

This proposal will help diversify the regional economy

Feel free to use this guidance to encourage BLM to properly consider and analyze the proposal's impact on diversifying the regional economy. Gradually expanding the size of the bison herd will have a minimal impact on traditional agriculture, but can help diversify the region's economy. American Prairie Reserve is already a significant contributor to the local economy through direct job creation and investments in the region. That, combined with new tourism and visitation, can help offset ongoing economic changes and fluctuations in the region.

BLM should analyze the proposals minimal impact on traditional agriculture

Agriculture has been and will continue to be the primary contributor to the economy in Northeast Montana. The proposed action has little influence on long-term economic and demographic trends that already impact that way of life. For example, total cattle numbers in the region can fluctuate by as much as 6% per year, driven by much more significant events including market conditions, weather, and the individual choices of ranchers. USDA studies show a steady annual increase in agriculture land values in Montana and the USA, with no indicate that Reserve land purchases have contributed to an increase in regional land values that exceed the increases being seen in MT and the USA.

The proposed request to transition from cattle to bison would affect less than 33,000 leased public Animal Unit Months (AUMs) on BLM and State grazing leases. That is enough pasture to feed a maximum of 2,750 cows annually with a suckling calf by their side for a portion of the year, which is a small percentage of total cattle in the region. In addition, not all cattle in these counties are dependent on leased public land. About 40% of western cattle graze part of the year on public land and only 19% of America's beef graze on public land part of the year. American Prairie Reserve is proposing to convert from cattle to bison on about 5% of all the leased public (BLM and State) AUMs in the five counties affected.

BLM should analyze how the proposal will help grow the positive economic footprint of the Reserve

American Prairie Reserve is already a significant contributor to the local economy and is creating jobs in the region. To date, the Reserve has contributed in excess of \$36 million to the local area economy, including land purchases, staff wages, taxes, tourism activities, equipment and supplies, and payments to local contractors. In the last three years, the Reserve has invested \$5.7 million in the project area, not including land purchases or related fees and services. The Reserve also contributes to the local economy by hosting hunters, nature tourists, researchers, students, and other groups. To date, the Reserve has contributed another \$28M+ to the Montana economy outside the APR region, which does not include land purchases or related fees and services.

In addition, the Reserve offers incentive payments to ranchers who voluntarily participate in wildlife-friendly ranching practices through our Wild Sky Program. Montana ranchers enrolled in the program have been paid in excess of \$200,000. The Wild Sky Program also spent more than \$35,000 on contractors, services, and in support of collaborating organizations in the Reserve region, and an additional \$20,000 on Montana contractors and services outside the region.

BLM should analyze how the proposal helps diversify the regional economy

A recent study by the University of Montana concluded that traditional agricultural production and the growth of amenity-fueled outdoor recreation and visitation can work together to strengthen the overall economic outlook in the region. This is particularly important because the region experienced a loss of \$109.5M in agriculture cash receipts between 1970 and 2016. Fostering and growing tourism and visitation to the region long-term can help offset some of the changes and fluctuations happening to the traditional agricultural economic base.

Montana's outdoor recreation economy is a significant and growing industry in Montana, but to date, those benefits have not been as pronounced in Missouri River country. In 2015, non-resident visitor expenditures in the region were \$113 million, which represents just 28% of total visitation expenditures in Southeast Montana and only 9% for Glacier Country. Approval of the proposed action will allow the Reserve to address that disparity over time, by helping to increase recreation and tourism-based expenditures in the region. A recent University of Montana study said if the longer-term vision of the Reserve were realized, nonresident spending could increase 67% from 2015 levels, and yield \$56 million in additional economic output and nearly 700 jobs.

More visitation will result in an influx of revenue for motels, restaurants, caterers, sporting goods stores, gas stations, outfitters, and others who service visitors and associated programs. Increasing natural, amenity-based visitation also can help local communities attract and retain people, from retirees to young business professionals and entrepreneurs, and ultimately diversify the economy of Northeastern Montana. Future visitation to the region also will benefit the Fort Belknap reservation and their goals of increasing tourism and public visitation.