

Transcript for recording of Theodore Roosevelt National Park Livestock Plan Environmental Assessment Public Meeting on October 10, 2023

Rene Ohms:

Good evening everyone, and welcome to the Theodore Roosevelt National Park Livestock Plan Environmental Assessment Meeting. We're going to begin momentarily.

Good evening everyone. It is six o'clock Mountain Time. We're going to begin shortly, but we are waiting for some additional folks to join, so please sit tight and we'll be back in just a couple of minutes. Thank you.

All right. Good evening everyone. We're going to begin the meeting now. Welcome to the Theodore Roosevelt National Park Livestock Plan Environmental Assessment Public Meeting. My name is Rene Ohms and I'm an environmental protection specialist with the Midwest region of the National Park Service.

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I'm just going to go over the meeting agenda. We are going to have a short presentation followed by a question-and-answer period. The main focus of tonight's meeting is that Q&A session. We want to hear from you and we want to answer your questions. To enter your questions tonight, be sure to click on the little Q&A box at the top of your screen and that's where you can enter a question. We will be answering the questions after the presentation tonight, but feel free to submit questions all throughout the meeting.

You can go to the next slide.

If you're viewing this on a mobile device and you're not seeing a button to submit your questions, tap your screen and the icon should appear in the upper right-hand corner. Also, for those of you who might be joining us late, you can catch up to the meeting in real-time by fast forwarding in Microsoft Teams.

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Keep in mind that to have your comments formally considered during the National Environmental Policy Act process, you need to submit them via the project website or via U.S. Mail, not in this meeting chat. Tonight, we'll be answering your questions, but we will not be taking formal comments on the environmental assessment. So, please go to <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/lp> if you would like to enter a comment on the environmental assessment.

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To submit questions tonight, click on the Q&A icon at the top of your screen and a box will appear. You can enter your questions in the little box and then make sure that you click the arrow in the lower right-hand corner of that window and that will submit your question. Be sure to submit your question only once. Just know that we are seeing them as they're coming in. We're going to try to get to as many of them as we possibly can tonight, and you can submit your questions all throughout the presentation. Again, to have your comments formally considered, make sure you submit them via the project website and we'll be putting that in the Q&A box throughout tonight's presentation, but that's park <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/lp>.

All right. Now, I'm going to turn it over to Superintendent Angie Richman who's going to begin tonight's presentation. Go ahead, Angie.

Angie Richman:

Great, thank you, Rene. Good evening everyone. My name is Angie Richman and I am the superintendent of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. I'd like to thank you all for giving up some of your evening to join us for tonight's meeting to hear a brief overview of the Livestock Plan Environmental Assessment, which is now open for public review and comment. We typically refer to an environmental assessment as an EA, and that's a lot easier to say, so that's the term that you're going to hear tonight. As Rene mentioned, tonight's presentation will be fairly short because we'd like to dedicate most of our time to answering your questions and we will try to answer as many unique questions as we can. On this slide is our timeline and it highlights where we currently are in the planning process. This is the third and the final time that we have engaged the public on this process.

We are and have been committed to being transparent in bringing awareness of this project throughout the process. We have engaged not only the public but our affiliated Tribes, our elected officials and other partners, and we continue to do so. Once an alternative is selected and a final decision is made, it will be included in the decision document. So, after where we are now, the next steps is to have the decision document and we expect to see that late winter or early spring. The decision document is usually signed by our regional director. The comment period that is currently open is a 30-day comment period, which is set to end on October 25th. However, we have received some requests asking for an extension and we are considering that request and we'll have an answer soon.

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We wanted to show you how to navigate where you can comment on our website. To provide your feedback, you can go to our website and there's a link there on the homepage, but we're also putting the link for you in the Q&A. When you get there, you'll see open for comment. If you click on the open for comment, the EA is the only document that will come up. However, if you end up in the document list, there is a lot of documents that we have shared on this planning process and you want to look for the one that's second to the bottom and in brackets it says open for comment. That is the environmental assessment and that is what we are hoping that you will comment on.

Once you click on that document, then it'll take you to the screen that you see here on the right and you'll see the comment now button, and that is how you will submit your formal comment. Again, it can be done through the website there or you can mail your comments through the U.S. Mail. Those are the only two ways that you can leave a formal comment.

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Since we're asking you to comment on the entire EA, we wanted to share a brief overview of what you'll find in each chapter of the document. I'll go into a little bit more detail on each of the chapters in the next few slides. But just a quick overview, the EA is comprised of four chapters. Chapter one articulates the purpose and need for this plan, which is to address the presence of livestock in the park. Again, livestock is considered to be any species of animal that has been bred by humans for domestic and agricultural purposes, which for Theodore Roosevelt National Park includes the horse and cattle herds. Chapter one also gives a history of these herds in the park and past management actions and perspectives.

Chapter two summarizes the no action alternative and the two action alternatives that were developed to meet the purpose and need. Like I mentioned, we have not selected a preferred alternative at this time, however there are management actions that are common across any of the three alternatives that would be utilized. And we have also described them in chapter two. Chapter three discusses the current and future of potential resource impacts, both beneficial and adverse, of implementing any one of the alternatives. A few of the impact topics included are things like noise, visitor experience, socioeconomics, wildlife habitat, just to name a few. Chapter four provides a list of agencies, Tribes, and individuals that have been consulted throughout the process.

And then finally, the appendices include a list of documents that we referenced throughout the EA, and most of those documents have now been uploaded to the project's planning page, so you can find them there. A comparison of the action alternatives in a table format in case that's easier to see them side by side. And then if you have engaged with this process since the beginning, we did have a bunch of alternatives that were initially considered but dismissed because they didn't meet the purpose and need, and those can be found in Appendix D. These are alternatives that were part of our March 2022 civic engagement.

