

Bison: At the Heart of the Montana Water Rights Protection Act

Also known as the Flathead Water Compact, this legislation will give management of the National Bison Range to the Salish and Kootenai tribes—where it belongs.



A positive, forward-looking approach to water management, community development and ecosystem recovery, the Montana Water Rights Protection Act was jointly introduced by Montana Senators Steve Daines and Jon Tester. It will provide Congressional approval for the water compact negotiated between the State of Montana and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and transfer the National Bison Range from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to CSKT.

Congressional approval for the water compact has been debated over the course of several Congresses. The time for action is now. The water compact is the result of years of negotiations between the State of Montana, the Salish and Kootenai Tribes and the Department of the Interior and was ratified by the Montana Legislature in 2015. In agreeing to the compact the Tribes relinquished considerable legal rights in order to accommodate water uses that have developed subsequent to the Hellgate Treaty of 1855, and to ensure productive, cooperative management of waters throughout western Montana.

This negotiated agreement not only reflects a collaborative solution to often contentious water use issues, but it also offers an innovative approach to habitat restoration and protection, water conservation, and instream flows that are essential to fish and wildlife populations on and off the Flathead Reservation. The Compact agreement reflects a positive, forward-looking approach to water management, community development and ecosystem recovery.

Tribal Stewardship of the National Bison Range

NWF has also long supported efforts by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes to assume greater management responsibility for the National Bison Range (NBR). As the bill recognizes, bison have tremendous social and cultural importance for the Salish and Kootenai and the Tribes played a pivotal role in saving bison from extinction in the late 1800s. Given these facts, it was always wrong to exclude the Tribes from a management role in the NBR. This legislation rights this wrong by transferring the NBR to the Tribes for bison conservation purposes.

Having worked closely with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes for many years, NWF looks forward to their stewardship of the NBR and the important tribal perspectives that they will bring to both management and interpretation for the thousands of people that annually visit the Bison Range.

Have your voice heard about Montana water resources and bison. Contact your state senator and tell them that you support the Montana Water Rights Protection Act.