

BUFFALOED

Big Green plans of Big Park under the Big Sky.

By Dave Skinner

In our Summer 2012 issue, Pat Hansen updated readers on the shape-shifting politics behind the purchase of the Spotted Dog ranch by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, and the efforts of Montana's sporting and ranching communities to keep MFWP from hijacking Spotted Dog as a bison quarantine facility.

However, when denied Spotted Dog, the agency responded in March by moving 65 quarantined bison out of the reach of state law, with no public notice and only a last-minute Memorandum of Understanding signed late on a Friday. By the following Monday, and again two days later before the Montana courts had a chance to respond, 61 bison had survived the 500-mile trip from the southeastern part of the state near Yellowstone to the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in northeastern Montana.

The Buffalo Commons

In the early 1980s, EarthFirst! founder Dave Foreman began advocating "rewilding"—basically the destruction of modern society where possible. Related concepts included early proposals for a "Big Open" to be created from failed ranches on the high plains.

In 1987, two college professors from Rutgers University in New Jersey, Deborah and Frank Popper, borrowed rewilding and published "The Great Plains, Dust to Dust," an article that flat-out wrongly predicted the "unsuccessfully privatized" Great Plains would, within a generation, "become almost totally depopulated." Therefore, the Poppers proposed that "the region be returned to its original pre-white state, that it be, in effect, deprivatized," to "reestablish what we would call the Buffalo Commons."

"Flyover" people rejected the Poppers' proposal for what it was—crazy. But back in town, academics, professional environmentalists and, most critically, environmental funders took the Poppers' concept to heart. "The Great Plains, Dust to Dust" inspired a 1992 Pulitzer-nominated book about the Poppers, "Where the Buffalo Roam." In 2003—a generation later, by the way—*Planning* magazine rated "Dust to Dust" as one of



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the 25 most significant articles it had published, and high-muckety-muck *New York Times*' columnist Nicholas Kristoff declared the Buffalo Commons "the boldest idea in America today."

Turning Ideas Into Reality

Since the mid-1990s, major environmental groups including the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) have boldly spent millions working closely together to make the Buffalo Commons a reality. But these conservation nonprofits are not alone. Besides many other Green groups—such as Defenders of Wildlife (DOW), and both the National and Montana Wildlife federations (NWF and MWF)—WCS and WWF have, through the reconstituted American Bison Society (ABS), successfully enlisted many federal and state entities. For example, the most recent ABS national conference was held March 2011 in Tulsa, Okla. Co-sponsors with WCS were Linden Trust for Conservation, the National Park Service (NPS), the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS), and World Wildlife Fund-U.S.

The boldest step taken to date is WWF's 2001 creation of the American Prairie Foundation (APF) as its "land trust partner" in Montana. APF's goal: Buying up private ranches, and then converting associated federal grazing leases from cattle to buffalo. The area chosen, Montana's sparsely populated

Blaine, Phillips and Valley counties, is not random. WWF, TNC and WCS share information through jointly developed, sophisticated mapping systems aimed at finding combinations of demographics, land use, land ownership, protection status, and biological attributes that present the highest conservation potential.

In 2005, APF released its first 16 buffalo, reaching 215 bison by spring 2010, and adding 71 more early in 2012. After 12 years, APF controls at least 12 base properties in far southern Phillips County comprising about 38,000 acres of private land with grazing rights on 83,000 acres of associated public grazing leases, converted from cows to bison on a one-to-one basis. So far, APF has raised \$40 million with an eye toward \$450 million. By 2010, APF had \$20.5 million in real estate, up impressively from \$4 million in 2007. MFWP documents reveal APF intent to assemble a reserve larger than Yellowstone National Park's 2.2 million acres—"500,000 purchased, deeded acres to connect three million acres of various public lands managed by the BLM, FWS and state of Montana."

Would 3.5 million acres be enough? Nope. In 2004, WWF helped fund "Ocean of Grass," a quasi-academic study of "Conserving the Great Plains." Bottom line? "By 2020...27 million acres...including two or more areas of several million acres each," which remains far short of the ideal.

APF's millions had already raised local hackles as the nonprofit could, and does, outbid for-profit ranchers. But because APF was privately funded (although tax exempt), the grumbling was limited. However, the grumbling turned into active opposition in 2010 when word leaked that WWF was secretly pushing the Obama administration hard to put APF first in line for federal "Treasured Landscapes" money from the Land & Water Conservation Fund.