All right, next slide please.

Again, the EA assesses the potential impacts of continuing current livestock management at the park. Chapter one builds from the purpose statement of the park, which is shared on the slide here, and was informed by our enabling legislation as well as our 2014 foundation document. The park was established to pay tribute to the conservation legacy of Theodore Roosevelt. This legacy is really defined by a natural ecosystem which includes the native animal species such as bison, elk, antelope, and a native grassland ecology. And many believe that the Badlands of North Dakota is where Theodore Roosevelt's conservation ethic began. It was here that Roosevelt's experiences led to later efforts to save the American bison from extinction, his signing of the Antiquities Act of 1906 and his establishment of national parks, national monuments, national forests and federal bird reserves, all of which was done in an effort to protect, to preserve or restore natural environments and ecological communities that inhabit them, systems that evolve together and support each species native to it.

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This is the purpose and need. We also shared this during the last civic engagement period. It should be familiar to you. Again, this is described in chapter one, and our job here was to consider the bigger picture, which is all the native species we are mandated to manage in the park, to look at everything in the ecosystem together, not individually. So, this purpose and need considers the context of the livestock species' existence in the park in accordance with current NPS laws and policies and in balance with the natural ecosystem, not separate from it.

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The EA still has the three alternatives that you have previously seen. Alternative A is referred to as the no action, although it really is more appropriate to consider it as a continuation of current management, which is guided by the 1970 Cattle Management Plan and the 1978 feral horse EA. Alternatives B and C are the action alternatives, which again were developed to meet the purpose and need of the document. And these action alternatives allow us to uphold the NPS mission, which mandates that we prioritize the health of native species and maintaining a native prairie ecosystem. They allow us to honor the Secretary of Interior's commitment to bison management. And by removing non-native species, it allows us to more fully manage the bison and the health of the bison herd. It also allows us to realign our management actions, goals and priorities.

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Again, just to go a little bit more depth into each of the alternatives. Alternative A is the no action. Again, this would realign to the management documents of the '70s, which has a population objective of 35 to 60 horses and up to 12 cattle. The horses would remain in the south unit and the cattle would remain in the north unit. The same management tools that we currently use would still be used. Contraception would still be used to limit the size of the herd, and excess animals would continue to be sold via GSA auction. And then cattle would be replenished as animals age and die. That's what we currently do. And it really is important to note that even under this alternative, the park would still need to reduce the horse herd size by about 150 animals.

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Alternative B is the first action alternative. Under alternative B, this would be active capture of horses and cattle to reduce the population to zero. Tribes would have the first opportunity to accept animals from the park. Once the Tribal requests were fulfilled, we would then consider requests from other authorized entities or educational organizations. And then anything remaining after that would go up on GSA auction to be sold to the public. The plan with alternative B would be to remove all livestock within two years, although given certain circumstances it could take longer.

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Alternative C, the second action alternative, is more of a phased reduction of livestock over a longer period of time. We would have the same capture methods, and again, the Tribes would have the first opportunity to accept animals then other authorized entities, then the public. Under this scenario, animals that we could not place would be contracepted and would be allowed to come back to the park to live out their lives. It is anticipated that phased reduction would occur over 10 years or longer. We have received over 2000 comments already, and several have asked the park not to kill the horses. There continues to be a misconception that the park is planning to eradicate or use lethal means to remove the horses, and that is not the case. I feel it's really important to note that while the park cannot guarantee the outcome for horses and cattle after they leave the park, we will work hard, just like we have in the past, to place animals with entities and individuals that can provide for their health and longevity.

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The NEPA process requires us to analyze the natural and cultural resource impacts under each alternative. A summary of these resource impacts is explored in greater detail in the EA in chapter three. And looking at the no action alternative, the impacts would continue as they are now. And under the action alternatives with the removal of livestock, any resource impacts that would occur from non-native species on the native prairie ecosystem or in competition with native wildlife would be mitigated or would go away entirely. This is an incredibly quick overview to basically say that we have analyzed several impacts and you can find this analysis in chapter three. We hope that you will read the EA in its entirety and submit your feedback and comments on the entire document.

The next slide please.

Now shifting gears a little bit throughout this planning process, we have seen several common questions that have come up frequently. And as a reminder, we continue to update our FAQ pages on the website for both horse and cattle, but we thought it was also a good idea to address a number of these common questions right out of the gate tonight since they're likely to come up again. I'm going to answer the first three questions on the slide here, and then I'm going to turn it over to my colleagues who are joining us tonight to help with the Q&A. As they answer their questions, they will introduce themselves. This first question, why is this happening now? We've gotten this question a lot and park managers have really

been grappling with this issue for a very long time. Since the inception of the park, it was our intention to remove the livestock from the park and restore to a more natural environment reflective of Theodore Roosevelt's conservation ethos.

So, removal actions continued into the '60s. We have noted in several of our management documents over the decades that we have struggled with what to do with the livestock. And by 2020, livestock management was really taking about 30% of park staff time and resources, and that's time that could be spent managing our native species. There was a need to update the 1970s plans to consider current policy and updated scientific guidance. So, it was determined that a Livestock Plan EA was the way to go.

All right, so the next question. What happened to our feedback? Every piece of correspondence that has come in during the past two comment periods has been read, analyzed, and added to the project documentation. Comments that were considered from the planning process have included input from our elected officials, our Tribal partners, as well as the general public. And we'll continue to do that with this public comment period as well.

