



KUFM RADIO COMMENTARY

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Home on the Range

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Talk about discouraging words: at a legislative hearing last week, State Senator John Brenden described possible restoration of bison to Montana as a “creeping cancer”. This is the same animal that artist Charlie Russell immortalized as the symbol of the West, the same animal that Native American cultures revered and relied upon above all others. What a difference a hundred years can make.

At this year’s Legislature at least three major anti-bison bills have been introduced. But how in tune are our state legislators with the feelings of most Montanans? The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) commissioned a poll in mid-February in an effort to gauge how Montanans feel about these stolid animals. In order to reduce any indication of bias, NWF chose Moore Information as its pollster, the same polling firm used by Congressman Denny Rehberg and many other conservative politicians. Four hundred registered voters were consulted.

One of the anti-bison bills would prohibit transport of bison to anywhere in Montana except the National Bison Range. This is in response to Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks’ 2010 effort to assess if there are places in Montana where it might be feasible to restore a wild bison population. What do most Montanans think about FWP doing this assessment? 74% favor such a process, 24% oppose and 6% didn’t know.

Another hot bison issue involves Governor Schweitzer’s proposal to take bison from Yellowstone National Park that have tested disease-free and move them to a recently-acquired 26,000-acre state wildlife management area near Deer Lodge known as Spotted Dog. What do most Montanans think? 72% favored moving the bison to Spotted Dog, 22% opposed and 6% didn’t know.

While many believe the Spotted Dog wildlife management area could provide quarantined Yellowstone bison with a temporary home in a fenced pasture, wildlife advocates and sportsmen are hoping to see bison recovery on a larger landscape. People in the know realize that the key site for bison restoration lies much further east, in and around the 1.1-million-acre Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR). It’s probably the one remaining place in the United States where it is still possible to restore a significant wild bison population to their native prairie habitat.

How do most Montanans feel about restoring a wild bison population to the CMR? The poll’s results show that 70% would support such an effort, 25% oppose and 5% didn’t know. So why is there so much anti-bison sentiment in our state legislature, and what will it take to change attitudes in Helena?

When bison numbers were reduced from millions to a few hundred at the beginning of the 20th Century, a small group of determined people, including sportsmen like Teddy Roosevelt and William Hornaday, led a campaign to ensure bison would not become extinct. We need that same kind of commitment from sportsmen and others to secure a place for a wild bison population in Montana today. Hunters are the only interest group in our state that has the clout to overcome the inevitable opposition from livestock interests. But that's not to say that livestock industry interests aren't important.

We all know that FWP will proceed carefully with any bison restoration efforts. Landowners will be consulted, landscapes will be examined, and a public process will go forward where all concerned will be involved. If bison are brought back to a particular place, problems will be solved, local economies will become more diverse, and the larger public will salute Montana for its achievement. As the landscape of eastern Montana changes, so does the opportunity for valuable wildlife species to be restored with minimal conflict to local agriculture.

Our state needs to be a place where buffalo are allowed to roam.

This is Kit Fischer with the National Wildlife Federation ... thanks for listening.