Purpose and Need for the North Unit Bison Resource Stewardship Plan

The purpose of this plan is to explore options to expand the current bison range to other areas within the North Unit of Badlands National Park. Expanding the bison range in the North Unit will enable the National Park Service (NPS) to protect the genetic integrity and health of the conservation bison herd in the North Unit, support the health of the mixed-grass prairie ecosystem, and provide appropriate visitor opportunities to view the herd and understand its ecological and cultural importance.

The scoping or the “discovery” phase plays an important role in helping to focus the priorities that must be addressed in the plan. The following topics represent the pertinent comments and concerns as identified during the scoping phase (summer 2013).

- **Stocking rates and genetic integrity.** Maintaining a healthy conservation herd requires preserving genetic integrity. The plan will address how many bison the park can reasonably support, given size of range and fluctuating environmental conditions like wet and dry years.
- **Expand bison range.** The plan will identify appropriate areas for bison in the North Unit. As appropriate, the plan could also consider different approaches to the timing of an expansion to protect the genetic integrity of the conservation bison herd.
- **Provide appropriate bison infrastructure.** The plan will describe the bison infrastructure needed to support an expansion of the bison range, and where that infrastructure might be located in the North

Unit. Appropriate bison infrastructure could include watering facilities and portable corrals.

- **Upgrade and maintain bison fence.** The bison fence will need to be regularly maintained to protect against trespass bison onto private property. The plan will consider a formal protocol for rapid response from NPS staff when/if NPS bison trespass onto neighboring private property.
- **Monitor for brucellosis.** The park bison herd has been certified brucellosis free for many years, and park staff will continue regular monitoring of the herd.
- **Resource protection.** The North Unit of Badlands National Park protects many nationally and globally significant geologic, paleontological, and archeological resources, as well as designated wilderness, wildlife, and vegetation resources. A goal of the plan will be to minimize any adverse impacts to these resources.
- **Visitor experience and safety.** The plan will identify appropriate visitor experiences related to viewing bison within the North Unit of the park, as well as interpretive and educational opportunities. Currently, visitors are only able to view bison by driving the unpaved Sage Creek Road. As appropriate, the plan will explore viewing opportunities from the paved State Highway 240 Badlands Loop Road, which most visitors to Badlands travel as part of their visit. Visitor safety needs will also be incorporated into the plan.



Alternatives Retained for Analysis in the Environmental Assessment

No-Action Alternative

The no-action alternative is the continuation of current management actions and direction into the future, i.e., continuing with the present course of action until that action is changed. The no-action alternative (required by NEPA) also serves as a baseline to compare the effects of the action alternatives to the effects of the status quo.

No-Action Alternative	
Geographic Extent of Bison Range	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The bison range would continue to include the Sage Creek Unit of the designated wilderness within the North Unit of Badlands National Park, as well as the area north of the Sage Creek Rim Road from the western boundary of the park where the Sage Creek Rim Road crosses the park boundary to a few miles west of the Pinnacles Entrance Station at the Pinnacles Overlook auto-gate (i.e., cattle guard). The current bison range is approximately 57,967 acres. See map titled “No-Action Alternative.”
Visitor Use and Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The majority of visitors would continue to not see bison during their visit to the North Unit of the park. Bison are only visible when driving the 12 miles of unpaved Sage Creek Rim Road past the Pinnacles Overlook or the short connector road to the Sage Creek Campground, camping at the Sage Creek Campground or in dispersed camping within the current bison range, or hiking or riding horses into the backcountry of the Sage Creek Unit of the designated wilderness. The park would continue to provide a number of interpretive and educational opportunities related to bison. Roving rangers would continue to interpret bison to visitors at various locations within the park, as appropriate. A bulletin board at the visitor center would continue to show current/approximate locations of the bison herd. Commercial tours would continue to stay largely on the paved State Highway 240 Badlands Loop Road, and therefore opportunities to view bison would continue to be limited. Some limited educational programs for youth groups related to bison could continue (i.e., studying foraging behavior and projects studying comparisons between cattle and bison grazing). The park would continue current research efforts related to bison.
Visitor Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safety messages related to bison would continue to be posted at strategic locations throughout the park and on various park media (i.e., at the Sage Creek Campground, the visitor center, in the park brochure, and on the park website).

