



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
APRIL 8, 2021

AFTER HB 677, LET'S COME TO THE TABLE RATHER THAN RESORT TO GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

By Alison Fox

The Montana State House Agriculture Committee last week voted unanimously to table HB 677, a bill that would have prohibited certain nonprofit organizations from buying agricultural land.

This proposed legislation would have been a brazen violation of private property rights. It would have inserted government in between willing buyers and sellers. It proposed a dangerous use of state power: restricting the property rights of an entire class of landowners simply because the writers do not agree with the choices that one landowner is making. Plus, it was unconstitutional and would not have survived a legal challenge. It is because of all this that HB 677 was rightfully tabled.

American Prairie understands there are real regional concerns that led to the introduction of HB 677. During a committee hearing for the bill, lawmakers on both sides of the aisle frequently asked the sponsor if there was a better path forward.

The answer is yes. Collaborating and working together to solve problems is better for all Montanans.

A promising example is American Prairie's recent agreement with the Phillips County Conservation District. This agreement was the hard-won result of constructive talks with American Prairie, the Conservation District, and livestock industry representatives. Working diligently alongside these parties, the American Prairie team agreed to an expanded disease management program for our bison herd, and created a new framework to share more information more frequently with the Conservation District.

That entire process helped us better understand the concerns of our neighbors, ensured that all sides were heard, and created more certainty for everyone. It is a testament to American Prairie's sincere commitment to work through tough issues and find real solutions.

We also have a long history of supporting private, market-based approaches to conservation that keep working lands working. We partner with ranchers to provide financial incentives for wildlife-friendly land management practices, and we currently have multi-year grazing lease agreements with more than a dozen local ranchers on many of our properties in Phillips, Valley, Fergus, Blaine, Chouteau, and Petroleum counties.



We will continue to purchase land when it makes sense for us as willing buyers, engaging with willing sellers. Across the state, nonprofits including American Prairie have used voluntary land purchases to do things like keep lands working, expand public access, and safeguard outdoor options for all Montanans. American Prairie is opening up new opportunities for hunting, fishing, hiking, and camping, and more.

Montana's hunting community in particular would have been limited by HB 677. By cutting off certain buyers, this legislation could have accelerated the trend of new landowners purchasing land and closing it off to the public for good.

We are doing the opposite. In 2020, American Prairie included 64,000 acres of our private deeded land in Montana's block management program for hunting. We opened up access to more than 3,000 acres of state and federal land that has been inaccessible for decades. We hosted a record number of Montanans on our properties who were looking to explore this landscape during the pandemic, and we'd love to see even more Montanans discovering this truly special part of the state.

To the many nonprofit representatives and other fellow landowners who stood up against this bill: thank you. We hope that the defeat of HB 677 can create a path forward that includes bringing stakeholders to the table to create solutions that work for all Montanans.

Alison Fox is American Prairie Reserve's CEO

About American Prairie Reserve

American Prairie Reserve's vision is to create a vast and collaboratively-managed prairie destination that serves as a fully functioning ecosystem for wildlife, and offers visitors permanent access to the landscape that shaped our nation's character. When complete, the Reserve will be larger than Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks combined, and will support wildlife species that historically called the Great Plains home. Already open to the public for recreation including camping and hunting, the Reserve offers visitors an opportunity to connect with nature on a truly grand scale. Learn more at americanprairie.org.