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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE AND THE CONFEDERATED SALISH AND KOOTENAI TRIBES SIGN ANNUAL FUNDING AGREEMENT FOR NATIONAL BISON RANGE COMPLEX

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation today signed an Annual Funding Agreement for the National Bison Range Complex, located in Moiese, Montana within the boundaries of the Flathead Indian Reservation. The agreement was negotiated over the past six months by professional natural resource management staff from both parties with support from Service, Department of the Interior, and Tribal leadership, and outlines the activities the Tribes will perform at the Bison Range during fiscal years 2009 through 2011.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director H. Dale Hall and Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CKST) Chairman James Steele, Jr., signed the agreement earlier today during a ceremony in Washington, D.C. Also participating in the signing ceremony were Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne, Deputy Secretary of the Interior Lynn Scarlett, Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks Lyle Laverty, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Economic Development – Indian Affairs George Skibine, Regional Director of the Service’s Mountain-Prairie Region Stephen Guertin, and members of the Montana congressional delegation.

“With this agreement, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes are entering into a new era of partnership and cooperation that will enhance the National Bison Range and its fish and wildlife resources for all Americans,” said Secretary Kempthorne. “I commend Service and Tribal staff for moving forward and building on the expertise and strengths of both organizations to conserve this special place.”

“The Bison Range occupies a special place in the hearts of Tribal members. I know the passion that they have for the land of their ancestors, and for the wildlife that sustained them. Fish and Wildlife Service employees also care passionately about the future of the Bison Range, and I strongly believe this agreement will serve to bring everyone together to accomplish great things for the refuge,” said Service Director Hall.

“This represents the latest step in the Tribes’ fourteen-year journey towards partnering with the Fish & Wildlife Service at the National Bison Range,” Steele, CSKT Chairman, said. “We believe that, as partners, we can make a special place even more special. Our Tribes’ unique history with this particular bison herd, and our ownership of the land upon which the ancillary Ninepipe and Pablo Refuges are located, provides both our motivation for stewardship and our ability to add another dimension to the National Bison Range Complex.”

The annual funding agreement was negotiated pursuant to the 1994 Tribal Self-Governance Act. The Act provides qualified self-governing tribes who demonstrate a significant cultural, geographic, and historical connection to facilities managed by the Department of the Interior with the opportunity to assume certain programs, services, functions, and activities at those facilities, including units of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The CSKT is assuming a substantive role in managing mission-critical programs at the Bison Range. The Bison Range Manager will remain a Service employee and have final decision-making authority on management direction, approval of plans, refuge uses and priorities. A Refuge Leadership Team, comprised of wildlife and land management professionals from both organizations, will inform those decisions.

Examples of the activities CSKT will perform on the Bison Range under the agreement include the annual Bison Round-up; migratory non-game bird surveys; waterfowl pair counts; bird banding; vegetation monitoring; geographic information system mapping; invasive plant control; wildfire suppression and prescribed burning; dissemination of oral and written information to visitors about the Bison Range, the National Wildlife Refuge System, the Service, and the CSKT’s relationship to the Range and its resources; and, other biological and related activities.

It is important to note that the emerging partnership between the Service and CSKT is a government-to-government relationship and is not a move toward privatization of the Bison Range. The Bison Range will remain a unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Service will maintain ownership of and management authority over all lands and buildings at the Bison Range and will retain law enforcement authorities on Bison Range lands and waters.

The annual funding agreement will be transmitted to the Senate Indian Affairs Committee and the House Natural Resources Committee for a 90-day Congressional review period. Following review by the committees and any other interested member of Congress, the AFA will be phased in during the first quarter of Fiscal Year 2009.

The National Bison Range Complex, part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, consists of the National Bison Range, Pablo and Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuges, and a portion of the Northwest Montana Wetland Management District. Established in 1908 to conserve the American Bison, the Bison Range and ancillary properties provide important habitat for a variety of other species such as elk, pronghorn antelope and migratory birds. This agreement applies only to those units that lie within the boundaries of the Flathead Reservation, including the National Bison Range; Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge and Pablo National Wildlife Refuge. Ninepipe and Pablo are overlay refuges on CSKT land and the Service operates those areas through conservation easements from CSKT.

Notice of the agreement will be published in the Federal Register in the near future. The agreement may currently be obtained on-line at: <http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/cskt-fws-negotiation> or by contacting the Bison Range at: National Bison Range, 132 Bison Range Road, Moiese, MT 59824; (406) 644-2211; or the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, P.O. Box 278, Pablo, MT 59855; (406) 675-2700.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service is both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for its scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on the Service's work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes are comprised of the Bitterroot Salish, the Pend d'Oreille, and the Kootenai Tribes. The Tribes occupy the 1.3 million acre Flathead Reservation in northwestern Montana.

CSKT is a leader in environmental protection and conservation. CSKT is the first tribe in the U.S. to establish a designated wilderness area; manages large herds of wild elk and bighorn sheep and oversees hunting and fishing programs on the Reservation for both Indians and non-Indians; administers a comprehensive mitigation program to offset the impacts of local hydropower operations on fish and wildlife resources; and, has for two decades partnered with the Service to conduct migratory waterfowl surveys and rebuild regional Canada goose populations.

For more information on the Tribes, visit www.cskt.org.