No-Action Alternative	
Bison-Related Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The bison range is currently contained through approximately 36 miles of bison fencing, as well as badlands features and a number of auto-gates at strategic locations. There are currently eight auto-gates. • Some small-scale additions and improvements to the bison fence would be performed to secure a recently acquired inholding using the park standard for boundary bison fence; cross-fencing for cattle would be removed. • The bison fence would continue to be a mix of different fencing types with a height ranging from 5 feet to 8 feet tall, and varying from 3-strand and 5-strand barbed wire to woven wire with barbed wire on top. • Because there are no bison enclosures within the current bison range to protect sensitive park resources, sensitive resources would continue to be removed from within the bison range when necessary. • The existing bison holding facility would remain in its current location. • During periods of high precipitation, water impoundments and streams in the Sage Creek Unit of the designated wilderness and north of Sage Creek Rim Road would continue to provide water to bison and other wildlife. The park would also continue to use the water features within the bison holding facility to provide water. During both wet and dry conditions, several perennial water sources in the current bison range would also provide water.
Bison Roundup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The park would continue to plan a yearly roundup. Sometimes roundups are infeasible due to inclement weather or other issues, and the subsequent year's roundup would need to take into account the skipped roundup from the previous year. • The roundup would continue to take about two weeks and involve a large number of park employees and volunteers. • The park would continue to use horses to perform the roundup in the Sage Creek Unit of the Badlands Wilderness. Outside the wilderness, park staff will continue to use vehicles to herd the animals to the bison holding facility. • During the roundup, the park staff would continue to cull the herd based on a science-based and systematic random sample. Factors to determine the number and individuals to cull from the herd include the overall number of bison, age distribution, and ratio of males to females. (Please note that in this case, cull means to distribute to other agencies/ governments through an agreement with the Intertribal Bison Council. The National Park Service does not kill any bison during the roundups). • After the roundup, the park would continue to monitor the bison herd population.
Trespass Bison Procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The park would continue to strive to rapidly respond to trespass bison. The park would continue to contact the landowner, remove the bison, repair the fence, and then follow up with the landowner after these procedures have been completed. • If the trespass bison is a repeat offender, the park could consider the use of lethal methods as a last resort, and donate the animal.



**National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior**





Alternatives Retained for Analysis in the Environmental Assessment (cont.)

Action Alternative

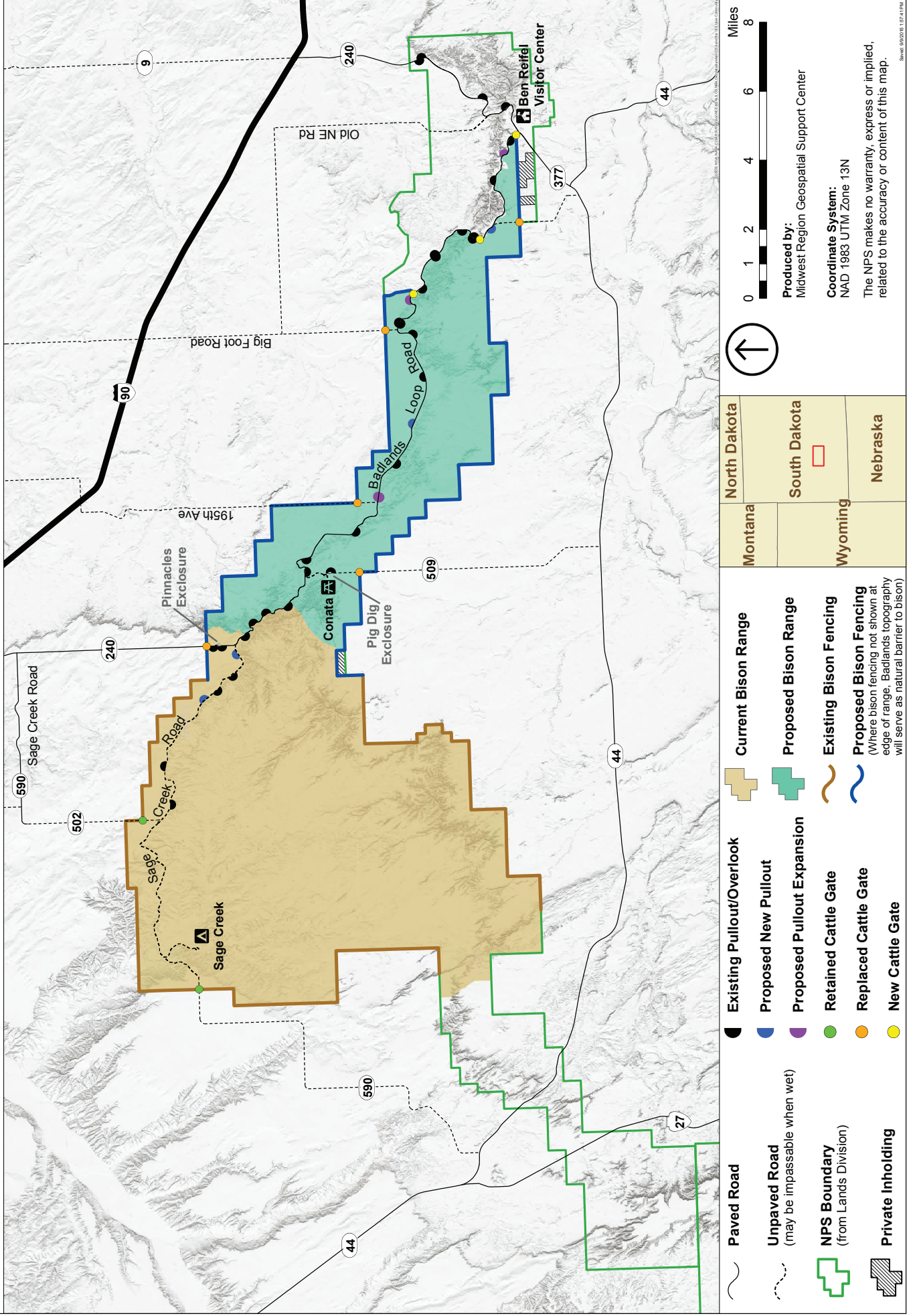
The National Park Service is considering just one action alternative at this time. During alternative development, it was determined that the purpose and need for the plan can be met with a single alternative, and that other alternatives are not feasible or necessary.

