



Protecting Montana's wildlife,
land, waters and hunting & fishing
heritage for future generations.

March 19, 2021

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

RE: Request for veto of SB 115, a bill requiring state Land Board approval for conservation easements under Habitat Montana

Dear Gov. Gianforte,

The Montana Wildlife Federation is our state's oldest and largest state-based wildlife conservation and sporting organization. We were formed in 1936 when hunters joined landowners to restore depleted wildlife in our great state. For 85 years we've worked on the complex issues surrounding wildlife, habitat and public access. Much of that work has involved extensive collaboration with private landowners, in recognition of the habitat they provide for big game, game birds and non-game wildlife species.

With that in mind, MWF respectfully asks that you veto SB 115, a bill requiring state Land Board approval for conservation easements under the Habitat Montana program. Habitat Montana is our state's premier conservation and access program. It was founded more than three decades ago when staff at Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks recognized the need for a stable funding source to pay for land conservation projects. It was spurred by a group of ranchers in the Ruby Valley who approached the agency asking that they purchase their summer grazing range. Today that's the Robb-Ledford Wildlife Management Area, an important winter range area that still supports cattle grazing as well as a large elk herd in winter.

Conservation easements under Habitat Montana have in the past gone to the state Land Board. But it was always a courtesy, and not a requirement. Landowners begin the lengthy and expensive process of working out the terms of an easement with FWP a couple years in advance. Many involve working out a grazing plan, the number of hunting days, and other complex aspects regarding public access and private property rights. These are hard and often delicate conversations that FWP staff has with landowners to hammer out agreements that work for their ranching operation, for the agency, for wildlife and for the hunters who fund these easements.

Professionals within Montana FWP consistently handle this well, but does so with oversight by the Fish and Wildlife Commission. That body, which is of course appointed by the governor and approved by the state Senate, takes the time and energy to review these potential projects from the get-go. Clearly, SB 115 undercuts the oversight authority of this Governor-appointed panel of wildlife experts and representatives of landowners.

It's difficult to see what role the state Land Board plays in this lengthy process, or what value they add. We have seen in the past projects stalled when they are rejected by the Land Board, with no sound justification for why. This will certainly discourage many landowners from even beginning the process of negotiating an easement with FWP, knowing that the completion of their easement is uncertain.

Governor Gianforte, we have applauded your public commitment to protecting Montana's way of life and increasing public access to lands and wildlife. Conservation easements under Habitat Montana keep working farms and ranches, and timberlands, in production. They conserve and protect from development important wildlife habitat. And they open access not only to those private lands, but almost always adjoining and inholdings of public lands. These easements are good for our agriculture and timber industries, good for our wildlife and good for the hunters of Montana. Let's continue to allow Habitat Montana to serve as our best conservation and access program, and build the relationship between hunters and landowners.

For those reasons, we respectfully ask you to veto SB 115.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tom Puchlerz". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Tom Puchlerz
President