# [***Defenders of Wildlife: Tribes, Conservation Groups Urge Veto on Anti-Bison Bills***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:62HN-2DH1-DYG2-R2DR-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(TNSPol) -- The ***Defenders of Wildlife issued*** the following news on April 21, 2021:

A group of Montana ***tribes*** and conservation groups sent a letter to Governor Gianforte today, urging him to veto a pair of state bills that will undermine reintroduction efforts of wild bison to Montana. The bills, HB 318 and HB 302, would restrict the bison's status as a native wildlife species to just a few circumstances and allow individual counties to overrule decisions on bison conservation made by state wildlife managers, respectively. HB 302 is heading to the governor's desk after it passed in the Legislature two weeks ago, while HB 318 is almost certain to pass in the coming weeks. Governor Gianforte has not indicated whether he will sign or veto the bills.

These bills come at an especially fraught time for bison. Last night, Gov. Gianforte scrapped the state's science-based bison management plan that would have allowed the animals to be restored as wildlife in suitable areas of Montana.

By politicizing wildlife restoration, these two bills would make it much more difficult to reintroduce wild bison back to their native habitat on Montana's public lands. It would represent a major setback in ongoing bison conservation efforts in the state.

These bills also fly in the face of public opinion--recent polls show more than 75% of Montanans support the reintroduction of bison to public and tribal lands in the state.

Signatories on the letter include representatives from the Blackfeet Nation, Fort Belknap Indian Community, Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux ***Tribes***, the InterTribal Buffalo Council, Defenders of Wildlife, World Wildlife Fund, Montana Chapter of the Sierra Club, The Humane Society of the United States, Natural Resources Defense Council, Laurel East Animal Center, National Wildlife Federation, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Wildlife Conservation Society, and National Parks Conservation Association.

Chamois Andersen, senior Rockies and Plains representative at ***Defenders of Wildlife***, ***issued*** the following statement:

"Bison are beloved by Montanans and are among North America's most iconic species. These bills are detrimental to bison reintroduction efforts in the state, preventing the restoration of this native species to their natural habitat. We urge Governor Gianforte to side with Montana values and veto these destructive bills so the restoration of bison to appropriate places in Montana can continue."

Background:

\* HB 318 would redefine what constitutes a "wild" bison by using criteria that strips the bison of recognition as a native wildlife species under state law. This would allow the species to lose certain protections.

- Former Montana governor Steve Bullock vetoed a similar bill in 2019 that would have redefined bison in the same way because of its negative effect on the bison of Yellowstone.

\* HB 302 would require county approval of any bison restoration project in that respective county, instead of leaving the decision to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

- It also sets a dangerous precedent of allowing county officials to usurp the state wildlife authority concerning the reintroduction of a wildlife species.

\* Bison are a crucial species native to the American West. Once numbering around 30 million, bison were hunted to near extinction with only several hundred remaining by the late 1800s, mostly in captivity. Only about two dozen bison remained in the wild at this time in Yellowstone National Park.

\* Though saved from extinction and thought to number around 500,000 today, most bison are managed as private livestock and contain cattle genetics. About 33,000-34,000 bison are managed for conservation in North America (USA, Canada, and Mexico), or 0.1 percent of the historic population. Of these, most are small herds; only a handful of bison herds numbering greater than 1,000 animals exist.

\* While bison are no longer threatened by extinction, substantial work remains to restore the species to its ecological and cultural role on appropriate landscapes. Ecological restoration of bison will require establishment of additional large herds numbering greater than 1,000 animals.

\* \* \*

April 20, 2021

To: The Honorable Greg Gianforte, Montana Office of the Governor, P.O. BOX 200801, Helena, MT 59620-0801

Sent via email to [*governor@mt.gov*](mailto:governor@mt.gov), [*Michael.Freeman@mt.gov*](mailto:Michael.Freeman@mt.gov) and [*Misty.Kuhl@mt.gov*](mailto:Misty.Kuhl@mt.gov)

RE: Request to veto bison bills, HB 318 and HB 302

Governor Greg Gianforte:

The ***Tribes*** and nongovernment organizations represented here respectfully request you VETO House Bill 302, "require county approval to relocate bison" and House Bill 318, "clarify definition of bison."

Those signing this letter have worked for decades on a path toward restoring wild bison to Tribal lands and appropriate public lands in Montana. HB 318 and HB 302 will constrain the ability of Tribal nations and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks to restore bison and with them, Montana's wildlife and cultural heritage. When polled, more than 75 percent of Montanans supported restoring wild bison to lands in Montana. (See polls below.)

Montana ***Tribes*** have led the way in restoring bison in Montana. All Montana ***Tribes*** have buffalo herds that promote cultural and spiritual restoration, food sovereignty, and economic development. However, House Bills 302 and 318 threaten those efforts through the unlawful delegation of state powers and the restrictive definition of wild bison.

House Bill 302, Require County Approval to Relocate Bison, enables individual counties to decide whether to restore bison in a respective county, usurping Montana Fish, Wildlife and Park's authority and role as the state's wildlife agency. This bill also tarnishes Montana's wildlife stewardship legacy that is world renowned for the agency to manage the species under the Public Trust doctrine.

HB 302 runs counter to existing statute, 7-1-111, MCA, that prohibits counties from exercising "any power that applies to or affects...Title 87", the fish and wildlife title of the Montana Code. It also sets a dangerous precedent for fish and wildlife management. In addition, current statute requires the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks to hold a public comment process in the county where a bison restoration project is proposed (MCA 87-1-216), ensuring the county, as well as local constituents and communities are an integral part of any bison restoration effort.

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Sincerely,

See signatories here: [*https://defenders.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Gov-Gianforte-veto-letter-bison-bills\_0420.pdf*](https://defenders.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Gov-Gianforte-veto-letter-bison-bills_0420.pdf)

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