

Fort Belknap Indian Community



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Fort Belknap Indian Community
(Tribal Govt.)
Fort Belknap Indian Community
(Elected to administer the affairs of the community and
to represent the Assiniboine and the Gros Ventre
Tribes of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation)

Chairman Redfield and Members of the House Agriculture Committee:

The Fort Belknap Tribal Council is writing to strongly voice our opposition to Senate Bill 284, sponsored by Senator John Brenden. We feel if passed, this legislation will dramatically impact the ability for the Fort Belknap tribe to manage our buffalo herds fully for our sovereign nation.

We do not believe it is the duty of counties to make wildlife management decisions. Montana's counties are not autonomous or sovereign entities, and can only follow the direction of the Montana Legislature.

Wildlife is a public trust resource whose management is best served – as it has been throughout Montana's history – by wildlife professionals at the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, with direction and oversight by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission. We are proud of the relationship that has been built through the years between Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the Fort Peck nation. By working together, we have been able to build a sustainable, safe, and culturally significant buffalo population.

Montana's tribal nations have an established track record of managing this culturally important animal on our sovereign lands and using a scientific process that still allows all interested voices to be heard. Bison relocation is a process concerning all of our country's sixty tribal nations and the significance of the species to the tribes, both spiritually and nutritionally, cannot be overstated.

We would like to share our following concerns about Senate Bill 284:

- The Ft. Belknap nation has over 7,000 members, and feels that we were very much so left out of pertinent discussions when developing the bill. Contrary to past years, tribal council members were not notified prior to bringing the bill before committee. Due to this misstep in the drafting process, they were unable to clearly decipher what the implications would be for sovereign tribal nations. We have an established track record of properly managing and respecting buffalo, and hold insurance for each of these animals to deal with any potential risks they present to neighbors and property.
- During the 2011 Montana Legislature, Senate Bill 212 (MCA 87-1-216) was signed by Governor Schweitzer and created a solid framework to address the complex issue of bison translocation. Through the legislative process of SB 212, County Commissioners rose in support of having broadly supported guidelines in place to ensure translocation was safe to livestock, people, and landscapes. What has changed since the passage of SB 212?
- County Commissions are vital to local governance but are not wildlife managers, Title 7 of the Montana Code Annotated makes it clear that counties are not the arbiters of wildlife policy. All Montanans, regardless of county of residence, have equal claim and interest in wildlife.
- Existing, effective public process provides every Montanan, including local and county government, landowners, hunters, conservationists, landowners and livestock producers to

participate fully in wildlife-management decisions. FWP and the FWP Commission are attentive to local interests.

- If signed into law, SB 284 would set a precedent that should be worrisome to all County Commissioners. If the this Legislature delegates to county commissioners authority to decidewildlifemanagement, subsequent legislatures will potentially face intense pressure to expand that authority to include decisions about other controversial wildlife – elk, wolves, grizzlies, furbearers, walleyes and other animals. The expense to counties to make and legally defend wildlife-management decisions would grow county government and require increase taxes in order to fulfill the wishes of the Legislature, as well as, requiring staff specifically working on these issues.

In summary, we feel this legislation is unneeded and unnecessary. The buffalo that roam our sovereign nation are of critical importance to our members for both their cultural and wildlife importance. We continue to work closely with Fish, Wildlife & Parks to ensure our herds are safe to people and livestock, respectful of private property rights, and look forward to building this relationship moving forward. The passage of Senate Bill 284 would jeopardize a framework that is working.

Sincerely,

