



April 14th, 2021

The Honorable Deb Haaland, Secretary
United States Department of Interior
1849 C St NW, Washington, DC 20240

Paul Santavy, Project Leader
Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge
P.O. Box 110
Airport Road
Lewistown, Montana 59457

Jeff Mow, Superintendent
Glacier National Park
Park Headquarters
PO Box 1
West Glacier, MT 59936

Dear Secretary Haaland, Project Leader Santavy and Superintendent Mow:

In December, the Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council wrote the Biden Transition Team and urged the Biden Administration to restore buffalo to public lands through a partnership with the Tribes. As Montana legislators and members of the Montana Indian Caucus, we also urge you to take action to work with Montana Tribes to restore buffalo on public lands in the state.

As legislators we have seen many bills in the 2021 Montana Legislature that undermine efforts by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks to restore wild buffalo and other bills that compromise Tribal bison restoration initiatives. Most recently, the Governor of Montana settled a lawsuit by pledging that the State of Montana will not seek to restore buffalo for a minimum of the next 10 years. If work to restore buffalo in Montana is to continue, federal leadership is essential. With this leadership and the cooperation of agencies within the Department of Interior, there is a tremendous opportunity to restore large herds of buffalo to public lands in Montana under Tribal management.

Last year, the Department of Interior's Bison Working Group issued an important report that established DOI priorities for moving buffalo conservation forward. These priorities include:

- DOI is committed to working with states, tribes, and other stakeholders to establish and maintain large, wide-ranging bison herds, subject to the forces of natural selection, on appropriate large landscapes where their role as ecosystem engineers shape healthy and diverse ecological communities.

- DOI will provide opportunities to restore cultural connections to bison by working with tribes inextricably linked to bison; youth; and rural and urban communities to honor and promote the unique status of bison as an American icon for all people.

Complementing the DOI report was a concurrent report prepared in 2020 by the National Wildlife Federation and the Margery Hunter Brown Indian Law Clinic at the University of Montana that set out the legal basis for Tribal management of buffalo herds on public lands in Montana.

The NWF report provides a detailed road map for establishing a Tribal herd on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in central Montana. In addition to a buffalo herd that would be cooperatively managed by several Tribes at CMR, there is also an opportunity to establish a buffalo herd on the Rocky Mountain Front that would range across in Glacier National Park and the Blackfeet Nation in both the U.S. and Canada. As at CMR, much of the preliminary work to establish this herd has also already occurred.

CMR is part of a much larger complex of public grasslands that the U.S. government recognized as a buffalo common to be used by many tribes in the Lama Bull Treaty of 1855. Much of Glacier National Park was originally part of the Blackfeet Reservation and cooperation with the Blackfeet Nation is a central tenet of Glacier Park management. While much has changed since the Tribes made these agreements, both the grass and the Tribes are still present; only the buffalo are missing.

Given the tremendous potential that exists for buffalo restoration at CMR and the Rocky Mountain Front, we urge the establishment of two working groups that would include Tribal representatives and federal managers and biologists to develop reintroduction proposals. An appropriate goal for each working group would be to frame a sufficiently detailed proposal that could then undergo further analysis through the National Environmental Policy Act. The NEPA process would bring other local, state and federal agencies to the table and provide opportunities for broad public involvement.

Because of the work done to date, there is a sound foundation for moving forward to develop implementation strategies for both CMR and the Rocky Mountain Front. Given the size of both these landscapes, restored herds would be among the largest in North America and with management by Tribal wildlife managers and biologists, these herds would be of enormous cultural, spiritual and economic significance to Tribes of the northern plains and intermountain west.

We look forward to your response to this letter.

Respectfully, the following members of the Montana American Indian Caucus:



Sen. Susan Webber - SD 8



Sen. Mike Fox - SD 16



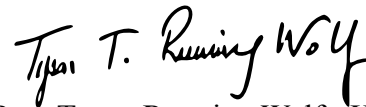
Sen. Shane Morigeau - SD 48



Rep. Sharon Stewart Peregoy - HD 42




Rep. Marvin Weatherwax - HD 15



Rep. Tyson Running Wolf - HD 16



Rep. Jonathan Windy Boy - HD 32



Rep. Rynalea Whiteman Pena - HD 41

- C:
- Gerald Gray, Chairman, Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council
 - Bill Snell, Executive Director, Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council
 - Ervin Carlson, President, Intertribal Buffalo Council
 - Arnell Abold, Executive Director, Intertribal Buffalo Council
 - Leroy Little Bear, Buffalo Treaty Tribes
 - Jason Baldes, National Wildlife Federation
 - Jonathan Proctor, Defenders of Wildlife
 - Kelly Stoner, Wildlife Conservation Society
 - Michael Jamison, National Parks Conservation Association