And then what about the historic scene? So, livestock including cattle and horses are generally precluded from NPS lands by federal regulation except when authorized under a few exceptions, which include when they are required to maintain a historic scene. The park has allowed the livestock to occur to represent the historic scene. However, our enabling legislation has no such provision to require or allow livestock. So, this effort is a realignment with our policy. The next question I believe Rene is going to answer, so I am going to bounce it back to Rene to continue answering these questions.

Rene Ohms:

Great. Thank you so much Angie. Again, everyone. My name is Rene Ohms and I'm an environmental protection specialist with the Midwest region of the National Park Service. The next question was, why are you doing an EA and not an environmental impact statement? Based on the current management, the existing conditions and previous studies, the range of management alternatives proposed weren't anticipated to have significant impacts. That's why an environmental assessment was the appropriate NEPA pathway. There's many different NEPA pathways that we can select from. The lowest level is a categorical exclusion. And then the next one is an environmental assessment, and then the next one is an environmental impact statement. In this case, an environmental assessment was the appropriate pathway. If in the process of analysis, it were determined that the potential existed for significant impacts that cannot be avoided or mitigated, then an environmental impact statement would be prepared. Hopefully that answers your questions. All right. Now I'm going to turn it over to Maureen who's going to take the next set of questions.

Maureen McGee-Ballinger:

Hi, I'm Maureen McGee-Ballinger. I'm the deputy superintendent at Theodore Roosevelt National Park. And one of the frequently asked questions is, why do you call horses livestock? The National Park Service and the scientific community consider livestock to be any species of animal that has been selectively bred by humans for domestic and agricultural purposes, including but not limited to cattle, sheep, horses, burros, mules, goats, and swine. Regardless of what you call a horse or cattle herds, livestock, wild, feral, domestic, the same statutes and regulations and policies will still apply. Even though some of the native wildlife like bison have been farmed, representatives of the species that occur on the park lands have not been subject to such practices. They're in their natural history and therefore they are wildlife.

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Why don't you apply the wild horse and burro act? The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 only applies to the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management managed lands. Our next question will be taken by Jenny.

Jenny Powers:

Hi. Thank you for joining us everybody. I am Jenny Powers and I lead the Wildlife Health Program for the National Park Service. The next question is, what is the difference between Theodore Roosevelt National Park and other parks that allow horses? While all parks are managed under the same set of policies, each park has a different purpose and unique enabling legislation pertaining to the management of resources within their boundaries. Some parks are also subject to additional legislation passed after the establishment of the park, including management of non-native animals. Here at Theodore Roosevelt, this NEPA analysis that we've currently been through has revealed that park enabling legislation does not address livestock and that there is no requirement allowing livestock to occur. Therefore, the park is prioritizing the management of native species.

The next question that I'll answer is, does GonaCon sterilize horses? Our experience over the last more than a decade indicates that while very effective if we use booster vaccinations, meaning a second vaccination after the first, that fertility control at the herd level can be accomplished, but that the herd is not sterilized. The duration of effect of the contraceptive is shorter for some animals than for others. Some animals treated with GonaCon have not returned to fertility during this research project. It is possible that individual animals may never return to fertility, and this question has not been fully answered. However, we do know that some animals from every treatment group return to fertility during the course of the study and that the herd is not contracepted completely. Now, I will turn the questions over to Blake.

Blake McCann:

Hello everybody. Blake McCann, director of resource management and Science here at the park. The question is, there is plenty of forage to maintain horses and bison, so why are you suggesting removal? Consistent with NPS management policies, we're prioritizing the available forage for native wildlife, including bison, elk, deer, and many others. The purpose of the Livestock Plan here is to address livestock, horses and cattle, within the park under relevant laws, regulations, policies, and park management priorities, including the conservation of native species and natural prairie ecosystem functions. I'll turn it back over to Rene.

Rene Ohms:

Great. Thank you, Blake. Hey, you can go to the next slide. We are now going to begin the question-and-answer period of tonight's meeting. We've had several wonderful questions coming in. And again, if you would like to submit a question, you click on the Q&A button at the top of your screen and type your question in the box that appears, and then just make sure that you click the little arrow in the lower right-hand corner of that window to submit your question. We'll leave the instructions up here on the screen throughout the Q&A session so that you can have ready access to those. All right, so our first question this evening is for Blake. Blake, how many bison are currently in Theodore Roosevelt National Park and what is the desired number of bison the park wants to have within the park's boundaries?

Blake McCann:

Thank you, Rene. Currently, we believe we have a little bit more than 600 bison in the south unit and a little over 300 bison in the north unit. The herds are separate. Looking back at our management over time, priorities have been a range of 300 to 500 bison in the south unit and 100 to 300 in the north unit. We are planning a roundup for this fall in the south unit to continue to work towards those objectives.

Rene Ohms:

All right. Thank you for that answer, Blake. You can just stay on camera because the next question is also for you. Blake, why was the bison initiative added to the purpose and need statement of the environmental assessment?

Blake McCann:

Well, it's certainly relevant. I believe that actually came out this last spring. So, it might've been something that hadn't been included in analysis to date, but it is relevant and I think an important part of how we're considering this project going forward.

Rene Ohms:

Okay, thank you. Yeah. Now we're going to shift over to Angie for the next question. Angie, the next question says, have you already made up your mind to remove the horses?

Angie Richman:

We have not. And that is why we have not selected a preferred alternative at this time. I also wanted to add to that last question about the bison initiative being added to just note that the Department of Interior manages only 11,000 bison and a thousand of those are here at Theodore Roosevelt National Park. That's a really significant number under the entire department, and it's a real responsibility that we have to contribute to managing this native species.

Rene Ohms:

Absolutely. Thank you for adding that, Angie. That's an incredible number. Okay. The next question is also for you, Angie, so we'll leave you on camera here. The next question says, I have not seen anything about the National Park Service considering the offer from North Dakota government to help manage the horses and keep a viable herd in the park. Why has the NPS not considered this option?

