



## MEMORANDUM

TO: INTERESTED PARTIES

FROM: LORI WEIGEL / PARTNER / PUBLIC OPINION STRATEGIES

DATE: AUGUST 13, 2012

RE: KEY FINDINGS FROM A SURVEY OF MONTANA VOTERS REGARDING BISON REINTRODUCTION

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Public Opinion Strategies recently completed a statistically valid survey of voters throughout Montana regarding views of bison reintroduction on public lands in the state<sup>1</sup>. The survey found that Montana voters are strongly supportive of reintroducing bison on public lands broadly, and just as supportive of such a policy at the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in north-central Montana. Moreover, majorities continue to support the policy when advised of requirements for public input prior to reintroduction and the process for screening of brucellosis. At the same time, seven-in-ten Montanans agree that some bison should be given to Native American tribes for their management on tribal lands.

The remainder of this report details some of the specific key findings from the survey:

- **Two-thirds of Montana voters support reintroduction of bison on public lands.** Fully 68 percent of voters indicate support for “restoring wild bison populations on state and federal public lands in Montana.” Just one-in-four (26 percent) oppose this idea. The intensity of support for reintroduction of wild bison on public lands is twice as strong as that of the opposition (36 percent strongly support reintroduction while 15 percent strongly oppose it).

Support for reintroduction of wild bison is evident throughout the state (64 percent support or greater in every region) and in every type of community (74 percent in cities, 66 percent in small towns, and 64 percent among rural residents).

- **There is just as strong support for a specific plan to reintroduce wild bison at the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge.** All respondents heard a neutral description of the proposal and were then asked whether they would support or oppose it:

*“As you may know, the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in north-central Montana is a 1.1 million acre wildlife refuge, commonly known as the “CMR.” The CMR is managed by the*

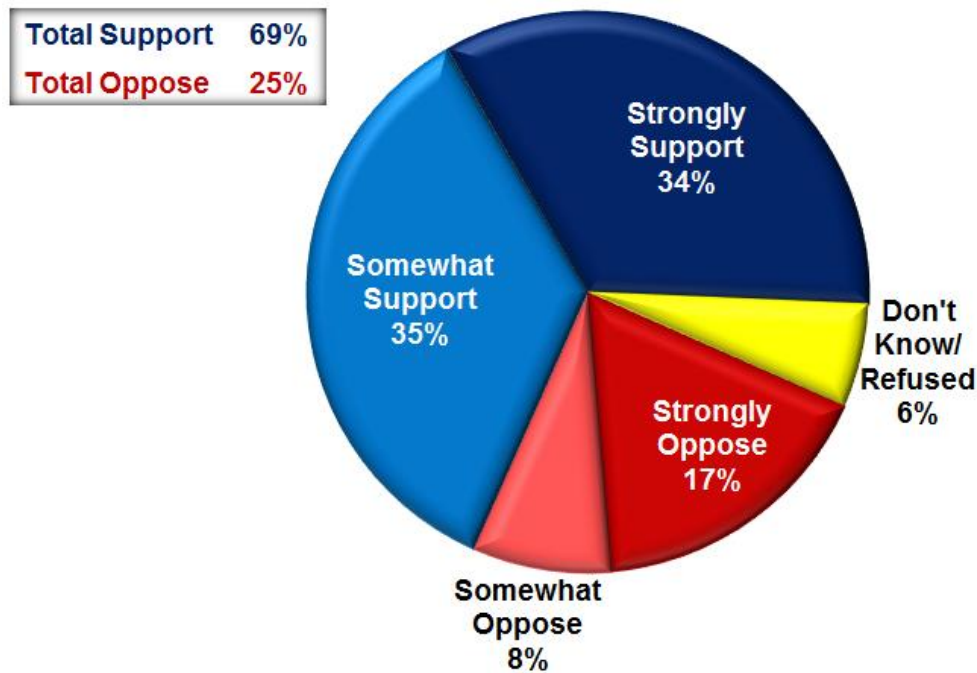
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<sup>1</sup> Public Opinion Strategies conducted 400 interviews throughout Montana. Interviews were distributed proportionally by county throughout the state. The sample is demographically representative of the profile of likely 2012 voters. The survey was conducted July 31-August 2, 2012, and has an overall margin of error of +4.9%. Sampling error for subgroups within the sample will be larger.