Action Alternative	
Geographic Extent of Bison Range	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This alternative would expand the bison range to include approximately 82,242 acres (24,275 acres more than the current range). Please see the map titled "Action Alternative" to review the areas included in the expansion. The process of expanding the bison range could, if necessary, take place in stages. The need for phased range expansion could be dependent on available water sources or on the need to initially monitor resource conditions in more limited areas before full expansion of the bison range.
Visitor Use and Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visitors would have more opportunities to hike, camp, or ride horses in areas where bison are present, such as along the majority of the northern and southern extent of State Highway 240 Badlands Loop Road, and at a distance from the Cedar Pass developed visitor area. There is the potential that visitors may see bison from any of the park's existing overlooks along Sage Creek Rim Road or Badlands Loop Road. Four new strategically located vehicle turnouts would be constructed and four existing vehicle turnouts would be improved to provide expanded opportunities for visitors to view bison along park roads from a safe distance. Park staff would consider enhanced opportunities to educate park visitors on the ecological and cultural values of bison. This effort could include personal and nonpersonal interpretive media at key bison viewing areas, strategically located turnouts, web-based information and/or social media, and other education/interpretation programming in the park. The park would continue current research efforts and explore enhanced opportunities for research related to bison. Potential areas of study include increased monitoring related to movement of bison in the North Unit of the park and population trends. The park would explore partnership opportunities with other agencies, educational institutions, and nonprofit groups.
Visitor Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visitor safety would continue to be of utmost importance, with a focus on visitor education. Interpretive rangers at entrance stations would warn visitors about getting too close to bison and other wildlife, and educational signs would be posted throughout the park in strategic locations. Additionally, NPS staff would receive training on behavioral cues that indicate that a bison is agitated or feeling threatened. Law enforcement rangers would be trained on how to appropriately respond to bison-visitor incidents.