Angie Richman:

I'll just say we are considering every piece of feedback that we get. We have been in conversation with our senators, congressmen, and the governor, and we'll continue to have conversations with their offices as we finish this process.

Rene Ohms:

Okay, thank you. We got one more for you here, Angie. What happened to the citation for NPS 2022H that was removed from the website today?

Angie Richman:

We are not infallible as well, and that was an internal, deliberative document that was accidentally referenced and uploaded, and so we have removed it.

Rene Ohms:

Okay. Thanks for that clarification, Angie. Okay. We're going to shift over to Maureen now for the next question. Maureen, what is a natural prairie ecosystem?

Maureen McGee-Ballinger:

A natural prairie ecosystem consists of native plants, animals, soils. The NPS management policy of native species defines all species that have occurred, that now occur, or may occur as a result of a natural process on lands designated as National Park Systems. The native species in a place are evolving in concert with each other. Our enabling legislation tells us to honor the conservation legacy of Theodore Roosevelt, which we through recent evaluation of law policy and research, understand we need to prioritize the native species.

Rene Ohms:

All right, thank you. The next question is for you as well, so I'm just going to leave you on the screen here. Does the management of Theodore Roosevelt National Park legitimately care and take into consideration what the public wants, let alone what Theodore Roosevelt stood for?

Maureen McGee-Ballinger:

Absolutely. That is the whole planning process is to take public information, take the comments into consideration. As Angie stated earlier, every comment that comes in is read, evaluated, everything has gone through. And our enabling legislation states that we are to be protecting the natural ecosystems that were here with Theodore Roosevelt.

Rene Ohms:

All right. Yeah, thank you for that, Maureen. It's an amazing legacy. Okay. We're going to shift to Blake now. Blake, this next question says, why does the EA offer the horses to the Tribes before the general public? Isn't the National Park Service supported by everyone?

Blake McCann:

Thank you, Rene. We maintain relationships with a number of affiliated Tribes, and over time we've pursued opportunities to transfer property, whether it's physical property such as mechanical items, or in the case of animals as property to those Tribal recipients wherever there was an interest and a benefit to Tribes. Our property management policy allows for this type of direct transfer to Tribes as well as other organizations and some nonprofits. In this instance, I think it makes a lot of sense given that history and that ability to pursue that option. I would say that once Tribal interests were satisfied, any remaining animals we could consider going to other eligible recipients and ultimately, public auction via the General Services Administration website would be another step that we would take to provide animals, make them available to interested parties.

Rene Ohms:

Okay, thanks for that, Blake. Sounds like there'll be many options to distribute the horses to interested parties after the Tribes. Okay. Angie, the next one is for you. Can you discuss the Brownlee study where you said that only 49% of visitors support the horses? Our interpretation says that the number is really 89%.

Angie Richman:

Yeah, so the Brownlee report was our visitor use management study that was completed in 2018. It looked at a lot of different aspects of visitor use throughout the park. One of the questions among many was should the park maintain the herd of horses in the south unit? And there was strongly opposed, opposed, somewhat opposed, neither oppose or support, somewhat support, support or strongly support. So, the 49% that was referenced was under the category strongly support. But these are the types of things that are important comments, so if there are questions relating to the information contained in the EA, please provide a comment with your specific concern and we'll definitely look at it.

Rene Ohms:

Great. Thank you so much Angie. Yeah, definitely as a reminder to everybody, we are not taking formal comments on the environmental assessment in tonight's meeting. That way to get your comments formally considered is to submit them via the project website at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/lp>. And if you do have a question that you'd like to ask tonight, make sure that you click on the Q&A button at the top of your screen to submit your questions. We have several more that have been coming in, so we're going to get back to it again. Let's see. The next question is for Blake. Blake, could you define the term native?

Blake McCann:

Thank you. I would fall back on our management policies, which defines native, talking about native species here, as all species that have occurred now occur or may occur as a result of natural processes on lands designated as units of the national park system. Native species in a place, in this context, are those that are evolving in concert with each other in the environment.

Rene Ohms:

All right, great. Thank you for that definition, Blake. We're going to shift over to Jenny now for this next question. Jenny, why do you want to remove the horses from the park? These horses have been part of the park since it began. They're part of our history. Once they're gone, they'll be gone forever. I enjoy the horses more than any other part of the park.

Jenny Powers:

Yeah, thank you for that question. These are the really, really hard ones, right? And I want to start by saying we hear you and we know that the horses are loved and it isn't that we don't really appreciate and love the horses too, it's that it takes some really hard decisions when you are managing public spaces. Going back to the purpose and need for this plan is really where you can answer that question. I think that it did a beautiful job of stating just exactly why we need to remove the horses at this time and that we're realigning with park service goals and policies by doing that.

Rene Ohms:

All right, thank you Jenny. Yeah, this is difficult stuff, so I appreciate your addressing that and we do hear you. We do hear that concern. Okay. We're going to go back to Blake now for the next question. Blake, what archeological sites and cultural sites are impacted by wildlife and other animals in the park?

Blake McCann:

Thanks, Rene. Wildlife freely traverse all park units or most of the park units including the cultural sites that exist there. While I don't have a specific example to call out in terms of measured effect, we could view the interaction of wildlife with archeological sites in most cases as part of the natural process in the life of an archeological site on a park. So, the native wildlife are part of the native landscape in which that site is embedded and part of its process going forward into the future. I think if you consider that context, wildlife interaction in some cases is a part of the natural progression of an archeological site. On the flip side, we might view interaction of livestock, which are maintained on a landscape by humans, specifically as something that is artificial in that context relative to damages that may occur.

