

Governor Steve Bullock

December 7, 2019

P. O. Box 200801

Helena, MT 59620 – 0801

Re. Restoration of public, wild bison on the Charles M. Russell NWR

Dear Governor Bullock:

We former employees of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks have been proud to have served in an agency that has brought so many species of wildlife back from the brink of extirpation in our wonderful state. Many of us participated in preserving and managing these essential icons of the “Last Best Place”.

However, despite its unique values and essential role as a keystone species in native Montana grasslands, despite efforts begun by William Hornaday over a century ago, we have failed to preserve public, wild bison as anything more than seasonal, abused visitors to our state from Yellowstone National Park. Now, it appears that Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has terminated efforts to restore any public, wild bison to the state.

We thank you for vetoing, in 2017 and 2019, anti-bison legislation that would have ended any future for wild bison in Montana. These vetoes preserved the option of restoring bison as a legacy to future generations of Montanans. But your efforts could come to naught with a new governor in 2021, unless you act strongly to initiate restoration of a public herd in 2020.

Please note the following components of this issue:

The Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR NWR) is the largest federal refuge within the historic range of plains bison. It is surrounded by much, contiguous other public land and considerable bison-friendly private land. It offers a diversity of quality habitats within the ancient center of plains bison distribution.

Elsewhere in the Great Plains, public bison herds on federal and state lands do not provide herd sizes, range sizes, or habitat quality and diversity necessary for long-term preservation of truly wild bison with their wild-adapted genomes. Genomes, not bison, are our legacy to the future.

The CMR NWR long-range conservation plan welcomes wild bison and notes that its overall goal of restoring natural processes to the refuge will be incomplete without bison restoration.

Politically and biologically, there is no better place than the CMR NWR to restore a public bison herd of genetically adequate size on a large, diverse habitat - for long-term viability with wild characteristics.

Three polls, conducted by three reputable organizations, have shown that about 70 percent of Montana voters favor restoring public, wild bison on public land, especially on the CMR NWR.

The legislature has provided guidelines (MCA 87-1-216) that would protect and indemnify private resources on the small amounts of private land abutting the CMR NWR. Moreover, the abundance of resident and non-resident applications for a low-quality harvest of bison near Yellowstone Park indicates that hunting would generate sufficient funding for quality bison management.

Brucella-free bison are readily available from several sources for restocking the CMR with this important native species.

Tourism and hunting focused on a restored wild bison population would add to and diversify the mostly struggling economies of counties in northeastern Montana.

Article IX of the Montana Constitution directs us to prevent unreasonable depletion of natural resources, to restore historic, scientific and recreational objects for their use by the people, and to preserve the opportunity to harvest wild game. The current situation (no public wild bison, year-round, in Montana) neglects this intent of the Constitution.

Governor Bullock, the future of wild bison in Montana, and the eventual quality of bison conservation anywhere south of Canada, is in your hands. Please reassert Montana's leadership in wildlife restoration. Direct Fish, Wildlife & Parks to begin restoring public, wild bison on the CMR NWR in 2020. It will be a major, long-lasting legacy of your administration for future generations of Montanans and of the nation.

Sincerely,

Rich DeSimone, FWP retired, 34 years of service.

Dennis Flath retired, 30 years of service.

Craig Knowles, 3 years with FWP.

Gayle Joslin, FWP retired, 32 years of service with State of Montana.

Ron Marcoux retired, 23 years of service.

Bob Martinka, FWF retired, 30 years of service.

Jim Posewitz, FWP retired, 32 years of service.

David Stevens, 5 years with FWP.

Jim Vashro retired, 39 years of service.

(Convened and sent by the Montana Wild Bison Restoration Coalition; Jim Bailey, Coordinator)