

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR  
STATE OF MONTANA

STEVE BULLOCK  
GOVERNOR



MIKE COONEY  
LT. GOVERNOR

April 29, 2019

The Honorable Corey Stapleton  
Secretary of State  
State Capitol  
Helena, MT 59601

Dear Secretary Stapleton:

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 132 (HB 132), "AN ACT CLARIFYING THE DEFINITION OF 'WILD BUFFALO' OR 'WILD BISON'; CLARIFYING THAT THE PER CAPITA FEE DOES NOT APPLY TO CERTAIN DOMESTIC BISON; AMENDING SECTIONS 15-24-921, 81-1-101, 87-2-101, AND 87-6-101, MCA; AND PROVIDING AN IMMEDIATE EFFECTIVE DATE."

As originally drafted, HB 132 attempted to clarify definitions related to bison. With changes added through the legislative process, however, the bill creates more confusion than clarity.

The current definition of a wild bison is one that "has not been reduced to captivity and is not owned by a person." This definition is well-settled. It was previously approved by the legislature, and the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and the Department of Livestock have had no difficulty interpreting it as they administer state laws related to bison.

House Bill 132 abandons this workable definition for a totally new one. Under the bill, a wild bison must meet all the following conditions: "it has not been reduced to captivity;" "it has never been subject to the per capita fee under 15-24-921;" and "it has never been owned by a person." The bill does not say whether conditions would apply to a herd, a single animal, or to an animal's offspring.

Though well-intentioned, these changes present significant, adverse consequences for bison management in Montana.

Bison widely considered to be wild, such as those in Yellowstone National Park, are often captured, handled, tested, and quarantined for health monitoring, biological sampling, transplant and relocation, and other research and management purposes. They are also descendants of animals once owned and reduced to captivity.

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Under the new terms of HB 132, these bison, and others around the state, could be inappropriately deemed “domestic.” This would threaten the preservation of their genetics and their conservation both within and beyond the Park’s boundaries. Inappropriate reclassification of wild bison as domestic would also jeopardize state and tribal treaty hunting for bison. Domestic animals cannot be hunted.

I proposed a series of simple amendments that would clarify the definition of wild bison and resolve the issues posed by HB 132. The legislature rejected these amendments. As a result, the problems with HB 132 and its new definition of wild bison remain.

If it becomes law in its current form, HB 132 will create an unacceptable level of confusion and uncertainty around bison management. It will threaten the bison hunts. And it is inconsistent with long-established practices around the management and research-capture of bison and other wildlife species. In short, it is simply unworkable for our state.

For these reasons, I veto HB 132.

Sincerely,



STEVE BULLOCK  
Governor

cc: Legislative Services Division  
Greg Hertz, Speaker of the House  
Scott Sales, President of the Senate