

March 15, 2011

EXHIBIT 12
DATE 3/17/2011
SB 144

RE: Opposition to Senate Bill No.144, sponsored by J. Brenden

To the House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee:

Mr. Chairman and Honorable members of the House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee: I am providing this written testimony today to express opposition to Senate Bill No. 144. This bill would prevent the relocation or allowance of free-roaming bison in Montana.

I am a third generation Montanan and enjoy watching the 4th generation of my family grow up in Montana. I grew up in central Montana where our family was involved in an agricultural business. I am a former employee of FWP where I conducted wildlife research in Montana for 31 years until my retirement in December 2007. I served as Chief of Wildlife Research in my last position with FWP. As an employee of FWP I was involved in research on brucellosis in bison and elk from 1989-2004 and published several articles on this disease in scientific journals. I have served as chair of the Greater Yellowstone Interagency Brucellosis Technical Committee, on the USDA APHIS National Animal Health Surveillance Committee, on the USAHA brucellosis committee, the USAHA brucellosis science and research committee and chaired the Western Wildlife Health Committee for the Western Association of Wildlife Agencies. I crafted much of the science proposal for the quarantine feasibility study and served as Principal Investigator for the State of Montana until I retired. I am currently employed as a conservation scientist for the Wildlife Conservation Society one of the oldest conservation organizations in North America (circa 1895).

The Wildlife Conservation Society is opposed to this senate bill for the following reasons:

- 1) The conservation status of bison across North America was just recently reviewed in 2010. Most bison (400,000) in North America (96%) are managed for commercial production and are privately owned. The status of bison in public herds and herds established for conservation purpose is of great concern to many. The number of bison in North America managed for conservation is quite small and these bison face many challenges including genetic pollution, small population size, and a confusing legal status. Sixty-one plains bison and eleven wood bison conservation herds were enumerated by that status review. The total number of plains bison in the conservation herds is about 20,500 animals. There are only 3 plains bison herds in North America of sufficient size to be ecologically relevant and genetically sustainable (1000 or more bison), Yellowstone being one of them. Despite the perception that bison are common the conservation herds represent a species very much in need of conservation. This bill, as proposed, seriously constrains the conservation opportunities in North America for the near and long-term at a time when it is most important to conserve the genetically important remnant herds to prevent a listing under the Endangered Species Act.
- 2) The State of Montana has a long history of thoughtfully managing wildlife and always advanced a very progressive conservation agenda-a hallmark feature of our state's wildlife legacy. Few people may know that 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. The historic call to advance wild bison conservation remains legitimate in Montana and needs renewed commitment from political leaders, sporting public, general citizens and the conservation community.