Rene Ohms:

All right. Thank you for that, Blake. And I know there's some discussion of this in the environmental assessment too. Again, encourage everyone to read the document and then comment on it. To submit your comments, make sure you go to <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/lp>. Okay, the next question is also for Blake. Blake, what happened to the horse document noted by NDSU student, Melissa that allowed for more horses that was published after the 1978 EA? Why wouldn't the most current document be used?

Blake McCann:

I'm not sure if I understand the question, but I'm going to speak to what I think is being talked about here. There was a graduate student that looked at genetics of the horse herd and had a master's thesis that was a result of her efforts. I believe one of those chapters has been published. The other is in the process of being published. But this is not a NEPA document, this is not a park service planning document. This is a research document. So, I think there is a clear distinction there in terms of research that's been done that may inform our understanding of animals on the park, but that's not the same thing as an environmental assessment. In fact, there've been a number of research projects from the 1990s onward evaluating the interaction of horses on the landscape of Theodore Roosevelt National Park as well as herd genetics and other topics. I apologize, I'm not sure exactly what is being asked, but if that is referencing the Thompson thesis, then that is an external research project. It was part of the work that we did through my program here at the park with that student.

Rene Ohms:

Okay. Thanks for addressing that, Blake. I'll just say to anybody out there, if you know of documentation that perhaps we don't have or you didn't see it referenced in the environmental assessment and you think it's important that we know about it, make sure you submit a comment to that effect in PEPC, that's <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/lp>. That's where you can submit your comments and any additional information that you think would help inform this planning process. Okay. We're going to shift over to Angie now. Angie, this is about the name of this effort. Why was this process originally named the Livestock Management Plan and is now just the Livestock Plan?

Angie Richman:

Good question. This is a very unexciting answer. This is an iterative process and we kicked around a lot of different names for this when we started the process. We have a lot of acronyms in the park service, and so we're also trying not to duplicate acronyms. I think initially it was the Horse and Cattle Management Plan, which was a mouthful. And so, we just tried to simplify it to just Livestock Plan. I do want to just mention, there was a comment that I saw that said, "Can we submit more than one question?" Yes, you can submit more than one question.

Rene Ohms:

Great. Thanks, Angie. Another question is coming to you now, Angie, what does the public need to do to get the National Park Service to understand how important the horses are to remain within the park? How do we get alternative D?

Angie Richman:

This kind of goes back to what Jenny said. We do hear you. We do know that there are a number of people that really love these horses and have an affinity for them. So, again, I'll just say please continue to provide your comments. We do read them all, we do analyze them all, and it really does make a difference, so submit your comments.

Rene Ohms:

Great. One more for you here, Angie. Does your enabling legislation mention horses as a reason for the establishment of the park or only native species?

Angie Richman:

It does not. Just as a reminder, this park was initially established as Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Park, so our enabling legislation is really to memorialize Theodore Roosevelt and really his conservation ethic as the conservation president. He set aside more public lands than any president in history. That's really the foundation of our enabling legislation.

Rene Ohms:

Okay, thank you for that answer, Angie. Appreciate that. I'm actually going to jump to a question that I can answer, which is a follow-up to that, which is did your foundation document that does mention horses go through a NEPA process? Those of you out there, you may not be familiar with foundation documents, but Theodore Roosevelt National Park does have a document called a foundation document. And those foundation documents do not go through a NEPA process because they're not proposing any sort of management action. A foundation document is essentially a summary of existing legislation and plans that guide the management of that particular national park unit. So, it goes back to the enabling legislation and other planning documents. Through the foundation document process, the team looks at all those different documents and develops the fundamental resources and values of the park and other important resources and values and also identifies planning needs for the future.

That's what a foundation document is essentially in a nutshell. And it's not something that goes through a NEPA process because there is no proposed action. Helps to guide future management of the park and helps the park to decide what planning documents they need to tackle next. That's the answer to that one.

Okay. Now we're going to go back to Blake. Blake, how do you propose the horse genetic diversity would be safe with the decrease of the horse herd size?

Blake McCann:

Thanks, Rene. I suppose it depends on what specifically is being asked. Before us here, we have a no action alternative, which would be management status quo, how we've been managed before. And then there are the two action alternatives, both action alternatives ultimately have an outcome of no horses remaining on the park. I think this is irrelevant to those two alternatives. Speaking of the no action, that really relies on a 1978 EA and the [inaudible 00:48:12] the population objective is, I think, 30 to 65 or 35

to 60, apologize if I'm mixing numbers around. There's no provision for expanding herd size for increased genetic diversity. There was effort in the 1980s to bring in new blood under that environmental assessment, but animals haven't been brought in since. I think given the scenarios we have, the two action alternatives to which this question is not relevant. If we're talking about no action, then we're left with our abilities to manage according to existing compliance. So, I think that's the best that I can answer at this point.

Rene Ohms:

Thanks, Blake. Yeah, that makes sense. Okay. We're going to move to Jenny now. Jenny, as every agency in the Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, BLM, NPS, and even the Bureau of Indian Affairs as well as U.S. Forest Service, and most states consider horses and cattle as non-native species, do you feel as though your alternatives adequately support NPS law and policy as well as the science in regards to the removal or eventual removal of these animals? I know that's a long question. Let me know if you need me to re-read it for you.

Jenny Powers:

Thanks, Rene. Yeah, there's a lot to unpack there. I'd go back to the fact that other agencies, both state and federal, have different laws and essentially enabling legislation for each of those agencies and they each have a different goal, particularly when it comes to native or non-native or wildlife versus livestock. There's going to be different verbiage used depending on the agency that you look at. Do we feel that we have thoroughly analyzed the alternatives as they pertain to NPS policy, NPS law and NPS regulations? Yes, we absolutely do. That has been a huge piece of our analysis and we've spent a lot of time there. Thank you for the question.

