

BOZEMAN DAILY CHRONICLE

Poll: Most Montanans don't hate bison

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With at least six bison-limiting bills awaiting legislative consideration, a new Montana poll appears to show that a majority of Montanans would support restoring bison to public lands.

On Wednesday, San Francisco polling firm Tulchin Research released survey results indicating that Montanans want the state to manage wild bison as wildlife and would support efforts to establish a state bison herd.

More than 80 percent of those surveyed indicated they liked bison while just 4 percent said they viewed bison unfavorably.

A smaller percentage – 68 percent – said they consider bison to be wildlife, but another 15 percent said bison could be wildlife or livestock.

Livestock industry legislators from areas in northeastern Montana near Fort Peck and Fort Belknap reservations have submitted the majority of the anti-bison bills so far.

Rep. Bill Harris, R-Winnett, has submitted a bill that would revise Montana laws related to managing bison as livestock, not wildlife.

But according to the poll, almost three-quarters of those surveyed said bison should be managed like deer, elk or other wildlife, not livestock.

With those numbers, it's not surprising that three-quarters of those surveyed supported the state restoring wild bison to some of Montana's public lands or the tribes restoring wild bison to tribal lands.

Those numbers dropped slightly to around two-thirds if the bison were disease-free Yellowstone bison, showing the stigma that still surrounds Yellowstone bison and the threat of brucellosis.

It's that threat of disease in addition to the competition posed by bison for grazing resources that have prompted some of the bills being drafted in the Legislature.

Sen. Rick Ripley, R-Wolf Creek, and Rep. Mike Lang, R-Malta, would revise management of bison, although the specifics of their bills are not yet available.

Some are anticipating one of the bills would prohibit the creation of a Montana herd. In the poll, 63 percent opposed such a bill.

In 2013, legislators proposed a bill that would allow landowners to shoot bison on their land. In the poll, 60 percent were opposed to a similar bill.

Sen. John Brendan, R-Scobey, chairs the Senate Fish and Wildlife Committee and has long opposed the creation of a state bison herd.

This year, Brendan's bill would require the approval of county commissioners prior to bison relocation. Lang proposed a similar bill in 2013, which was vetoed by Gov. Steve Bullock.

But according to the poll, three-quarters of the respondents agreed that Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks should make management decisions about bison, not county politicians.

In 2011, bison opponents passed Senate Bill 212 that already requires the approval of adjacent landowners.

Rep. Alan Redfield, R-Livingston, saw two of his anti-bison bills die in 2013. Now he's returning with a bill that would require an analysis of available forage before bison could be transplanted into an area.

Redfield witnessed some of the pushback against bison bills that occurred in 2013. In December, Redfield said he'd be talking to some of the other bison-bill sponsors to encourage bills that would have a better chance of passing and having an effect.

Tulchin Research conducted a telephone survey of 500 registered Montana voters in mid-December and concluded the margin of error was 4.4 percentage points.

FACT SHEET ON MCA 81-2-120

In 1995, the Montana Legislature created a new statute MCA 81-2-120 transferring Fish, Wildlife, & Parks authority to manage wild buffalo to the Department of Livestock.¹

Under Department of Livestock policies set down by MCA 81-2-120, the federal and Montana state governments have taken over 3,600 wild buffalo in capture for slaughter operations.²

Wild buffalo remain culturally and spiritually significant to American Indian tribes in Montana and surrounding states.³ As implemented by the Department of Livestock, MCA 81-2-120 severely limits the abundance and distribution of wild buffalo to less than 0.3% of Montana's habitat, directly limiting tribal treaty rights to hunt buffalo on open and unclaimed lands and severing a direct cultural link to a revered species, wild buffalo.^{3,4}

Montana state hunters cannot hunt wild buffalo without Department of Livestock approval.¹ In the last ten years, of 82,832 applicants, 426 hunters drew wild buffalo tags.⁵

Private landowners living in Yellowstone National Park gateway communities who support the presence of wild buffalo continue to be placed in conflict with livestock inspectors who trespass on their private property to remove buffalo a native, migratory species.⁶

Domestic cattle operations near Yellowstone National Park have dwindled to a handful, further eroding the justification for Department of Livestock's zero tolerance policy for a wild buffalo population in Montana.⁷ There is no demonstrable disease risk on habitat where there is no susceptible cattle host, yet all wild buffalo in Montana are forcibly removed during and after calving season.⁸

Since 2000, the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service has provided over \$8,000,000 American taxpayer dollars for the Department of Livestock to carry out MCA 81-2-120 without legislative oversight or fiscal accountability to taxpayers.⁹

