

**Montana Wildlife Federation ♦ Ducks Unlimited ♦ Montana Bowhunters Association
Mule Deer Foundation ♦ Montana Wild Sheep Foundation ♦ Montana Trout Unlimited
Montana Backcountry Hunters & Anglers ♦ Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Montana Sportsman's Alliance ♦ Pheasants Forever ♦ National Wildlife Federation**

March 6, 2018

Gov. Steve Bullock
Chairman
Montana State Land Board
1539 Eleventh Ave.
Helena, MT 59601

RE: Montana Sporting Coalition support for Horse Creek Complex Conservation Easement

Dear Gov. Bullock and Land Board members,

The Montana Sporting Coalition was formed in 2015 to build a strong, unified voice on issues that enjoy broad support from hunters and anglers, such as the Habitat Montana program. We are comprised of hunting, angling and conservation organizations with a strong interest in Montana's wildlife, the habitat that supports it and public access for hunting and angling opportunities. Collectively we have tens of thousands of members in Montana, as well as members from around the country who come to enjoy our state's incredible sporting opportunities.

Healthy habitat on both public and private lands is crucial if we are to continue to enjoy Montana's long hunting seasons, diversity of big game, upland birds and waterfowl, and superb fisheries.

With that in mind, the coalition strongly supports the Horse Creek Complex Conservation Easement in Wibaux and Dawson counties. This easement is the embodiment of the Habitat Montana program in that it fosters family-based agriculture by keeping the land as a working cow-calf operation. It also promotes the local hunting economy by increasing access to over 15,000 acres of prime wildlife habitat for mule deer, white-tailed deer, upland game birds, turkeys and waterfowl. This property is a prime example of private land conservation at its finest. It has brought hunters and landowners together, working for a common cause and it highlights the vital role private lands play in Montana's wildlife heritage.

The easement would include up to 600 days per year of public hunting access. It would be facilitated through five parking areas, from which hunters would walk in to hunt. That is excellent opportunity, because it affords a level of security necessary for quality hunting while

also ensuring that hunters have access, spread out and that game doesn't leave the country due to over-crowding.

When internal and adjacent public lands are considered, the Horse Creek easement would open up nearly 20,000 acres to public hunting in perpetuity. It would represent a remarkable achievement in opening access to landlocked public land as well as provide much-needed revenue for local communities that will benefit from the over 600 hunter days that will accompany this easement. The Horse Creek easement also helps ensure the future of the family ranching operation by allowing the Stensons to decide how they want their land to be used in a willing seller/willing buyer fashion.

The coalition would like to address several points that held this easement up at the state Land Board meeting in February.

First, private property rights are protected and in fact enhanced by this project. Montana's split estate laws are clear that mineral rights have supremacy over surface ownership. Nothing in this easement changes that. However, the easement does give the landowners a better negotiating tool when it comes time to discuss any mineral development that may reduce the carrying capacity of the Stenson's ranch, harm the ability of the Stensons to continue their cow-calf operation or cause permanent damage to their ranch that should otherwise be avoided. Nothing in this easement would make it possible to prohibit the extraction of minerals. It simply helps level the playing field for the surface owners.

The oil and gas industry's ability to develop their mineral rights have improved dramatically over the years, and now it has an incredibly small footprint with the use of horizontal drilling and timing stipulations to protect wintering wildlife, and during both mating and parturition seasons. As most Montanans agree that wildlife conservation and mineral development can coexist if done properly, this easement helps ensure that the surface owners and the wildlife values will be adequately represented during negotiations, if they ever occur.

Second, this project meets all of the goals that Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks has for proper wildlife management. Habitat Montana was built as a tool to help our farmers and ranchers to continue their operations, while maintaining Montana's solid partnership between landowners and hunters. This is essential to provide private habitat, while also allowing hunting as the time-tested management tool to control wildlife numbers. Habitat Montana, through easements like this, is one of our greatest conservation achievements. Simply put, the program works for landowners, hunters and for wildlife.

Finally, there has been criticism of the appraisal that established the value of the easement. By law, the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks is required to pay appraised value for easements and fee title acquisitions. This appraisal was conducted by a well-known, certified Montana appraiser. As the old saying goes, they're not making any more land. As such, land values in Montana for properties with high wildlife potential have been increasing steadily over the last 10 to 20 years. We believe as well that the appraisal is correct, and within the cost of what it should be, considering the extra value added of access granted in perpetuity.

Access to private land for hunting is a privilege, not a right. Montana's hunters understand that. We also understand that landowners and hunters need each other for sound wildlife management. Montana's hunters have shown that we're willing to step up to help our friends in the agriculture community. Habitat Montana is one of the best tools we have to do that. It is one of our greatest conservation success stories. Please vote to approve this common-sense project that will protect a working cattle ranch, wildlife habitat and public hunting opportunity.

Sincerely,

Montana Wildlife Federation

Ducks Unlimited

Montana Sportsman's Alliance

Pheasants Forever

Montana Bowhunters Association

National Wildlife Federation

Mule Deer Foundation

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation

Montana Trout Unlimited

Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

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