Rene Ohms:

Yeah, and thank you for that answer, Jenny. Much appreciated. Okay. We are moving over to Blake again now. These questions are fantastic. We're getting many, many questions coming in, so keep them coming, again click the Q&A button at the top of your screen to submit a question and we will get to as many of these as we possibly can. All right. Blake, what about horses during roundup that are injured? Will they be euthanized? What about older horses?

Blake McCann:

Thanks, Rene. Every time we handle animals, there's always potential that you can have injury and injury that results in a need to destroy an animal, so it is a possibility. I would say that where we have broken bones or other serious injuries, it's in consultation with veterinarian staff that we have on onsite before decisions are made about what is the best process going forward for that. Euthanasia remains a possibility for those circumstances where we have severe injuries. What was the second part of the question, Rene?

Rene Ohms:

What about older horses? Would they be euthanized?

Blake McCann:

We understand that it's harder to place older animals just with experience in transferring a number of horses out to private recipients in the past. We have had some luck and we've had some interest from different entities and individuals in older animals in the past for various reasons. But again, I think we

have three alternatives before us here. There's two action alternatives and then there is no action. Under each of those circumstances, we might have different interactions with regard to older horses. So, it's hard to say until an action or until we have a decision on the environmental assessment.

Rene Ohms:

Great. Thank you for that answer, Blake. Yeah, we understand that's not something that we ever want to see have to happen, but like you said, if there's injuries, sometimes things like that do happen. But yeah, thank you for that answer, much appreciated. We are going to move over to Jenny. Jenny, this next question is why are the horses termed as a heritage herd if they're just livestock?

Jenny Powers:

Oh gosh. For this question, I would really point you to chapter one of the EA. That chapter really describes the struggle the park service has had since the beginning, since the inception of the park with trying to deal with what do we call horses, how do we remove them, do we remove them at all? I think that it's a great history, if you go to that chapter one. It'll help shed some light there.

Rene Ohms:

Yeah, thank you for that, Jenny. There's a long history there and I think it's summed up very well in that chapter one. So, definitely encourage everyone to read the environmental assessment, read it thoroughly, and then submit your comments. Okay. We're going to switch over to Maureen now. Maureen, are cattle allowed to graze in the park?

Maureen McGee-Ballinger:

Thank you for that question. We do have nine longhorn steer that are in the north unit of the park and they're included and part of this environmental assessment, however, cattle in general are not allowed to graze in the park.

Rene Ohms:

Okay. Very clear and to the point, cattle are not allowed to graze in the park. Okay. The next one is also for you, Maureen. If the horses are removed... Let's see. Oh, okay. I think this is saying if the horses are removed, will we no longer allow horseback riding in the park as it is now?

Maureen McGee-Ballinger:

The environmental assessment is not addressing recreational horseback riding. So, people would be allowed to come in, there are equestrian trails, they would still be allowed to come and ride their horses in the park. This is strictly addressing the animals that are not personal pets that are being used in the park.

Rene Ohms:

Okay, thank you. It doesn't affect that recreational use, understand. Okay. I see we got a question from somebody that wanted us to repeat how you submit your comments on the environmental assessment, so I'll go ahead and repeat that now. To have your comments formally considered in the NEPA process, so to enter a comment that will be considered, be sure to submit it via the project website. The link appears on your screen on this slide in the lower right-hand corner. And it's also been posted in the Q&A section. When you click on the Q&A button, the top of your screen you should see it there as well along

with some other helpful resources. Again, that address is <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/lp>. and you can also submit your comments by U.S. Mail. We can get you the address for that as well. It may be in the Q&A section already. If not, we'll make sure we get that posted there. You have two options you can submit online through <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/lp> or by U.S. Mail.

But to submit a question for our staff to answer tonight, you click on the Q&A button at the top of your screen and then enter your question there. We do have quite a few questions to get through here. We are only five minutes from the top of the hour, but we are going to hang around longer and try to get through as many of these as we possibly can tonight. Let's just keep on going. All right. The next question is for Jenny. Jenny, weren't the bison restocked or replaced from herds elsewhere and therefore are not native to this park?

Jenny Powers:

Great question. The bison were re-established within Theodore Roosevelt National Park from other bison that are part of the Department of the Interior's bison population. The intent is to manage bison within DOI for wild and healthy herds, meaning as free ranging as we possibly can be and as close to wildlife as we possibly can be. These animals are as representative of the bison that were free roaming there a couple of hundred years ago as they can be.

Rene Ohms:

All right. Thank you, Jenny. Yeah, it's the closest that we can get. Okay. Blake, why can't the horses still be removed and adopted out like they previously had been?

Blake McCann:

Thanks, Rene. I think that would remain a possibility as I described earlier, a response to the question about potential for Tribes receiving horses. At some point, adoption via General Services Administration auctions may be a part of how some fraction of animals coming out of the park would be distributed to private owners. So, I think it could be. Again, here I think we're talking about potential differences across no action versus action alternatives with regard to this question too.

Rene Ohms:

Right, exactly. Thanks for answering that. Hopefully that helped out whoever asked that question. The next one is also for you Blake. What entities have made themselves available to adopt the approximately 150 horses that the park plans on removing?

Blake McCann:

I think it's probably not my place to put anybody on the spot during this meeting, but I will say that we've had some interest from multiple locations and entities. I think it's probably a number of outlets for animals rather than a large sum going to any one location. We've always made efforts to find different locations and different recipients that could provide good opportunities for animals leaving the park. So, I would anticipate that processes we would use here would follow our history of effort there to do so. And there may be multiple recipients rather than one large recipient just depending on how things play out. Once again, I think we have action alternatives and we have a no action alternative where different scenarios may be experienced.