Action Alternative	
Bison-Related Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fence around the North Unit of the park would be upgraded to a consistent height (~7 feet) and constructed to contain the bison while allowing other wildlife to move freely. Fencing may not be needed in areas where the Badlands would act as a natural barrier to bison movement. An additional 40.3 miles of bison fence would be constructed. This section would include a large portion of the exterior boundary of the North Unit, in addition to several small sections of fence in the interior of the park: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> to the east of Big Foot Road, excluding bison access to the Big Buffalo Basin area of the park intermittent fencing as needed along the Badlands Loop Road between Big Foot Road and State Highway 240, where topographic features do not provide sufficient boundary to the bison trying to enter the Big Buffalo Basin area of the park bison enclosures would be constructed to protect some sensitive park resources—sensitive resources could also be removed from within the bison range when necessary around inholdings within the park A corridor along the interior of the boundary fence would be developed for access by off-highway vehicles, horseback riding, or foot travel to perform periodic inspection and maintenance of the fenceline. Inspection and maintenance would be both preventive and proactive. For the corridor within designated wilderness, the park would perform a minimum requirements analysis to determine the minimum tool necessary to perform inspection and maintenance. In some cases, to avoid impacts to designated wilderness, the park may seek permission from the adjacent property owner to access the fence from their property. The existing bison holding facility would remain in its current location. A mobile corral would be needed for roundup procedures in the eastern portions of the bison range. The addition of the identified 24,275 acres to the bison range would include additional water sources that were previously unavailable to the bison herd.
Bison Roundup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The park would continue to plan a yearly roundup. Roundup procedures related to the use of mobile corrals would need to be developed as part of this alternative. The park would sometimes use horses to perform the roundup in the Sage Creek and Conata Units of the designated wilderness or wait for the bison to cross into nonwilderness without using horses and then switch to the use of vehicles in nonwilderness to herd the animals to the bison holding facility. Population control will be managed according to the carrying capacity method (to be described in the environmental assessment) and the bison roundup and processing procedures (described in the above bullets). The culled animals will be distributed in accordance with agreements among Badlands National Park, the Intertribal Bison Council, and others. The roundup would likely last longer than the two weeks currently required and would involve a larger number of park employees and volunteers.
Trespass Bison Procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The trespass bison protocol would be formalized and added to the Superintendent's Compendium.



Proposed Action Alternative



Additional Management Strategies

Some management strategies currently ongoing will remain in place if the bison range is expanded. These strategies emphasize certain management practices needed to meet the purpose and need for the plan and address identified issues.

- **Disease management.** The State of South Dakota is a Certified (Brucellosis) Free State and an Accredited (TB) Free State (South Dakota Animal Industry Board 2004). The park would continue to draw blood during annual bison roundups to be tested for brucellosis and other infectious diseases, and for DNA analysis/archiving as recommended by the South Dakota Animal Industry Board. Brucellosis has never been found in the North Unit bison herd. Bovine tuberculosis has never been found in the park or surrounding area; however, the park occasionally tests for this and other infectious diseases when shipping animals to other states as recommend by the receiving states' State Vet/ Animal Industry Board. When the potential for disease is detected or determined, management will react accordingly, on an as-needed basis and within agency and park policies. Additional testing may be conducted if the situation warrants.

Another possible way disease is detected is from park staff and visitors reporting injuries or unhealthy-looking bison to Badlands National

Park resource management staff. In this situation, resource management staff would follow up with additional data collection/ necropsies and, for disease purposes, consult with NPS Biological Resources Division wildlife veterinarians. The circumstances would be reviewed with the veterinarian staff and a determination would be made regarding further actions to be taken. These may include continued monitoring and/or euthanizing the animal.

- **Dam and water impoundment maintenance.** Any needed repair or maintenance for dams eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places would be covered through appropriate compliance documents. Management actions related to water impoundments within wilderness would be determined through a minimum tool requirements analysis, as well as other necessary compliance (depending on extent of repair/improvement, historic value of impoundment, and/or presence of sensitive resource).
- **Ethnographic use.** Appropriate access for ethnographic use would be allowed, as defined in *NPS Management Policies 2006* or other agreements or policies specific to Badlands National Park.



Alternatives Considered But Dismissed from Analysis in the Environmental Assessment

While developing each alternative, it may become evident that some proposed alternative concepts or strategies do not need to be further analyzed. Certain alternatives can sometimes be considered but eliminated from further study for a variety of reasons. According to NPS Director's Order 12 *Handbook*, reasons to eliminate alternatives include:

- technical or economic infeasibility
- inability to meet project objectives or resolve need
- duplication with other, less environmentally damaging or less expensive alternatives
- conflict with an up-to-date and valid park plan, statement of purpose and significance, or other policy, such that a major change in the plan or policy would be needed to implement
- too great an environmental impact

The NPS planning team discussed and ultimately dismissed a number of ideas from consideration.

