

February 15, 2005
Comments on *House Joint Resolution No. 22*
By Stephany J. Seay, Montana Resident and Wild Buffalo Advocate

Vote no on House Joint Resolution 22.

I am a resident of Arlee, Montana, and I also spend half of each year in West Yellowstone, in the field with the buffalo that live in and around Yellowstone National Park. I insist that you vote against this insulting resolution today.

First of all, it is impossible to eradicate brucellosis within the ecosystem unless you kill every single animal that carries it; I am here to tell you that you are not going to do that. Elk and buffalo are only two species that cattle have infected with brucellosis; there are other wildlife species that cattle have given brucellosis to, and you'll have to kill them all if you think you'll ever eradicate brucellosis. The people will not stand by to let that happen. Better to go about this wisely and focus the lust for management on cattle.

Secondly, the people – especially of the Indian Nations, the United States, but also the world over – will not stand by and allow the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service take charge of Yellowstone's wildlife. They are the agency second only to the Montana Department of Livestock who are least capable of managing wildlife. APHIS is known for poisoning and trapping of wildlife to benefit ranchers, and we'll not let them in the Park to manage our last wild buffalo. APHIS can best help solve the brucellosis issue by helping you keep the focus on livestock; by managing livestock and producing an effective brucellosis vaccine for livestock, as is their charge.

Third, the threat of brucellosis is extremely over exaggerated. To date, there has never been a documented case of a wild buffalo transmitting brucellosis to cattle. There are less than a handful of cattle grazing anywhere near wild buffalo at any given time. Keep the cattle fenced in and come up with a vaccine for them that actually works, and you can keep Montana's brucellosis-free status. I also suggest working with Wyoming and encourage them to close their elk feed grounds, which are a cesspool for spreading disease. Brucellosis is hardly a worry; Now the cattle that you feed cattle parts to are infecting our wildlife with chronic wasting disease. That monster is getting closer.

The American people have grown tired of the rule of the cattle industry in the West. This document is just one more attempt to flex that muscle. It is getting very old. As for the list of "WHEREAS" untruths within this resolution:

1. The resolution purports that the wildlife of Yellowstone are not healthy. If that is so, it is only because of over-zealous and aggressive management. The buffalo and elk of Yellowstone National Park have become victims of extreme management techniques that threaten their genetic diversity and wild integrity. It is utterly arrogant to say that only "proper wildlife management" leads to healthy animal populations.
2. As the resolution states, for over 80 years the Yellowstone buffalo herd has lived with brucellosis. What it fails to mention is that the buffalo have developed antibodies and have resisted the biological impacts of the disease. In other words, aside from human intervention, the buffalo are doing just fine, thank you. A hands-off approach - allowing buffalo room to roam - would provide natural "quarantine" and would greatly reduce any supposed risk of brucellosis. The current aggressive management techniques are what hurt the buffalo - the actions taken under the Interagency Bison Management Plan is killing the strong buffalo that have developed antibodies to brucellosis, and is also changing their ancient migratory behavior patterns. The Plan is also killing off the lines of ages of buffalo mothers, risking the entire genetic integrity of the last wild buffalo to have continuously occupied their native habitat since buffalo time began.
3. There has never been a carrying capacity study done for Yellowstone National Park. There are NOT an "excess of 4,500 buffalo" in Yellowstone as the resolution suggests. At last count there are approximately 4,200. Simply put, there are NOT too many buffalo. Buffalo in Montana alone historically "darkened the plains" and moved over the land like a great black cloak from horizon to horizon. They helped make the good grasses grow, and they provided food, shelter and clothing for a nation. The herds were so thick there seemed to be no beginning and no end. From 60 million to 4200 is hardly enough buffalo, much less too many, and this drastic reduction combined with their genetic uniqueness warrants the protection of the Yellowstone buffalo herd under the Endangered Species Act. And no matter if there are 1000 buffalo or 10,000 buffalo, they would still migrate out of the Park in search of winter forage because it is what they do - they migrate. Recognizing that when Yellowstone was created, the box shape of the park didn't reflect the ecosystem or the needs of the creatures that live within that ecosystem - winter habitat was forgotten - in 1926, Gallatin National Forest was created to provide this crucial element. Today, buffalo are the only animals not allowed to access this land.

By allowing buffalo to access their native range, by giving them room to breath

and to roam, you will significantly decrease any chance of spread of brucellosis. By better managing cattle – fencing them in, removing them from buffalo habitat or grazing low-risk livestock such as steers in places where buffalo exist, as well as developing a vaccine that works for cattle – you will decrease any chance of spread of brucellosis.

The instances where brucellosis has been transmitted in the so-called wild, it has happened between elk – not buffalo – and cattle. This has taken place on elk feed grounds, where unnaturally high concentrations of elk congregate for unnatural food sources for the benefit of humans. The elk re-infecting cattle (remember, it is the cattle where brucellosis originates) are NOT from Yellowstone National Park. They are from the state and federal elk feed grounds. Get the facts straight and get the science straight. By allowing this unnatural concentration of animals for the benefit of so-called hunters, you create your own problems with brucellosis, and perpetuate them. Letting the wild be wild and free would drastically reduce any supposed risk of brucellosis transmission.

The resolution states that there are “significant economic losses to the local economies” due to brucellosis, and as a taxpayer in Montana, I want to see those numbers broken down and I want you to demonstrate the loss. Show me how they compare to what the American people pay for cattle ranching on public lands. Let me remind you that cattle ranching on America’s public lands exist as a welfare system. The American people are paying ranchers to graze cattle on their public lands – on wildlife habitat- and then we pay again to repair the damages cattle cause to the land, water and the wildlife. On top of this, we are unfortunately and unwillingly paying \$3 million a year for you to harass and kill America’s last wild buffalo. It’s a form of double-taxation, triple in some cases, and it’s costing us the health of our wild lands and wildlife.

