

Testimony on HB482

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee

On behalf of the 4,500 members of World Wildlife in Montana I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak to this bill. WWF supports this common-sense legislation that offers a solution instead of conflict for the future of bison in Montana.

This bill is about the future, not the worn out conflicts of the past. While some in the legislature want to fight battles long past, and continue down the path of conflict and stalemate, this is a positive step that affirms the relationship of the people of Montana with their natural heritage. The legislature is confronted with a number of proposals this session relating to bison (up to 17 bills), none of which, with the exception of this bill, aim to resolve the long-standing management conflicts with bison in this state. The State of Montana has a long history of thoughtfully managing wildlife and has always engaged a very progressive conservation agenda - a hallmark feature of our state's heritage, and a driver of the economics of this state. Our wildlife attracts businesses to locate here. The Montana legislature began passing laws to protect wild game, including bison, as far back as 1864, long before the federal government or private conservation organizations responded to the call for wildlife preservation.

Montana is unique in that bison were never removed from game animal status as established by early legislatures.

Montanans want more hunting opportunities in the future, not less. Bison could provide an exciting and economically valuable new opportunity for enjoying and utilizing wildlife. We should not allow politicians to handcuff Montana hunters – and future generations of Montanans – without giving this idea a fair shake. If Utah and Arizona can benefit from a fair chase hunt for free-ranging bison, we should consider it in Montana.

A statewide management plan for bison is needed, and HB482 supports that effort. Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks has the appropriate management expertise to develop such a plan, and the outreach capability to engage the citizens of Montana to do it. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks has, in fact, been working on such a plan for over a year, and if the result of this bill encourages completion of this plan sooner all the better. Moreover, the issues discussed in Section 4 have been addressed in other reintroduction efforts in Montana and WWF will be happy to share those agreements with FWP to assist them in negotiating these considerations with neighboring land owners.

And let's not forget that for many Montanans, those of Native American descent in particular, there is a special cultural and spiritual relationship with bison. The tribes in Montana have worked diligently to prepare homes for bison on their tribal lands. This bill would facilitate efforts of our neighbors to bring bison back to their lands, and restore dignity and cultural bonds that strengthen their communities.

Finally, let's put this in perspective: 1) bison grazed this continent long before Montana became a state, in an ecologically sustainable way; 2) bison do not pose a greater health or human safety threat than cattle; 3) There are 2.6 million head of cattle in Montana, and fewer than 5,000 wild bison...a mere 0.2% of all grazing stock in Montana is comprised of bison. There is room in Montana for both cattle and bison. Let's look to the future, not to the past. I ask for your vote to "do pass" this bill. Thank you

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steve Forrest".

Steve Forrest