

House Bill 553
February 17, 2005
Presented by Jeff Hagener
House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee

EXHIBIT 8
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HB 553

Mr. Chairman and committee members, for the record I am Jeff Hagener, Director for Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP).

House Bill 553 would require that all wildlife transplanted by the department be permanently marked to facilitate identification. Depending on how this language is interpreted, this bill could be problematic for FWP.

FWP currently places ear tags on most, and visual or radio collars on some, big game animals that are transplanted. These markings are visible at a distance, so they may "facilitate identification," but because they may come off an animal, they may not be "permanent."

The only way to permanently identify a big game animal is with a tattoo on the lip or ear. We tattoo some big game animals, such as bears, when they are sedated. However, use of drugs when handling animals increases risk of mortality. Thus, not all bears that are captured are sedated, and for other species such as big horn sheep or mountain goats, increasingly we rely on net-gunning and do not use drugs. We cannot tattoo an animal that is not sedated. Thus HB 553 would potentially require us to use drugs on animals that we do not currently sedate. More importantly, tattooing, while permanent, will not help us identify an animal in the field until it is "in hand." Thus the only way tattooing can "facilitate identification" is through re-capturing or killing an animal suspected of being marked.

HB 553 would also create difficulties related to transplants of smaller animals and birds. In terms of numbers, FWP transplants more turkeys and pheasants than all other species combined. All these birds could be fitted with leg bands. However, this would increase cost and handling of these birds; the bands may or may not be considered permanent since some bands do fall off; and the bands may, or may not, facilitate identification of birds that are not recaptured or killed.

Finally, it is important to note that the number of animals FWP transplants in any given operation is relatively small. The individual animals that are introduced are not likely to harm native vegetation or agricultural production. In fact, it is not likely that the offspring of transplanted animals will adversely affect people or the environment, due to the careful scrutiny FWP and the FWP Commission undertake before initiating any transplants. In the unlikely event that a problem did arise, though, it will likely be several generations after the transplant that the impacts of the species must be addressed. At that point, few, if any, of the initial, marked animals would remain.

FWP understands the concern the sponsor has with transplants and believes that we are already addressing them. We thoroughly review the pro's and con's of any transplant and work with potentially affected agricultural producers before we take action. We also include mitigation procedures, if necessary. For example, before undertaking a re-introduction of big horn sheep into the Green Mountain area in southwest Montana, we consulted with landowners and the individual who owns the sheep grazing allotment in the area. In response to the allotment holder's concerns about the potential impact of big horn rams breeding with his ewes, and FWP's concern that any contact between big horn and domestic sheep could result in a die-off of the big horns, the allotment holder was authorized to "shoot on sight" any big horn sheep that commingled with his flock on the allotment.

We believe existing law and FWP practice adequately prevents adverse impacts due to transplants. HB 553 would increase costs and reduce the effectiveness of FWP's wildlife management program with no discernable benefits.