Tom Depuydt farms and ranches with his brothers 20 miles north of Saco, 20 miles from Canada's Grasslands National Park. "When APF first got going," Tom says, "I was feeling glad our place wasn't in south Phillips. But when the Salazar memo came out, along

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with the emails asking for funds for a 3.5 million-acre park, that's when it really dawned on me."

The Ungulate Adjusters

Another partner in the Buffalo Commons seems to be Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. In January 2011, at the same time the Montana Legislature was fighting over allowing bison at Spotted Dog, MFWP commissioners approved the start of work on a "Statewide Bison Management Plan" environmental impact statement.

The alternatives for a state herd run from zero to a "preferred" herd size of a thousand was apparently based on a 2010 Park Service report by two federal scientists. Peter A. Dratch of NPS and Peter J.P. Gogan of the U.S. Geological Survey recommended a minimum bison herd size of "over 1,000." Possible actions to achieve this size include "adjusting the abundance of other ungulate populations, and increasing bison carrying capacity by range expansion through identification of neighbors willing to have bison on their lands."

Ungulates—including cows, bison, elk, deer and antelope—are split-hooved ani-

mals. Now, which abundances would be adjusted? Dratch and Gogan concluded, "Most importantly, management of bison must be refocused to the landscape scale, where natural selection can work to preserve variation." Gogan, by the way, joined WCS's ABS effort early on, helping co-author the so-called Vermejo Statement in 2006.

Is Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks a willing partner in all this? Well, at least two high-level FWP retirees have drawn paychecks from WCS, APF or MFW. Furthermore, of the five MFWP commissioners (all appointed by Gov. Brian Schweitzer), two—Ron Moody and Shane Colton—are members of Montana Wildlife Federation or an affiliate.

In the Courts

In a nutshell, MFWP sought to move the bison to the Fort Peck Indian Reservation primarily to prevent having a worthy program wrecked by an environmentalist lawsuit filed by Western Watersheds Project (WWP) in March 2010.

In 2005, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and MFWP began a joint experiment on 100 bison calves from Yellowstone. Because Yellowstone bison

Buffalo in Yellowstone. Since the mid-1990s, major environmental groups have boldly spent millions working closely together to make the Buffalo Commons a reality. To "adjust ungulate populations," the cattle would have to go.

(and elk) are hopelessly contaminated with brucellosis thanks to Park Service stupidity and neglect, the plan was to raise and breed Yellowstone-sourced bison "reliably negative for brucellosis and suitable for the establishment of new tribal and public herds."

As the herd grew, APHIS and MFWP needed more pasture. "Rancher" Ted Turner agreed to house some of the quarantine test bison on his Green Ranch west of Bozeman. In return, Joe Maurier, MFWP director, agreed that Turner would keep 75 percent of the offspring calves to add to his private herd.

Outraged that a capitalist, even a globalist, might profit, Western Watersheds sued to nullify the deal. If WWP won, the test buffalo would be hauled off for slaughter or returned to the park and re-diseased—an utter waste of time and money spent on these unlucky animals. Losing those animals would also mess up MFWP's plans for a state wild bison herd. In its September 2011 draft Environmental Assessment (EA) covering the

planned transfers to Fort Peck and Fort Belknap, MFWP stated that the environmental consequences of leaving the study bison in quarantine on Turner's ground are minimal. But MFWP also mentioned WWP's lawsuit—therefore, "MFWP believes it is prudent to relocate those bison if possible to public or tribal lands for the remainder of the monitoring period." Adding to the pressure on MFWP was a pending lease expiration on the pasture where the 65 bison were held before transport.

How to short-circuit WWP? How to vacate the leased pasture in time? Schlump the case subject matter (bison) to someplace where state law doesn't apply—like an Indian reservation! Or...federal lands!

Northeast Montana producers already nervous about Big Green's big plans read the tea leaves. If MFWP moved the quarantine buffalo, then all the disease and political problems facing ranchers in and near the Yellowstone hot zone would be in their laps.

Therefore, in January 2012, Citizens for Balanced Use, state Sen. Rick Ripley, the Valley County commissioners, United Property Owners, Missouri River Stewards, and seven individual ranchers filed an unsworn complaint before state District Judge John Mc-

Keon in Malta seeking to prevent MFWP from shipping the buffalo.