Moreover, Montana has not spent a dime on brucellosis eradication since 2002. It is all coming from federal dollars. And what about the loss to Montana’s service and tourist industry; people come to Montana not to see cows, but to see wildlife. That includes wild buffalo – the icon of the American West. The tourist industry is the second largest revenue source for the state, and this aspect of the economy is suffering greatly for the benefit of cattle. Killing America’s last wild buffalo, and putting the survivors through a rigorous domestication attempt is a price far too high for the meager returns of the cattle industry.

The resolution goes on to suggest that humans are at risk of brucellosis. The Center for Disease Control doesn't even list brucellosis as a disease of concern. The only people subjected to any possible risk of getting brucellosis are livestock veterinarians, hunters, and people who ingest unpasteurized milk. This resolution is utterly misleading in the purported threats of brucellosis to human safety.

Brucellosis is a European cattle disease, and the onus is on the cattle industry, not the wildlife, to reduce risk of transmission. The brucellosis vaccines under consideration are not meant for wildlife, and money and energy should be placed on a vaccine that works on and is used on CATTLE. Cattle are routinely put through all sorts of testing and vaccinating, you must add a brucellosis vaccine that WORKS to this list.

Montana is foolish not to celebrate the wild buffalo as a state mammal. People the world over, and within this state are sick of the way Montana has dictated the disrespectful management of our last wild buffalo, and there are few in this country and around the globe that will stand by and allow APHIS to lay a hand on the wildlife of America's first National Park. Yellowstone is renowned the world over. It is a world heritage site as well as a biosphere reserve. Montana should celebrate wild buffalo in Montana and allow them to roam, help Wyoming close the elk feeding grounds, and simply manage cattle with better fences and better vaccines.

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Montana's Wild Buffalo: a Treasured Asset

The wild buffalo of Yellowstone and Montana are the last genetically pure remnant of the vast populations that once migrated freely across the American West. Our vision is to ensure that this unique herd shall flourish in as much of its natural and historic range as possible--forever. Our purpose and intent is to protect and preserve the Yellowstone bison from harm--also forever.

The Yellowstone buffalo are the only living link to the great herds of millions that once thundered across the plains. Wild buffalo are considered sacred to the Native American tribes of the Great Plains whose cultures evolved with them and who still hold treaty rights to the Yellowstone area. Disturbingly, the tribes have been excluded from all levels of management affecting the herd.

Buffalo are a uniquely American icon, a fact made apparent by the presence of their image on countless Montana highway signs and license plates, on the insignia of the National Park Service, the United States Department of Interior, and on the signs and windows of countless businesses.

While for the rest of the country buffalo are a powerful symbol of the continent's wild past, Montana alone is positioned to benefit from their current and future presence. We are already rewarded by the presence of buffalo and other native wildlife as evidenced by the millions of people visiting Yellowstone each year. These visitors have helped make tourism the fastest growing economy in Montana. If buffalo were allowed to reinhabit even a small fraction of their former range, expanded wildlife viewing opportunities would bring millions of additional tourist dollars to our state.

Whereas elk, also known to carry brucellosis, bring millions of dollars to Montana through hunting fees and associated revenues, similar opportunities are presently lost on the buffalo, who are only allowed to access a tiny fraction of available habitat. If buffalo, like elk, were allowed access to prime Montana habitat, a true fair-chase hunt could be established that would be a tremendous asset to Montana's economy.

Montana has a golden opportunity to secure public and private land habitat for buffalo outside the park and abandon its antiquated "zero tolerance" policy in favor of one more consistent with modern risk-management principles. The best available science does not support the current management regime.

Current bison management actions are not based on the best available scientific evidence and have resulted in the unnecessary slaughter of large numbers of bison. Further, they are not based on an accurate assessment of the risk of brucellosis transmission from bison to cattle, they rely on inappropriate tools and techniques designed for use in livestock, and they ignore the more serious threat of brucellosis transmission from feed-ground elk to cattle.

A common-sense approach would focus management actions on buffalo *and* livestock to protect Montana's brucellosis-free status. Readily available solutions such as modifying stocking dates and building stronger fences would ensure spatial and temporal separation of bison and cattle. In combination with mandatory cattle vaccination protocols (enhanced by tax incentives to offset additional costs) and the development of livestock herd-management plans to encourage the grazing of "brucellosis-proof" livestock like steers and non-reproductive cows, such a common sense approach would protect both Montana's brucellosis free status and the last wild herd of native buffalo.

Such an approach ~~would save millions of tax-dollars,~~ alleviate the negative publicity Montana has received, and greatly benefit Montana's number one and number two industries: livestock and tourism.

~~Most~~ of these practices have already been implemented in and near Grand Teton National Park, where buffalo ~~and cattle~~ have co-mingled without a single incidence of brucellosis transmission for the past forty-five years.

The goal of eradicating brucellosis from bison and elk in the Greater Yellowstone Area (GYA) is untenable until appropriate technologies are developed to achieve such an objective without harming the bison and elk populations or the integrity of the ecosystem in which they exist.

The remaining wild buffalo need lasting protection to preserve their ecological, genetic, cultural, aesthetic, and spiritual significance. We envision a new Montana in which wild buffalo are recognized and managed as native wildlife and treated as an asset rather than a liability.

"The killing by the state of Montana could threaten the future of this national symbol and the biological integrity of the last wild herd."

Former U.S. Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt, 1997