

Feb. 5, 2019

The Hon. Rep. Bob Brown
Chairman, House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee
State Capitol
1301 East Sixth Ave.
Helena, MT 59601

Dear Chairman Brown and members of the House FWP committee,

The Montana Sporting Coalition is made up of more than a dozen hunting and angling organizations with a deep commitment to our outdoors traditions. Our diverse interests means at times we disagree on specific issues. But we all recognize the vital role that habitat plays to all wildlife species, and we come together to protect vital areas for our big game, upland birds, waterfowl and for our fisheries.

For that reason, the Coalition is opposed to HB 265. This bill would require that the state Land Board approve all conservation easements on private land under the Habitat Montana program. This program is one of our state's biggest conservation success stories. For over 30 years it has funded conservation easements with willing landowners, targeted fee title purchases of important winter range and other quality wildlife habitat. Habitat Montana uses a small portion of hunting license fees, and it's used to leverage federal and non-governmental dollars to fund habitat projects. It has an incredible track record of success.

Last year the state Land Board unnecessarily delayed the Horse Creek Complex conservation easement near Wibaux. This quality, 15,000-acre project had been in the works for two years, and went through an extensive review with Montana FWP staff. It was unanimously approved by the state Fish and Wildlife Commission. But the Land Board voted to indefinitely delay the project.

Finally the governor approved the project after determining that conservation easements don't require Land Board approval under state law. That was challenged by the Attorney General's office, and the case was decided by the state Supreme Court, which ruled that easements in fact don't require Land Board approval under the original intent of the Legislature when it created the Habitat Montana program.

HB 265 would undo that ruling, and go against the original intent of our Legislature. This bill would create more government bureaucracy that is unnecessary for projects that have already undergone extensive review. And it would politicize wildlife conservation and divide Montanans unnecessarily.

We need to strive to provide more certainty for landowners to exercise their private property rights, and that's what the Supreme Court ruling did. Habitat Montana is a quality program that

brings hunters and landowners together to achieve results that help farmers and ranchers secure their financial future, while also providing tremendous habitat and public hunting access.

Please vote to table this misguided bill and allow the Habitat Montana program to continue to work for Montana's landowners, hunters, anglers and wildlife enthusiasts.

Sincerely,

Montana Wildlife Federation

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

Montana Backcountry Hunters and Anglers

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation

National Wildlife Federation

Montana Trout Unlimited

Montana Sportsmen Alliance

Ducks Unlimited

Montana Bowhunters Association

The Wildlife Society