The deadline for response from MFWP was March 9, fatefully extended to March 23. But late on Friday, March 16, precisely a week before MFWP's responsive pleading was due, MFWP and Fort Peck representatives signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The next Monday, the bison were in Fort Peck's pasture.

Was it a sneak move? Despite denials from MFWP and Gov. Schweitzer's office, even Matthew Brown of the Associated Press concluded: "The March 19 shipment of bison to Fort Peck came without prior public notice and during a snowstorm—a maneuver by the Schweitzer administration and tribes that was meant to get the bison to Fort Peck ahead of a possible court injunction."

In McKeon's courtroom, defendants (MFWP, joined by intervenors Defenders and NWF) affirmed suspicions by arguing that McKeon had no jurisdiction because the dispute involved reservation activities and the tribes could not be made a party to the case. On May 9, McKeon blocked Montana state officials from arranging any further transfers of Yellowstone bison until the lawsuit was decided, while allowing the quarantine buff-

to stay at Fort Peck. He also ruled that any future bison movements involving MFWP must be supported by a formal process including a local management plan, plus public review and comment.

MFWP, joined by DOW and NWF, appealed McKeon's restraining order to the Montana Supreme Court on May 21. Among other things, DOW has been funding both fencing and grazing retirements on the Fort Peck and other reservations. In her March 21 press release hailing the arrival of the bison at Fort Peck, Jamie Rappaport Clark, Defenders' president and Clinton-era U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service director, gave thanks to "the Augustyn Foundation, the Steele-Reese Foundation, Liz Claiborne Art Ortenberg Foundation, and McIntosh Foundation for their generous support, which helped make the bison relocation possible." RANGE dug through federal tax forms and confirmed \$105,000 in payments to DOW in 2010 from these generous supporters. We'll have to wait until at least October 2012 for 2011's numbers.

Furthermore, when the bison were shipped to Fort Peck, according to Judge McKeon's temporary restraining order, "[National Wildlife Federation] covered the costs of these movements."

The Indians

Without refighting the Indian wars, the fact remains that bison are culturally critical to Native Americans, especially Plains tribes. RANGE was unable to sit down with Robert Magnan, Fort Peck Fish & Game director, but back west at Fort Belknap, RANGE enjoyed a discussion and pickup ride with Mark L. Azure, Fort Belknap Fish & Wildlife director.

Recently retired from 22 years in the U.S. Army, the squared-away Azure explains that Fort Belknap has had buffalo since 1974 when stock from the National Bison Range in western Montana was brought to it. Wind Cave buffalo are also part of the mix. Azure recalls with a smile the day buffalo returned to Fort Belknap, almost exactly 100 years after the last tribal hunt. "For us, it was like the best kind of Christmas, opening the box, and getting exactly what you'd asked for."

Azure makes it clear that Fort Belknap's approach to buffalo is centered more on meeting cultural requirements than on tourism or income. "We don't advertise," he explains, but the Fort Belknap tribes are more than happy to accommodate visitors wishing to view their herd, buy meat, or





Environmentalists will only be happy when this scene of Beaver Creek near Content includes wild, free-roaming buffalo. But locals are happy with the way things are. As Nancy Ereaux puts it, “Please, please, leave us alone.”

hunt. “We aim to please. If someone buys a tag and, for example, wants to hunt in fringe buckskin with black powder, we’ll set them up.” Bow hunting is especially popular. Azure explains that the experience is “like stepping back in time 200 years.”

Nevertheless, the Snake Butte herd is being managed to meet tribal desires first and foremost. “It’s up to us how we do things.” When asked how Yellowstone bison might fit, Azure explains: “Of course we are looking for the best possible genetics,” including good genetics without brucellosis, as a selling point. “We want to be able to market that product as we choose.” That is, if the tribes decide to market any buffalo product of any kind to anyone. Regarding the Buffalo Commons, Azure feels such an outcome would be “nice, but that could be at least 25 years, if ever,” and for now it’s just talk.

The battle over MFWP’s shipment to

Fort Peck is an especially sore point for tribal interests. Robert Magnan has repeatedly pointed out at least 56 bison ranches in Montana, including Ted Turner’s, all of which are free to trade, sell and transfer bison.

Azure also hints of frustration as he points out how MFWP’s transfer of buffalo to Fort Peck generated a firestorm of controversy and a court injunction, while the American Prairie Foundation concurrently imported 71 new bison “without a peep from anybody. You didn’t read anything in the news about that.”