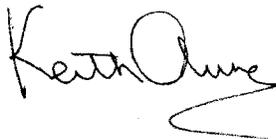
- 3) The bison from and in Yellowstone are highly valued wildlife partly because of their important genetic character and because they could serve as a source stock to build other important conservation herds for hunting and general enjoyment by the public. These bison embody critical genetic material necessary for the long-term conservation of this iconic species. Although there are many bison herds in North America, Yellowstone may be the last bison populations known to be free of cattle genes. Unfortunately cattle genes were introduced into the American bison at the turn of the century and are present in many of the conservation herds, including the one at Moiese. Yellowstone bison are the only Plains bison herd with a continuous genetic link to ancient DNA.
- 4) It would not be prudent conservation management to introduce Yellowstone bison, with no cattle genes, into the population at Moiese with cattle genes. Protecting and conserving the long-term genomic integrity of Yellowstone bison is essential to the future of this species may be essential to prevent a listing under the Endangered Species Act. By conserving the genetics of Yellowstone bison through establishment of several satellite herds we are ensuring the future of this gene pool and increasing the opportunity for human interaction with a historically important Big Game species.
- 5) Agriculture in Montana has just enjoyed one of the most profitable years on record and testimony by Jay Bodner at recent Senate hearing pointed out that at this very time Montana beef remain highly valued and sought as seed stock. Brucellosis has been a preeminent issue in the GYA since 1985 and in the news routinely. I am convinced that we have strong agriculture despite this disease being present in Yellowstone and our own experience in Montana has shown that to be the case. In addition, new rules from APHIS have improved the flexibility in the federal response to brucellosis in cattle and our management programs have clearly protected the image of our beef industry.
- 6) Consider that cattle and bison can coexist and are doing so in many areas. It is often forgotten that cattle and bison coexisted for over 300 years following the introduction of cattle by Spaniards in 1541 and until decimation of bison in the late 1880's. In fact, during the Civil war there were millions of wild cattle (eventually gathered and trailed to Colorado and Montana) and millions of bison sharing ranges all across the south. Early ranchers actually trailed these cattle through free-ranging bison and lived with wild bison on open ranges. Bison, both free-ranging and behind fence, are sharing habitat with cattle today in many areas. We need to consider the possibilities and avoid framing this issue only as a false choice of cattle versus bison on public lands.
- 7) Regarding risk for disease transmission from bison and specifically the Yellowstone quarantine bison I would like to add these comments.
 - a. The quarantine protocol used to classify bison as disease free is a very rigorous protocol established by the Greater Yellowstone Interagency Brucellosis Committee and approved by the United States Animal Health Association. The best scientists and animal health regulators in the world were convened by GYIBC to develop this protocol which was eventually adopted into the Interagency Bison Management Plan and published as an APHIS Uniform Method and Rule. This rule was reviewed by the U. S. Animal Health Association brucellosis committee and examined extensively by other scientists and veterinarians from around the world.
 - b. In addition to meeting Federal/State animal health regulatory standards the quarantine study actually ADDED features to the protocol In other words these

animals have not only met federal rules but exceeded the published regulatory standards to be classed "disease free". There are no more tested and examined bison in the world! If this standard is not high enough then we would like to know what standard will make the grade.

- c. To implement a disease management program we must agree on a standard for determining when animals are disease free. Without measurable standards how can we support any of the animal regulations that prevent movement of disease in wildlife or Montana livestock? In the livestock industry those standards are published in a uniform set of rules that when met allow free movement of animals for commerce and conservation. Apparently even using more rigorous standards and the same rule making process for wild bison and going extra miles beyond those standards is still not satisfactory to some. This raises great questions about the very nature of our animal health regulation system in the U.S. How can we propose to move toward more aggressive disease management strategies in wildlife or even discuss those ideas of eradication of brucellosis when no disease free standard is acceptable to agriculture? Without a science based standard we can never determine if we are meeting disease management goals. This bill jeopardizes those standards.
- d. Finally, despite the continual political rhetoric raising fear and anxiety about disease in bison, science clearly shows that this species has no greater potential to spread disease than any other hoofed ungulate including livestock imported into Montana. Agencies or conservation interests are not proposing to move diseased bison to other areas of Montana. Most bison herds in North America are not diseased and pose no risk to agriculture and, in fact, bison already live along side cattle all across the Nation without any disease event.

A survey by the American Bison Society showed that More than 74% of the American Public believes that bison are extremely important living symbol of the American West. Even more recent polls (Moore Opinion Poll 2011) show that the majority of Montana voters and sportsmen want to see wild bison and experience them in a natural setting. With strong leadership from legislature we have a chance to meet the conservation needs of this species while protecting an equally important ranching industry. The truth is, many other states and Indian Tribes are already showing us the way. Utah recently reintroduced bison to the Book Cliffs in cooperation with the Ute Tribe and Alaska is working on a restoration project with first nations in the Yukon. Other examples of successful bison restoration alongside agriculture are seen in Saskatchewan and even Mexico. Many Indian Tribes across North America are working hard to establish cultural herds on their large landscapes and are reconnecting in their own way with wild bison. These states and tribes are building healthy conservation herds that can be experienced by the public in many ways including annual hunts. All of these conservation efforts come from the rational understanding that bison provide positive benefits that we can all share and enjoy. We, in Montana, must find a way forward with agricultural and conservation interests being served equally. Unfortunately, this bill will not help us find that path but it will take the positive benefits from a valued wildlife resource and exchange them for a blemish on Montana's conservation history and national image.

Respectfully



Keith Aune
The Wildlife Conservation Society