



Support Wild Bison Restoration in Montana

Oppose HB 302: “Require County Approval to Relocate Bison”

This bill undermines Montana’s authority to manage wildlife. If HB 302 becomes law, one can imagine similar attempts to hand over the management reins to local governments for any species with which landowners might have conflict.

Oppose HB 302 (Representative Kassmeier)

- HB 302 gives county commissioners veto power over relocation or translocation of wild bison into their counties and forces county involvement in wildlife management of bison.
- Surveys show that bison restoration is important to Montanans. More than 75% of Montanans support the management of bison as wildlife on public and tribal lands.
- This bill could have major implications for tribal sovereignty in counties which include tribal land and the two governments disagree on bison management.
- HB 302 would prevent wild bison restoration in Montana by allowing county commissions the power to make wildlife decisions. Wildlife decisions currently fall under the Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP), not counties. This change would erode the authority of FWP and could create a slippery slope for other species with which landowners might have conflict.
- This change would erode the authority of FWP and could create a slippery slope for other species with which landowners might have conflict.
- Montana already has a system of local consultation in statewide wildlife management decisionmaking processes. Under the current law and statewide bison management plan, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks is already required to provide for public comment and public hearing in the county/counties where bison restoration is taking place.

A History of Conflict

In the 1800s, the US government and western settlers all but eradicated bison in the United States. This was done in part for sport and to harvest and trade their hides, but it was also a significant part of the strategy to colonize Native territory. Efforts to bring back the bison are currently underway, especially in Yellowstone National Park where the herd there reached numbers of around 3000. Tribes have historical, cultural, spiritual, and traditional connection to bison and have been actively working to restore bison to their historical prairie habitat on reservation land and on federal public land. Many organizations and individuals have also advocated for restoration of bison as part of the public trust on state and federal lands in Montana. These efforts as a whole have been faced with long-standing opposition. This is due in large part to conflicts between livestock owners and stated concerns over brucellosis, a disease that originated in livestock, and has spread to elk and bison. It can cause reduced milk production in cattle, and sometimes spontaneous abortion of a first calf. It is not, however, fatal to either livestock or bison. The risk of spread from wild bison to domestic cattle is exceedingly small, and basic management practices can eliminate the risk altogether. But bills like HB 318 and HB 302 act as direct threats to these efforts.

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