Rene Ohms:

All right. Thanks, Blake. We're going to go back to Jenny now. Jenny, if the wild horses are livestock, so are the bison. Many ranchers are raising them to butcher now, so they are also livestock. So, are you going to remove all of them too?

Jenny Powers:

I would probably refer you back to my last answer, and that is that... Yes, it can be confusing and depending on the entity that you're talking to, some people consider bison livestock and some people don't. But I can tell you within the Department of the Interior, bison are managed as wildlife.

Rene Ohms:

All right, thank you. Now we're going to shift back to Angie. Angie, it says we were told in December that there would be two more chances for the public to comment. When is the next public comment period?

Angie Richman:

I wonder if we can go back in our slides to the slide that has the timeline. We've used this slide with each of our public meetings and public comment periods, and this is the third one. If you look at the orange asterisk, this is the three times that we have said that we'd go out for public comment. If you remember that first one was the pre-NEPA civic engagement, and that was in the spring of '22. If you remember, we had a blizzard and we had a request to extend that comment period because of the blizzard, which we did. Then the second comment period was this last winter, December, January, and this is the third. So, we're on the third comment period. Sorry, if there was some confusion about that.

Rene Ohms:

Okay, thanks, Angie. Thanks for clarifying that. Yeah. I think when it says back in December, that must have been including the one that was last winter.

Angie Richman: Right. Three times total. Yeah.

Rene Ohms:

Right. Okay, thanks. Okay. The next one is also for you, Angie. It says, what happens to the town of Medora with the decrease of tourism?

Angie Richman:

We don't think there will be a decrease in tourism. The park is a popular tourist destination in North Dakota. And if you look at our visitation stats over the last 100 years, there are variations among the years, but we have a steady trajectory where visitation is continuing to increase. And this is true of national parks across the country. Our park is not alone in that. We do think that visitation is going to continue to go up. Visitors come to this park for many reasons, which include viewing scenery, viewing native wildlife, bison, elk, pronghorn, and yes, even the prairie dogs, they also come to see the horses. The park doesn't really collect data on specific economic contributions related to each activity, but we do think that there's going to be plenty of opportunities for visitors in this area, not just at the park, but with the opening of the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library in 2026, and then also with all the offerings that the Medora Foundation provides here in the town of Medora.

Rene Ohms:

All right. Thank you, Angie. We are going to go back over to Blake for this next question. Blake, it says, why not get rid of the groundhogs that are very destructive to the land? If the horses are removed, you'll lose a lot of money coming into the park. Two different thoughts there, but yeah, why not get rid of the groundhogs?

Blake McCann:

Okay, thanks, Rene. I'll refer the second part of that question back to the one that Angie just answered. I think she covered that. In terms of groundhogs, I think possibly this person is referencing prairie dogs. I'm not aware of groundhogs occurring in our park, so I'll proceed as though we're talking about prairie dogs. I guess what I would offer and what we've talked about in the past is prairie dogs are a native species that are part of that natural landscape. Since we've defined what native species are, and we've talked about what natural ecosystem is, they're an integral part to that. That's part of what we're trying to preserve here and trying to prioritize is those native systems and native species.

Rene Ohms:

All right. Thank you, Blake. We're going to shift back to Angie again now. This next question is, have the Tribes agreed that there is no cultural significance to the horses?

Angie Richman:

That's a good question. We do consult with eight affiliated Tribes, and I'll just say that they all have a different perspective on the horses, but some of the Tribes do consider them to be important culturally to their Tribe. That is why we are offering Tribes the first opportunity to accept these animals.

Rene Ohms:

Right. Thank you. Boy, we've got so many questions coming in everybody, thank you so much for all your participation tonight. We are going to keep going and try to get through as many of these as we possibly can. We're going to stay on a little longer here, even though the meeting was scheduled for one hour, but you've got so many great questions. We're going to keep diving in for at least a few more minutes here. Next one is for Jenny. Jenny, have you thought that the horses and cattle make Theodore Roosevelt National Park unique compared to other parks? All other national parks contain bison, prairie dogs, elk. It seems redundant and boring visiting parks that have the same wildlife, whereas seeing the horses and cattle in Theodore Roosevelt National Park are refreshing and fun.

Jenny Powers:

Thanks for that comment. And yes, we have absolutely considered that information and we've been told many times. I would just point you right back to the purpose and need for this plan and that will show you why we have to make these hard decisions.

Rene Ohms:

All right. Thank you, Jenny. Just looking at this list of questions, there are so many that have come in that I don't think we will be able to get to every single question tonight, but we are going to hang on a bit longer and try to get through a few more of these. Again, if we get through tonight and your question

was not answered, I'll refer you back to the FAQs. We put the link in the Q&A earlier tonight, so you should be able to access that. You can also see it by going to the park website. And make sure that if you have formal comments that you would like to have considered on the environmental assessment that you go to park <http://planning.nps.gov/lp> and get your comments submitted there.

We will go through some more of these questions, but there's been so many tonight we won't be able to get to all of them, and I apologize for that. There's just been so many that have come in, but it's great to see so much participation. Okay, let's go on to... Let's see, combing through some more here. Okay, great. Lots of questions. All right. We'll go on to Blake here. Blake, what is the cost and employee hours used on the livestock? Please clarify this cost for cattle versus horses.

