

Governor Steve Bullock

November 7, 2019

P.O. Box 200801

Helena, MT 59620 – 0801

Dear Governor Bullock:

The undersigned scientists encourage you to reinitiate efforts to restore a public, wild herd of genetically sound bison on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge. In 2014, many of them signed a letter to you supporting bison restoration on Montana's Great Plains. The views and science expressed in that letter remain valid today.

Avoiding extinction of North American bison has been a major conservation success achieved by previous generations of Americans. However, since the 1930s there has been little progress to increase the number of significantly large bison herds on the Great Plains. Most herds are small on limited ranges that lack ecological diversity. Moreover, they are subjected to diverse artificial management activities. Consequently, the once profound ecological influence of bison no longer exists on the Great Plains, and the wild genotype of plains bison gradually deteriorates. As stated in the 2014 letter, "We consider it socially and biologically unacceptable that the extirpation of the bison as a wildlife species on the Great Plains should persist to this day." and "Plains bison cannot be considered restored until their most characteristic native habitat in the Great Plains contains at least some bison herds that are genetically, behaviorally, ecologically and functionally similar to what existed when Lewis and Clark first crossed Montana in 1805."

Historically, Montana's Great Plains teemed with a diversity of wildlife, including abundant plains bison. But today, wild bison are essentially absent from Montana, as Yellowstone bison are only seasonal visitors to the state and bison at the National Bison Range are "display" animals in an "exhibition park" under Montana law (MCA 87-1-711, 712).

The Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge is the best location in Montana and on the Great Plains for restoring a biologically significant wild bison herd. It is the largest federal wildlife refuge within historic plains bison range. It is surrounded mostly by abundant, contiguous public land, and by much bison-friendly private land. It offers abundant habitat and topographic diversity, and Fort Peck Reservoir provides a barrier that will be useful in containing wild bison as required by law (MCA 87-1-216).

Restoration of bison on the CMR NWR would benefit many species of animals and plants that co-evolved with bison, some of which are depleted today from loss of bison-influenced habitats. These include: pronghorn antelope, black-footed ferrets, prairie dogs, upland sandpiper, mountain plover, McCown's longspur, grasshopper sparrow,

ferruginous hawk, sage grouse, long-billed curlew, and many other species whose relationships to bison were never documented before bison were diminished.

In 2014, scientists stated, “The limited number and distribution of wild, genetically sound bison herds in America leaves the species vulnerable to catastrophic events – from climate-related habitat changes to disease or policy miscalculations and other events or actions that could deplete or extirpate existing populations. Restoring one or more herds of wild bison with suitable genetics increases the species’ resiliency. This resiliency is necessary for sound wildlife and prairie-habitat stewardship and merits a significant measure of urgency.”

Polls indicate that about 70 percent of Montana voters support bison restoration on the CMR NWR. In a recent year, Fish, Wildlife & Parks received over 10,000 paid applications for a small number of (Yellowstone) bison hunting permits. This illustrates the high demand for wild bison hunting and the potential to provide funding for necessary bison management. Moreover, the Montana legislature has provided guidelines for restoring wild bison while protecting private property (MCA 87-1-216).

Governor Bullock, the history of restoring some truly wild bison in America is incomplete. Yours is the opportunity to fulfill the promise of past generations as a legacy of your administration. Moreover, the need is urgent, as in 2021 a new governor and the legislature may preclude Montana bison restoration, possibly forever. We encourage your leadership, and the leadership of Montana, to recover an adequate sample of this iconic species and its habitat, maintaining the state’s reputation throughout the world, and demonstrating that Montanans take their wildlife heritage – their obligation to future generations - seriously.

Please direct Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks to reestablish a significant wild bison herd on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in 2020.

cc. Martha Williams, MT FWP

Sincerely,

James A. Bailey, PhD. Retired professor of Wildlife Biology, Colorado State University.

Joel Berger, PhD. Professor in Wildlife Conservation, Colorado State University.

Cory Cleveland, PhD. Professor and ecosystem ecologist, University of Montana.

Lance Craighead, PhD. Craighead Institute.

Scott Creel, PhD. Professor of Wildlife Biology, Montana State University.

Kerry R. Foresman, PhD. Prof. Emeritus of Biology and Wildlife Biology, University of Montana.

Steve Forrest, J.D., MSc. International Union for Conservation of Nature Specialist Group.

Curtis Freese. PhD. Adjunct Professor, University of Massachusetts.

Brian Horejsi, PhD. Conservation Director, Speak Up for Wildlife Foundation.

Brian Miller, PhD. Rio Mora Conservation Science Center at Rio Mora National Wildlife Refuge, New Mexico.

Sterling Miller, PhD. Dunrovin Research, National Wildlife Federation (retired), Alaska Dept. Fish & Game (retired), Univ. Montana (Affiliate).

Mike Phillips, MSc. ED Turner Endangered Species Fund, Montana State Senator.

Stuart Pimm, PhD. Professor of Conservation Ecology, Duke University.

Kenneth Raedeke, PhD. Affiliate Professor, Wildlife Sciences Program, University of Washington, retired.

Kent Redford, PhD. Archipelago Consulting, Portland, ME.

Kate Schoenecker, PhD. Ungulate Population Ecologist, Colorado State University.

Charles Schwartz, PhD. U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service, retired. Formally, leader of Yellowstone grizzly bear study team and research coordinator, Alaska Fish & Game.

Chris Servheen, PhD. USFWS Grizzly Bear Coordinator (retired), Adjunct Associate Professor of Wildlife Conservation, University of Montana.

Bruce Smith, PhD. U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service, retired.

David Wilcove, PhD. Professor of Ecology, Evolutionary Biology and Public Affairs, Princeton University.

(Convened and sent by the Montana Wild Bison Restoration Coalition)