- **Allow bison grazing in the North Unit areas between the southwest extent of the current bison range (in the Sage Creek Unit of the wilderness area) to the northern boundary of South Unit of Badlands National Park.** This area was dismissed from consideration because managing a discontinuous bison herd in this remote area would be operationally infeasible related to herd management, bison roundup, limited availability of water, and limited vegetation. However, if bison are reintroduced to South Unit, it might be more operationally feasible to reintroduce bison in this southwestern portion of North Unit in the future.
- **Provide a separate and small demonstration herd either nearby the Ben Reifel Visitor Center or near the northeast entrance to the North Unit of the park.** This idea was dismissed, largely related to potential impacts to visitor safety from proximity to bison in high visitor use areas, impacts to the cultural landscape and viewshed from fencing and other bison facilities, and operational challenges related to herd management and bison roundup. Additionally, the action alternative considers expanding the bison range just west of Interior Road, which would bring bison fairly close to this same area without the same adverse resource impacts.
- **Allow bison grazing in the “Big Buffalo Basin” area of the North Unit of the park (north of State Highway 240 Badlands Loop Road, between the area just east of Big Foot Road to where State Highway 240 enters the park boundary).** This area was dismissed from consideration for bison grazing due to the sensitivity of paleontological resources in this area, limited availability of water, and potential safety concerns related to a high concentration of popular visitor trails.
- **Eliminate bison grazing in the North Unit.** This alternative would not achieve the purpose and need for the plan, nor would it meet Department of the Interior and NPS policy related to bison management.





How to Get Involved

Badlands National Park is soliciting public feedback on the preliminary action alternative. This 30-day comment period will extend from September 30 to October 30, 2015. We invite you to review the information in this newsletter and offer us your comments. Public comments will be used to refine the range of alternatives that will be analyzed in the plan / environmental assessment. In particular, we would appreciate your responses on the following questions. Please use question four to provide any additional input you might have.

1. Which strategies in the preliminary action alternative do you think should be carried forward to achieve the purpose and to address the need for the plan? Why do you think they should be carried forward?
2. Are there any strategies in the preliminary action alternative that you think would not achieve the purpose and need for the plan? Why do you think they should not be carried forward?
3. Are there other strategies that should be included in the preliminary action alternative that are not already presented? If so, which strategies and why should they be considered?
4. What other comments or suggestions do you have?

How to Comment

Share Your Comments Electronically

Comments may be submitted electronically at the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website (http://parkplanning.nps.gov/Badlands_Bison). Once on the website, select “Open for Comment” to provide your thoughts on the preliminary alternatives.

Share Your Comments Via Mail

Comments may also be submitted in writing to the following address:

National Park Service

Denver Service Center, Sarah Conlin, DSC-P

12795 West Alameda Parkway

PO Box 25287

Denver CO 80225-0287

Drop Off Your Comments at the Ben Reifel Visitor Center

Written comments can be hand-delivered at the Ben Reifel Visitor Center, in the North Unit of Badlands National Park.

Next Steps in the Planning Process

The planning team will analyze public comments on the preliminary alternatives, revise the concepts as necessary, and then analyze the impacts of the alternatives. After the analysis and identification of a preferred alternative, the alternatives will be presented in the North Unit Bison Resource Stewardship Plan / Environmental Assessment for public review. The table on the back provides the planning schedule, including opportunities for public input.

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Next Steps in the Planning Process

Milestone	Schedule	Public Input
Initiate project and conduct public scoping	Summer 2013	Thank you for your input! The public scoping summary is included in this newsletter.
Analyze public comments and develop a range of preliminary alternatives	Summer 2015	
Public review of the preliminary alternatives	Fall 2015	Review the preliminary alternatives newsletter and provide your comments at http://parkplanning.nps.gov/Badlands_Bison
Analyze public comments and prepare the North Unit Bison Resource Stewardship Plan / EA	Winter 2015 – Spring 2016	
Public review of the North Unit Bison Resource Stewardship Plan / EA	Summer 2016	Review the plan, attend the open house event(s), and provide your comments at http://parkplanning.nps.gov/Badlands_Bison
Analyze public comments and prepare and sign decision document	Late Summer 2016	Stay up to date on the planning process by visiting the website at: http://parkplanning.nps.gov/Badlands_Bison

*Thank you for your continued interest in Badlands National Park
North Unit Bison Resource Stewardship Plan / Environmental Assessment!*