

Coalition for Reauthorization of Habitat Montana
January 25, 2005

EXHIBIT 8
DATE 1.25.05
HB 79

Testimony to House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee supporting HB 79

Chairman Golie and Members of the Committee:

I'm Stan Meyer, from Great Falls. It was my privilege to serve as Chair of the FWP Commission during Governor Racicot's Administration, 1993 through 2000.

Governor Racicot made six appointments to the FWP Commission during those eight years. One - Dale Tash of Dillon - died while on the Commission. All of the remaining five endorse passage of HB 79. I am speaking on behalf of retired Commissioners Darlyne Dascher, Fort Peck, Charlie Decker, Libby, Dave Simpson, Hardin, and for current commissioner Tim Mulligan, Whitehall.

Legislators in 1987 and subsequent sessions directed us to pursue conservation of critical habitat through conservation easements whenever possible. Eighty-two percent of the acres were handled by easement, keeping working ranchers on their land. Still, there were times when owners would not accept an easement - they were determined to sell. It was fortunate that FWP had ability to acquire the land in fee title; otherwise, it would probably have gone for rural subdivision.

We visited each of the ranches proposed for Habitat Montana. We talked with the families. They told us they don't want their property subdivided, not now, not ever. They feel a moral responsibility to their parents and grandparents, and to future generations, to keep the ranch and its habitat intact. Also, the negotiated payment for a conservation easement is substantial, a bundle of hard cash needed to expand the ranch, to reduce debt, or to help pass the ranch to the next generation.

Habitat Montana has conserved critical habitat, but not at the expense of the ranching operation. No rancher - not one -- has been asked to reduce grazing levels because of the FWP easement. Rather, their grass has responded to FWP's range management practices by producing heavier weaning weights and better yearling gains, plus more wildlife. Please read the letter from Steve Page who ranches in Valley and Powder River counties. Steve's letter will amaze you.

Also, I am providing a letter from the Private Lands/Public Wildlife Advisory Council. This is a diverse group - appointed by the Governor - and includes landowners, two legislators, outfitters and hunters. Their support for HB 79 is unanimous.

We urge your support. And we thank you, Chairman Golie, for carrying this important legislation.

Stan Meyer, Great Falls