Granted, adding new bison to tribal herds is not a big deal. Fort Peck already hosts a 200-strong herd, while Fort Belknap hosts 450 buffalo in its 22,000-acre Snake Butte pastures. Thirty or so additional buffalo are chump change—the problem, of course, is that neither private buffalo herds nor the existing tribal herds are under a brucellosis quarantine. Nonetheless, perceptions of a double standard linger.

Fort Belknap leaders and citizens remain hopeful they’ll get Yellowstone buffalo. If the

injunction is lifted, or MFWP wins the lawsuit, Fort Belknap’s share of the test bison is planned to be moved from Fort Peck, then kept separate from its existing herd until at least 2017. “We’re not going to give up,” Azure declares. “We’re in this for the long haul.”

The Cowboys

Since *RANGE* cares about ranchers, you’re probably wondering what the cowboys say about all this.

First and foremost, when it comes to the issue of tribal buffalo management and ownership, not a single person *RANGE* visited with objects, especially not the plaintiffs against MFWP. Citizens for Balanced Use et al. plaintiff counsel Cory Swanson told *The New York Times*: “The tribes will get the buffalo. It’s just a question of how we get there.”

As Sierra Holt (see “The Gene War,” page 50) points out: “The tribes have owned good bison for decades, and things have more or less worked out. Now MFWP wants us to believe that the tribes can’t handle bison without the state holding their hands? Ha!”



American Prairie Foundation has installed miles of brand-new fencing on its properties. While nice—with, as APF manager Dennis Lingohr explained to RANGE, a 7,000-volt wire—it's not the usual seven-foot woven wire.

Things aren't perfect. Curt McCann farms and ranches at both Harlem and next to Fort Belknap, and testified in McKeon's court about past breakouts from Fort Belknap. Jim Robinson, who runs cattle from near Second Butte in southwest Phillips, explains: "We had a buffalo from a private ranch down around Jordan, 80 miles as the crow flies to the south. It climbed down, swam the reservoir, and climbed back out of the Breaks to get here. Then in the mid-1980s, a Snake Butte buffalo got out and wound up down here; that's 70 miles the other way." Even so, Robinson states, "I don't think anybody has any objection whatsoever to the tribes having bison, as long as they are controlled."

The Fort Peck MOU grants the tribe ownership of the quarantine bison after the final test period ends (successfully, with "clean" animals) in March 2017. But there's a catch: "[F]or the purposes of future bison conservation on other tribal or public lands, up to 25 percent of the progeny will be made

available [to MFWP] upon request." Veterinarian and rancher Rose Stoneberg is blunt about the import of that holdback clause, saying, "This is their foothold!" Is it? Yep. Defenders' Jamie Clark crowed that the bison shipment to Fort Peck "paves the way for restoring bison to other areas across the region and revitalizing America's vast prairie ecosystems in the years to come."

With talk like that, there's little confidence that MFWP or the federal agencies will adhere to any bison herd goal, be it "trial" or 1,000 or more, especially given Montana's lousy track record with restored wolves. Clyde Robinson, Jim's brother, explains, "There's just no trust in anything the agencies, especially MFWP, are saying about bison."

Even if there were trust, retired career MFWP biologist Ron Stoneberg points out: "Now, how many wolf pairs were we told we'd have—30 in three states, right? Twenty years later, MFWP has absolutely no control of the wolf problem. You have federal law, outside environmental litigants like Defend-



American Prairie Foundation buffalo turn tail toward the Little Rockies. In 2006, American Bison Society Vermejo Workshop conferees issued the so-called Vermejo Statement: "Over the next century, the ecological recovery of the North American bison will occur when multiple large herds move freely across extensive landscapes within all major habitats of their historic range, interacting in ecologically significant ways with the fullest possible set of other native species, and inspiring, sustaining and connecting human cultures." This statement was agreed to in 2006 by employees of nongovernment organizations, including World Wildlife Fund, Wildlife Conservation Society, The Nature Conservancy; tribes, including the Lower Brule Sioux and Yukon Athabaskan Council; and public entities, including Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Alaska Fish & Game, the U.S. Geological Survey, and the National Park Service. Now that's teamwork!

ers and Western Watersheds...buffalo will be no different.”

Perri Jacobs, who ranches on the Dry Fork with husband Lee, feels similarly. “Nothing they put in any park plan will actually effectively limit the number of bison,” she says, raising the issue of whether one park would be enough. Tom Depuydt figures those envisioning one park would have no problem adding another and says, “The proponents aren’t talking openly about it, but I believe they’re sure thinking about it.”

