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Wildlife Conservation Society Bison Survey



Montanans Voice Overwhelming Support for Restoring Bison

BOZEMAN, MT (September 5, 2012) As wildlife managers continue work on a statewide bison-management plan, a new survey underscores overwhelming public support for restoring a herd of wild, wide-ranging bison on public land in Montana. Additionally, Montana voters specifically support restoration to the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in central Montana.

Sixty-eight percent of Montanans support restoration of wild bison on federal or state land, while just 26 percent are opposed, according to the survey commissioned by the National Wildlife Federation and Wildlife Conservation Society, and a similar number thought the wildlife refuge best known as the CMR was a good place to establish a wild herd.

Sixty-nine percent of respondents voiced support for building a new herd of wild bison on public land in and around the 1.1-million-acre Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge. This survey closely tracks a similar poll conducted by Moore Information, Inc. in February of 2011 that found 70 percent of Montanans support bison restoration.

"The public support for restoring this American icon is exceptionally strong," said the National Wildlife Federation's Kit Fischer in Missoula. "The decimation of bison was a wrong that people would like to repair, and doing so would be the crowning achievement in Montana's century-long commitment to wildlife conservation."

Adds the Wildlife Conservation Society's Keith Aune, "The primary reason people visit Montana is our incredible wildlife resource. Restoring bison is not only important conservation, it's good for our economy."

In addition to public lands, 68 percent of Montanans support giving bison to Native American tribes for relocation to tribal lands. This view was held by every key voter sub-group (gender, age, geography and ideology) examined in this survey.

"It's gratifying to see the people of Montana acknowledging the fundamental, historical role bison played in tribal life," said Robbie Magnan, Ft. Peck Tribal Fish and Game Director. "It's impossible to overstate the importance to tribes of restoring some wild bison, and the tribes want to be leaders of this effort."

The new survey comes on the heels of an extensive effort by Montana's

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Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks to engage the public in its bison-management planning project – including eight public meetings held throughout the state. More than 20,000 people submitted nearly 23,000 comments.

“The level of interest is exciting and consistent with our conservation legacy of restoring wildlife to native habitats.” Aune said. “The potential benefits are just tremendous.” NWF’s Fischer attributed opposition – expressed at the scoping meetings and reflected in the survey – to concerns ranchers have regarding potential conflicts and competition between cattle and bison.

Fischer said, “We can successfully manage bison as we have with elk and other wildlife. Bison advocates are eager to work with ranchers to make this a win-win proposition, and I think the public expects us to work together to figure this out.”

Strong, Consistent Support

The survey was conducted June 7-9 by Public Opinion Strategies, a national market research company. The telephone survey of 400 likely voters has a margin of error of +/- 4.9 percent. The survey found support for bison restoration remains consistent in response to general and specific questions on the issue.

Here are the questions and responses:

1. Do you support or oppose restoring wild bison populations on state and federal public lands in Montana?

68% TOTAL SUPPORT

26% TOTAL OPPOSE

2. 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 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?

69% TOTAL SUPPORT

25% TOTAL OPPOSE

3. 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

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required. Having heard this, do you support or oppose restoring wild bison populations on state and federal public lands in Montana?

69% TOTAL SUPPORT

29% TOTAL OPPOSE

4. Next, please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statement. Some bison should be given to Native American tribes for their management on tribal lands.

68% TOTAL AGREE

31% TOTAL DISAGREE

5. 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. Having heard this, do you support or oppose restoring wild bison populations on state and federal public lands in Montana?

71% TOTAL SUPPORT

27% TOTAL OPPOSE

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