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MONTANA CATTLEMEN'S ASSOCIATION (MCA)
MONTANA FARMERS UNION (MFU)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Bridge Access Legislation: Clarity, Collaboration and Property Rights

GREAT FALLS, MT (Jan. 12, 2009) – Within months of a failed 2007 legislative measure (SB78) that addressed the ability of outdoor enthusiasts to access Montana waterways at county bridges by using the public right-of-ways and an allowance for private landowners to build fences in the right-of-ways to control livestock, a working group of farm and ranch groups, sportsmen organizations, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) and county officials began working collectively on a new legislative measure.

HB 190, by Rep. Kendall Van Dyk (D-Billings), will be heard by the House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee on Tuesday, January 13, at 3:00 p.m. in the Old Supreme Court.

Some groups and individuals have opposed resolving the issue of public access to waterways at county bridges and fencing in right-of-ways as a threat to private property rights. The Montana Cattlemen's Association and the Montana Farmers Union joined the working group believing just the opposite is true.

Montana Farmers Union President Alan Merrill said, "We joined because we believe the issues need to be resolved, that there can be balance benefiting both the farmer and rancher and the public and that HB 190 – as it is crafted – does just this while protecting private property rights."

Working proactively with MFWP, Montana Wildlife Federation, Trout Unlimited and others, Farmers Union and the Cattlemen's Association have helped craft a bill that respects and protects property rights while recognizing the existing constitutionally guaranteed right of the public to access Montana rivers and streams.

"It's important for farmers and ranchers to understand that we aren't losing anything," said Merrill, "instead we are working with the public for legislation that will put on the books conditions so the farmer or rancher can legally attach fences to county bridges for the purpose of controlling livestock. This is a win-win measure," he said.

Montana Cattlemen's Association President Brett DeBruycker said, "Most importantly, by working together to write and support this simple straightforward legislation we can avoid inevitable court battles where private property rights are open to legal interpretation." DeBruycker added that, "With legal interpretation you never know what the outcome might be, and we prefer, instead, to craft our own solutions. This legislation protects private property rights and creates a hand-shake with the public and waterway users."