*federal U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and surrounded by millions acres of public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Would you support or oppose restoration of a wild bison population in and around the CMR in north-central Montana?*

As seen in the following graph, 69 percent of the state’s electorate supports the proposal. Only 25 percent indicate opposition for the proposal as summarized. The intensity of support again is twice as high as the intensity of opposition, as fully 34 percent say they strongly support the proposal, compared to just 17 percent who strongly oppose it.

**Support for Reintroduction of Wild Bison In and Around the CMR**



- **Support for reintroduction of wild bison in and around the CMR is widespread and broad-based, cutting across key demographic and partisan sub-groups within the electorate.** The breadth of this proposal’s support is significant, with voters in a wide variety of demographic and geographic subgroups offering backing for this explanation of the proposal. Specifically, we found support for the proposal among:
  - ✓ 64% of men and 74% of women;
  - ✓ 73% of residents in cities and suburban areas, 67% in small towns, and 65% in rural areas;
  - ✓ 83% of Democrats, 73% of Independent voters, and 56% of Republicans;
  - ✓ 60% of self-described conservatives, 69% of moderates and 86% of liberals;
  - ✓ 65% of men under age 50, 80% of women under age 50, 63% of men age 50 and older, and 68% of women age 50 and older;
  - ✓ 78% of voters in the Missoula area, 69% in the Butte region, 63% in the Billings region, and 60% in the Great Falls area; and
  - ✓ 68% of fishermen, 60% of hunters, and 72% of those who have not had an hunting or fishing license in the last three years.

- **Some of this support may be grounded in a view that bison are wildlife.** When asked to choose between different descriptions of how to categorize bison, state voters say their status can be dependent on who owns and manages them but those who choose are more apt to view them as wildlife:

Do you think of bison, commonly known as buffalo, more as...

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| 35 percent | Wildlife like deer, elk or moose                         |
| 11 percent | Livestock like cattle or sheep                           |
| 42 percent | Either one depending on where they are and who owns them |
| 3 percent  | Neither one  |
| 8 percent  | Don't know enough to say one way or the other            |

This dynamic holds true in every region of the state, in every type of community, and with most key sub-groups.

- **Specific requirements on bison reintroduction reinforce the initial positive sentiment recorded in the survey.** Survey respondents were asked about their support levels after hearing additional information about how reintroduction would work in practice:

**71 percent support; 27 percent oppose**

*“As you may know, some wild bison in and around Yellowstone National Park carry the disease brucellosis. However, the bison that would be located in these new areas would be tested using nationally approved veterinary screening for animal health prior to moving them.”*

**69 percent support; 29 percent oppose**

*“As you know, many areas of Montana include a mixture of public, private and tribal lands. Before bison are allowed to be reintroduced, state and local government agencies, private land owners, and tribal leaders would need to come together and willingly agree to allow bison to move across their lands and be mutually responsible for their management. Community input would also be required.”*

The same underlying distinctions are evident in the responses to these aspects of reintroduction.

- Two-thirds of Montana voters (68 percent) agree with the statement that *“some bison should be given to Native American tribes for their management on tribal lands.”* Two-in-five (39 percent) strongly agree with this statement. Thirty-one percent disagree with this point of view. This view is held by a majority of every key voter sub-group examined in this survey, but is even more pronounced among respondents whose family income is dependent on tourism (79 percent), residents age 55 and older (74 percent), and in the Great Falls area (74 percent).

**Overall, Montana voters express strong and consistent support for the reintroduction of wild bison on public lands in the state.** While there are differences in levels of support, solid majorities of virtually all key voter groups hold a supportive view. It cuts across partisan, gender, age and geographic lines. This support is also evident generically and when it comes to a specific plan to reintroduce bison in and around the CMR. Additional information about how reintroduction may take place further confirms respondents’ previous views. At the same time, state voters also concur with the idea of giving bison to Native American tribes for their management on tribal lands.