

House Bill 364
March 13, 2007
Presented by Chris Smith
Senate Fish and Game Committee

SENATE FISH AND GAME

EXHIBIT NO. 6

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BILL NO. HB 364

Mr. Chairman and committee members, for the record I am Chris Smith, Chief of Staff of Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP).

Wolves have once again become a part of the Montana landscape. FWP, with the assistance of USDA Wildlife Services, will do everything we can to minimize the risk of depredation and the economic impact of wolves on livestock producers. However, some livestock will be lost every year to wolf depredation, just as they are lost to disease, lightning or other natural causes.

Given this new reality of wolves in Montana, the idea of a program to reduce the risk of livestock losses to wolves and to reimburse producers for losses was one of the original consensus recommendations of the Governor's Wolf Advisory Council in 2000. FWP included the council's recommendation in the final Montana Wolf Management Plan approved in 2004.

In 2005, FWP initiated and supported the process that led to development of the details of the loss reduction and mitigation program. Our expectation at the outset of the process was that in the end, a Montana-based nonprofit entity would develop and take over responsibility for this program, replacing the program currently offered by the Defenders of Wildlife. Questions regarding the ability to secure federal funds for a non-profit led the group working on this issue to seek creation of a state board as proposed in HB 364.

Consistent with the recommendations of the Governor's Council and Montana's plan, the program includes a component to reduce the risk of loss, as well as reimbursement for losses. Pro-active efforts that reduce the risk of loss benefit everyone; as the old saying goes, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Loss reduction efforts supported by grants under the program established by HB 364 will supplement FWP's active management of wolf numbers once wolves are delisted to reduce the risk of depredation.

The reimbursement component of the program is practical and administratively simple. Although documenting all losses to wolves will never be possible, for those losses that can be documented, the reimbursement process is straightforward. This approach minimizes the potential for fraud or prolonged arguments over the appropriate payment.

It is important to note that from the outset of discussions regarding this concept in 2000, all parties agreed that in addition to having both a pro-active and reimbursement component, there were two other critical conditions. First, the program must not be funded with hunters and angler's license fees or federal funds provided to FWP for wildlife management. Second, the program should operate independently.

The federal Endangered Species Act is the primary driving force behind restoration of wolves to Montana's landscape. Thus, it is appropriate that federal funds – supplemented by donations from individuals or groups that support wolf restoration – be used to implement HB 364. FWP is working with other interests involved in this issue to secure federal funds for the program.