

March 19, 2021

Gov. Greg Gianforte  
Montana State Capitol  
1301 E. Sixth Ave.  
Helena, MT 59601

RE: Veto request of SB 115 requiring state Land Board approval for conservation easements

Dear Gov. Gianforte,

The Montana Sporting Coalition is comprised of more than a dozen hunting, fishing and conservation organizations. Collectively our organizations represent tens of thousands of Montana hunters, anglers and wildlife conservationists with a deep commitment to our wildlife heritage and sporting traditions. We include groups with a focus on fisheries, general wildlife groups and species-specific conservation organizations with a narrower focus.

The common denominator that brings us together is the shared knowledge that habitat is essential to abundant fish and wildlife resources, and the public sporting opportunity that comes with it. In fact, that's why the coalition was formed in 2015; to defend the Habitat Montana program and the numerous benefits it has for our state after years of attacks both in terms of the program, and its spending authority.

For that reason, we are writing to ask you to please veto SB 115: Establish acquisitions requiring land board consideration. This bill adds a layer of unneeded government bureaucracy into conservation easements under Habitat Montana, and threatens the future of this sterling program. Our organizations have opposed this bill throughout the session.

Landowners who make the effort to pursue an easement through Habitat Montana are making a deep commitment to conserving wildlife habitat, and sharing that land with Montana's hunters and anglers. This decades-long partnership between hunters and landowners through Habitat Montana conservation easements provides a strong tool for farmers and ranchers to secure their financial future while providing public hunting access for Montanans. The program is entirely funded by fees on hunting licenses, and it shows the deep commitment hunters have to working with landowners to benefit them, public access and our public wildlife.

SB 115 would subject landowners to an arbitrary process in which their ability to exercise their private property rights are in doubt. When the Legislature approved Habitat Montana, its intent was not to place more people not engaged in the work that goes into crafting an easement in charge of private property rights, nor was its intent to have these easements go before the Land Board.

As governor, you appoint members of the Fish and Wildlife Commission, and they must be approved by the state Senate. They are deeply engaged in land conservation projects throughout the process, and they put in the time to both understand and weigh the overall benefits of individual projects. Landowners deserve to know that their project will be completed. That's especially the case since they invest tens of thousands of dollars on these projects, including on legal review, estate planning and appraisals.

Please protect private property rights, hunter access and our premier conservation and access program. We respectfully ask that you veto SB 115.

Sincerely,

Montana Chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers

National Wildlife Federation

Ducks Unlimited

Montana Wildlife Federation

Pheasants Forever

Montana Sportsmen's Alliance

Orion, the Hunter's Institute

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation

The Wildlife Society

Montana Bowhunters Association

Mule Deer Foundation