

EXHIBIT 20  
DATE 3.23.05  
HB 767

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Chairman Jim Peterson  
House Natural Resource Committee  
Montana State Legislature  
Box 200400  
Helena Mt. 59620-0400

Dear Chairman and members of the House Natural Resources Committee.

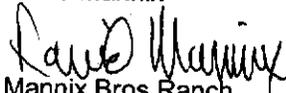
I am writing to you regarding HB 767. I am opposed to this bill for this simple reason. It will accomplish nothing other than adding unnecessary bureaucracy and red tape.

My brothers and I are 4th generation cattle ranchers in the Blackfoot Valley. We have three different conservation easements covering a total of about 5,000 of the 12,000 deeded acres owned by our family. I believe conservation easements are a good tool for both agriculture and conservation values. Are they a perfect tool? No, of course not. They are not for everyone nor are they a good fit on every piece of land. However, there is much of the land in this state for which development should not be it's highest and best use. But development is dictating the land values. Conservation easements are a tool that allow us to take some of the "Blue Sky" value out of our land and leave the land in Ag production, leave it as open space, keep the conservation values in tact.

I believe there are habitat management issues that need resolving within the structure of conservation easements. Myself along with other landowners, non-profit land trusts and agencies have been working together through the Blackfoot Challenge to address these issues in an attempt to make conservation easements a healthier, more adaptable land management tool. I believe the better approach is to improve and enhance the workings of conservation easements rather than hamstringing them.

HB 767 addresses no existing problems. Land owners aren't being coerced or hood-winked into signing easements. They are signing easements because they believe them to be the proper tool for their land. HB 767 is poor legislation that adds costs and bureaucracy without solving any problems. Please vote against it.

Sincerely yours,  
David Mannix

  
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