

House resolution critical of American Prairie Reserve

Phil Drake – March 1, 2019

HELENA – House members approved a resolution Friday asking the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to deny a bison grazing proposal from the American Prairie Reserve, saying such action would protect farmers, ranchers and communities.

The 59-40 vote followed a rules committee meeting and House floor session Thursday in which lawmakers were told a resolution, such as House Joint Resolution 28, sponsored by Rep. Dan Bartel, R-Lewistown, was not considered a law. Democratic members of the House objected after they were asked by House Speaker Greg Hertz, R-Polson, to not mention any company by name during the floor discussion.

They asked the matter be brought before the rules committee, which voted party lines to uphold Hertz's request.



Rep. Dan Bartel, R-Lewistown

Bartel told fellow lawmakers the resolution “sends a strong message to BLM that all grazing allotment users be treated fairly for best stewardship of land.”

On Friday, the American Prairie reserve was critical of the proposal, which now moves to the state Senate.

“The House just rushed through a deeply flawed resolution that uses the coercive power of the state to attack basic property rights and grazing privileges,” said Pete Geddes, chief external relations officer for American Prairie Reserve American. “We are hopeful the Senate will better recognize this for what it is, an unethical attack on the property rights of a landowner.”

The nearly 400,000-acre American Prairie Reserve, owned by the not-for-profit American Prairie Foundation, is 50 miles south of northeastern Montana's Malta adjacent to public land near the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge. It has said its goal is to acquire 500,000 acres, then link that land with 3 million acres already publicly managed, creating a 3.5 million-acre wildlife reserve spanning six counties. It now has about 800 bison.



A bull bison on the American Prairie Reserve, May 18, 2015. (Photo: TRIBUNE PHOTO/RION SANDERS)

The House resolution states the American Prairie Reserve controls private properties tied to 18 Bureau of Land Management grazing allotments in Fergus, Petroleum, Phillips, and Valley counties.



American Prairie Reserve's Enrico Education and Science Center on the Sun Prairie Bison Range north of the Missouri River and Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern Montana. Through private funding and land leases with the BLM, the American Prairie Reserve has created a 31,000 acre bison range for their herd, which is expected to top 500 animals this year. (Photo: TRIBUNE PHOTO/RION SANDERS)

It states the APR has requested that the BLM shift long-established grazing practices on those allotments, which encompass 250,000 acres of public property; and APR has petitioned to change the allotments from seasonal or rotational grazing to year-round grazing and remove the interior fencing. It also states APR proposes to allow the year-round, continuous grazing of public land by bison, which would impact the future grazing viability.

It "is essential for the preservation of the future viability of Montana's rangeland that the BLM 18 deny the petition by the APR to alter grazing permits on the 18 allotments under the control of APR," the resolution states.

The BLM should deny the APR bison grazing proposal and a copy of the resolution should be sent to the U.S. Congress, the Department of the Interior, and the Bureau of Land Management, HJ 28 states.

An official with the American Prairie Reserve called Bartel's claims "totally dishonest."

"The legislature is seeking to strip away our rights to legally use grazing privileges," said Betty Holder, senior land acquisition manager for American Prairie Reserve. "This resolution says we don't deserve the same flexibility offered to every other livestock manager in Montana and the West. That's an unlawful, unjustifiable, and discriminatory use of power."

American Prairie Reserve officials noted federal grazing regulations allow anyone with federal grazing privileges a right to request the government modify the terms of their grazing permit, so long as basic rangeland health requirements are maintained.

They said these privileges are used frequently by cattle, sheep and other livestock producers across the state.



Rep. Zach Brown, D-Bozeman

Geddes said there is concern Montana lawmakers could set a new precedent by attempting to pick winners and losers through politics instead of through science and public engagement.

“The resolution should concern all landowners depending on the same fair standards to exercise grazing privileges under federal laws and regulations,” he said.

Rep. Zach Brown, D-Bozeman, voted for the resolution but said he was “conflicted.”

He said he knows people who worked for the organization, but also has friends who are stewards of the land “who care a whole lot about this issue.”

“This issue is extremely important to a lot of thoughtful, lovely folks,” Brown said.

The vote was mostly along party lines with Republicans voting yes. However, Brown was joined by fellow Democratic Rep. Bradley Hamlett of Cascade in voting in favor of the resolution.

Veteran journalist Phil Drake is our eye on the state capitol. For tips, suggestions or comment, he can be reached at 406-231-9021 or pdrake@greatfallstribune.com.

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Read House Joint Resolution 28 at <https://bit.ly/2SxgUFz>