MCA 81-2-120 has no provision to conserve wild buffalo, the statute is based entirely on taking the wildlife species by hazing or harassing buffalo from habitat, capturing buffalo in pens for shipment to slaughterhouses, hunting buffalo without providing habitat to support a viable population, quarantining or domesticating wild buffalo, and agency shootings.¹

Two Montana state courts have ruled there is no statutory or mandatory duty or legal precedent for the state of Montana to arbitrarily remove all migratory buffalo from the state - preventing the wild species from establishing a year-round population.¹⁰

The Supreme Court of Montana has found that Montana's Constitution and laws mandate "special considerations" to assure the persistence of native wildlife species for future generations.¹¹

Biologists have found the status of wild buffalo in Montana in "greatest conservation need" and "at risk because of very limited and/or potentially declining population numbers, range and/or habitat, making it vulnerable to global extinction or extirpation in the state."¹²

Sources

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 2. White, P. J., Wallen, R. L., Geremia, C., Treanor, J. and Blanton, D. W. 2011. Management of Yellowstone bison and brucellosis transmission risk-Implications for conservation and restoration. *Biological Conservation*, 144: 1322-1334.
 3. Montana-Wyoming Tribal Leaders Council. A Resolution Urging the Governor of Montana, the Montana Legislature, U.S. Department of the Interior, Yellowstone National Park, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, to Recognize and Honor its' Trust Responsibility and Treaty Obligations to American Indian Nations in Providing for Viable Populations of Migratory Buffalo in the Wildlife Species' Native Habitat. March 23, 2013.

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 - Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, Fort Hall Business Council. RESOLUTION, March 14, 2013.
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 8. Nicoletti, Dr. Paul L. Horse Butte scoping statement, March 28, 2008.
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Montana District Court Judge John. C. Brown, Montana District Court, Gallatin County. Cause No: DV-09-388C, Order RE: Pending Motions, May 27, 2010.
 11. Supreme Court of Montana. STATE OF MONTANA ex rel. WILLIAM SACKMAN and EDNA SACKMAN, Petitioners and Respondents, v. STATE FISH AND GAME COMMISSION of the State of Montana et al., Defendants and Appellants, 151 Mont. 45, 438 P.2d 663, 1968 Mont.

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 12. Adams, S.M. and A.R. Dood. 2011. Background Information on Issues of Concern for Montana: Plains Bison Ecology, Management, and Conservation. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Bozeman, Montana.
- Prepared by Buffalo Field Campaign P.O. Box 957, West Yellowstone MT 59758, (406) 646-0070, www.buffalofieldcampaign.org.

In line with voter support for protecting bison and managing them as wildlife, a large majority of Montana voters agree that "wildlife management decisions regarding native wild bison should be made by biologists at Montana's Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and not by county politicians." When presented with this statement making the case for a consistent statewide approach to bison management, nearly three quarters of voters (74%) indicated they found the statement to be convincing.

Voters Decisively Reject Anti-Bison Legislative Proposals

Proposals aimed at reducing Montana's bison population or restricting restoration efforts are met with strong opposition from voters in the state. Specifically, voters overwhelmingly reject proposals to reclassify all wild bison as livestock (76% opposed, including 51% *strongly* opposed) and to prohibit the establishment of any wild bison in the state (63% opposed). Voters oppose allowing private landowners to shoot bison that enter onto private land (60% opposed) and oppose establishing a year-round hunting season for bison (59% opposed).

<i>Voters Reject Anti-Bison Legislative Proposals by Wide Margins</i>		
<i>"Now I'd like to read you some different policy proposals relating to bison that are being considered this year by state lawmakers. Please tell me if you would support or oppose each."</i>	Total Support	Total Oppose
Reclassify all wild bison in Montana as livestock so they are managed as livestock instead of as wildlife	18%	78%
Prohibit the establishment of any wild bison population in the state of Montana	29%	63%
Allow private landowners to shoot any wild bison that enter onto private land	35%	60%
Establish a year-round hunting season for bison in Montana	34%	59%

Conclusion

In conclusion, our research finds that Montana voters greatly value bison in their state and strongly support efforts to restore them in the wild. Voters believe that bison should be managed like other wildlife, back efforts to restore bison populations to public lands and tribal lands, and support relocating bison from Yellowstone to establish new herds in the state. Additionally, voters overwhelmingly reject proposals currently before the Montana Legislature that would treat all bison as livestock rather than wildlife and that would otherwise undermine Montana FWP and tribal efforts to restore bison populations.

Survey Methodology: From December 17-21, 2014, Tulchin Research conducted a telephone survey using professional interviewers calling both landlines and cell phones among 500 registered voters in Montana. The margin of error for this survey is +/- 4.38 percentage points.