Blake McCann:

Thanks, Rene. I believe we did just post a frequently asked question Q&A on our website relative to this. Many park staff, whether it's resource program, law enforcement, administrative, interpretation, facilities folks, engage in our management efforts for livestock. That includes staff time, there's salary, there's supplies, there's contracted services, and these costs haven't been tracked as an itemized cost specifically for horses and cattle. So, I don't think I can provide something specific in response to this specific question. But I can say that managing the herd takes a substantial amount of our time, our effort and some funding important to park operations and important to our other priorities, which are management of native species and systems. While I apologize, I don't have a specific figure, hope that provides some understanding of what commitment the park has had in terms of staff and time and effort.

Rene Ohms:

Okay, thank you. Let's see. The next one is also for you Blake. Would you consider allowing volunteers to help manage the horse and cattle work rather than park employees?

Blake McCann:

Thank you. Well, I can certainly speak to what we've done in the past, and we've had a very active volunteer in parks program in the resource management division. Those interactions were directed by NPS employees in those past instances. So, I suppose if the question is, would we include volunteers potentially in operations under the direction of NPS staff? If that is the question, then I think a clear answer is that we've done that for many years, so we've gotten a lot of good perspectives, understanding and skills through those interactions and would consider those types of relationships going forward.

Rene Ohms:

Thanks, Blake. Yeah, it sounds like the park has an active volunteer program, so appreciate that answer. Okay, Jenny, the next one's for you. How many horses are managed by the entire National Park service?

Jenny Powers:

And that one I can answer approximately a thousand horses that are free roaming within NPS lands.

Rene Ohms:

Great, thank you. It's always nice when you have one you can answer. All right. Blake, we're going to go back to you again for this next question. One of the objectives of the national park is to preserve the

cultural resources in the area and of the time of Theodore Roosevelt. Many people identify with these horses as part of our nation's history. So, why are horses not considered to be a cultural resource?

Blake McCann:

I'm not sure if I can speak directly to animals as a cultural resource. I think we can look at the national register and other places like that where we don't see examples of animals being put forward as eligible in that instance. I think we understand that many animals are relevant from a cultural standpoint. If you could repeat the question, I think I got lost, it was a bit of a long one.

Rene Ohms:

Yeah, no worries. Yeah, it was a bit long. But the main question was why are horses not considered to be cultural resources?

Blake McCann:

Right. Looking at the National Historic Preservation Act, there are some specific definitions that qualify things that would be eligible as a cultural resource for consideration and listing in the National Register of Historic Places. I guess I would do best to refer people to NHPA and those sections specifically.

Rene Ohms:

All right. Thank you, Blake. With the time we have left, let's go back to Angie for this next question. Angie, why did the management plan change from removal in the 1960s to maintaining a herd in the 1970s? Wasn't this change reflective of congressional findings noted in the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, even if NPS is separate from BLM?

Angie Richman:

I'll take a stab at the first part of that question, but maybe Jenny can help with this second part about the congressional findings in the Wild Horse and Burro Act, because I'm not familiar with that. As I mentioned earlier, at park inception, the plan was to remove the non-native species or the livestock from the park. And we did actively remove cattle and did a roundup in the '50s to try to remove the horses. And there was a shift sometime in the '60s, between the '60s and '70s where the horses that remained were then considered a demonstration herd. And we're not entirely sure why that shift happened. We have looked through past documents from then to see if we could get to that answer, and we're not really sure why it shifted. But in the '78 EA, it does say that while removal is environmentally sound, plans to remove the horses from the park were met with very strong public disapproval. We know that that's why they refrained from removing them at that time. Maybe I can punt it to Jenny for the second part of that question.

Rene Ohms:

Jenny, let me know if you need me to reread that second part.

Jenny Powers:

Yes, please. Could you?

Rene Ohms:

Okay. Yeah, sure. The whole question was why did the management plan change from removal in the 1960s to maintaining a herd in the 1970s? Then it says, wasn't this change reflective of congressional findings noted in the Wild Free-roaming Horses and Burros Act, even if the NPS is separate from BLM?

Jenny Powers:

Oh, boy. I would have to go back to the act and read it with a very careful eye in order to be able to answer that question, so I can't off the top of my head. Sorry for that.

Rene Ohms:

No, no, that's fair. We certainly want to make sure we're giving everyone accurate information, so thank you. Okay. We've got time for just one more question. I think we are going to wrap up here. We weren't able to get to every single question, but we were able to answer many, many, many of your questions tonight. And we really appreciate all of your participation and all the great questions that you submitted. Angie, we've got one more question that we'll kick to you here. So, once all information is gathered, who are the people involved in making the final decision about the horses? Are any citizens part of this decision-making group?

Angie Richman:

Great question. Once again, I'll reiterate the timeline for the process. We are currently in the comment period, and once that comment period closes, we will do a comment analysis like we have in the past. And then everything from the project will get rolled up to regional and national leadership before a decision is determined and the decision document is signed. These public comment periods are the opportunity for public and citizens to provide their input, but our park service leadership will be the ones to make the decision.

Rene Ohms:

All right. Thank you, Angie. Thank you to all of our speakers tonight who answered as many questions as they possibly could. They were coming in rapid fire. Thank you again to the public who tuned in and participated tonight. I am going to turn it over to Angie to close out tonight's meeting. Thank you so much.

Angie Richman:

Thanks, Rene. I'll just reiterate, we really appreciate everybody who tuned in. We really appreciate your participation and your great questions. A reminder that the comment period is currently open until October 25th, but we have had requests to extend it and we are considering that. We will be making a decision soon and we will make sure that that's posted on our PEPC site. We'll do a Facebook post so everybody knows what the extension may look like. Again, the decision document is not expected until late winter, early spring. So, we still have a bit to go in analyzing comments and coming to a final decision. Thanks again for joining us and I hope you'll enjoy the rest of your evening.