

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
STATE OF MONTANA

STEVE BULLOCK
GOVERNOR



ANGELA McLEAN
LT. GOVERNOR

May 4, 2015

The Honorable Linda McCulloch
Secretary of State
State Capitol
Helena, MT 59620

Dear Secretary McCulloch:

In accordance with the power vested in me as Governor by the Constitution and the laws of the State of Montana, I hereby veto House Bill 496 (HB 496), "AN ACT ESTABLISHING THE PUBLIC LAND TASK FORCE TO STUDY THE MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITY FOR PUBLIC LAND CURRENTLY ADMINISTERED BY THE STATE OF MONTANA OR THE UNITED STATES, EXCEPT FOR CONGRESSIONALLY DESIGNATED WILDERNESS AREAS AND NATIONAL PARKS; REQUIRING A FINAL REPORT; APPROPRIATING FUNDS; PROVIDING EFFECTIVE DATES; AND PROVIDING A TERMINATION DATE."

HB 496 has a number of problems. First, it is overbroad in its scope. It purports to empower the task force to "study issues pertaining to management for public land currently administered by the...United States." This arguably includes lands held in trust by the United States for federally recognized tribes – independent sovereign nations. It also includes, perhaps, lands administered by the Department of Defense, such as Malmstrom Air Force Base. The State of Montana does not need to spend taxpayers' resources studying the management of these lands.

Second, I do not accept the purpose for which the task force is being created. In 2013 the Legislature passed SJ 15, to study management of federal public lands. In short order that study turned to the transfer or sell-off of those public lands. There is every reason to believe that this is the intended direction for this task force. When HB 496 was first introduced, it was a "Transfer of Public Land Feasibility Task Force." Only after that version of the bill died in committee was it amended to its present form. But a careful reading of the bill – with references to an "assumption [of continuing] public ownership," and an examination of the entities "best suited" to manage public lands – reveals that the transfer of public lands is still very much in the sights of the task force.

My position on this issue is crystal clear: I do not support any effort that jeopardizes or calls into question the future of our public lands heritage. These lands fuel our economy and enrich our way of life. We were recently named the most fiscally prudent state in the nation, and exposing our pocketbook to the costs associated with federal lands management is not sensible.

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There are topics that are worthy of study in HB 496, such as noxious weed management or the future of secure rural schools and Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT). Those topics are either being studied now or could certainly receive more scrutiny by the Environmental Quality Council (EQC), without a new task force.

There is little doubt that federal management needs to improve and my administration is working hard to make it better. My Forests in Focus Program is fostering collaboration by Montanans who are willing to work together to improve forest management to the benefit of working forests, reduced fire risk, healthy watersheds, wildlife habitat, and local communities. That program is actually making good things happen on our national forests, with bipartisan support and involvement and without the need for further study.

Finally, HB 496 is a waste of executive branch resources. Normally I would give the Legislature deference in deciding what it wants to study. But in this case, the bill assigns two members of the Executive Branch to the task force – the state forester and the administrator of the trust lands division. Both of these positions already carry significant job responsibilities, and cooperate extensively with the EQC. In this legislative session both of the divisions that these positions manage were cut back in staffing. Neither position needs more to do, especially as it relates to efforts to sell off our public lands.

For these reasons, I veto HB 496.

Sincerely,



STEVE BULLOCK
Governor

cc: Legislative Services Division
Austin Knudsen, Speaker of the House
Debby Barrett, President of the Senate