Would a park bring a tourism bonanza? Ron Stoneberg thinks not: “We actually had a sit-down around this table with the APF people. They seemed pretty proud to have 400 guests at their yurt camp in 2010. Well, we checked, and in the 2010 hunting season, we had around 520 sportsmen sign into our Block Management Unit. That was just us, on just one unit.” There are hundreds of hunting Block Management Units in the three counties that would terminate with a park designation.

While area ranchers rank amongst Montana’s most supportive regarding hunting, nobody had anything good to say about self-titled “hunter and angler” groups like National Wildlife Federation and its affiliates. In May, Vicki Hofeldt traveled statewide from the home place in Chinook she shares with husband Dustin to FWP’s bison-plan scoping meetings, an exhausting but educational experience. “I was struck by the so-called ‘sportsmen’ who kept talking about wanting to hunt bison,” she says. “Sorry, but last I checked, the Fort Belknap tribe offers hunting, as do other Indian tribes. Ted Turner offers hunting, as do hundreds of other private bison ranches. MFWP offers a bison hunt at Yellowstone, too.”

As for replacement tourists, Tom Depuydt has found some rather expensive “safari” offerings involving stays at APF’s yurt camp (the bargain is \$2,190 for seven days), and couldn’t help but notice the dates are early summer (after gumbo but before the heat and mosquitoes get serious) and early fall (after the first cold snap but before the first blizzards).

Zortman Motel proprietor Candy Kalal has also checked out the competition, concluding, “Those aren’t *my* customers.”

As for the economy that already exists, Nancy Ereaux points out, “Phillips County produces enough food to feed 2.3 million people, never mind Valley and Blaine County, or the rest of Montana.” Dustin Hofeldt



The day RANGE visited rancher Curt McCann, news broke that Sen. Mike Enzi of Wyoming is introducing a bill naming bison America’s National Mammal. McCann was not amused. “Trillions in debt, and THIS is what our Senate is doing?” Sure enough, this is the Wildlife Conservation Society’s doing. “What better way to celebrate the bison’s remarkable history in U.S. culture than to make it the national mammal,” asks WCS’s “Vote Bison” press release. If the bill passes, good luck trying to deny a national icon its very own national park. For some strange reason, Montana senators Max Baucus and Jon Tester are not yet co-sponsors.

warns that while the national discussion has been on energy security, “the United States has a lot of foreign policy leverage because we are so food-secure. We need every acre we have available for growing food.”

Lesley Robinson, Jim’s wife and a Phillips County commissioner, recognizes why Phillips County seems to be center-mass for a Buffalo Commons. It is the most sparsely populated of the three (3,904 people, average 1.32 per square mile), with the highest proportion of public ownership: “Phillips County is 51 percent state and federal, 49 percent private.” As an elected official, she says, “Of course I am concerned about what would happen to our tax base if a park or monument is designated.”

What about the American Prairie Foundation reserve? “APF is a nonprofit, but they are still paying property taxes.” But, what if APF isn’t flipped into a government park, stays private, and is somehow successful? Lesley Robinson says, “APF is not going to really replace what ranchers contribute.” When asked if she has concerns aside from her job, she pauses. “Personally, I’m concerned about losing our community.”

Tough Landscape, Tough People

Commissioner Robinson’s community encompasses tough country, with people to match. Northeastern Montana is not scenic or beautiful in the usual sense. Both weather and landscape are huge and mostly harsh, prone to turn killer with no notice. It’s not ground for the careless tourist, or careless anyone. Ron Stoneberg explains, “This country has to grow on you.” And given time, especially a lifetime or across generations, it does.

“The only thing we have going for us is productive land,” explains Curt McCann. “We are simply not going to rape and pillage.” McCann explains that Stephenie Ambrose Tubbs, daughter of late Lewis-and-Clark historian Stephen Ambrose (“Undaunted Courage”), is on APF’s board of directors. McCann and his neighbors have not only studied the journals, but have also lived four, five, six generations where Lewis and Clark passed through. He says the common wisdom that the Northwest was a wildlife paradise is unfaithful to reality. “People like to forget Lewis and Clark came up the river bottoms” and starved, parched, or both, in the uplands.

The high ground held little to no year-round water until retention dams were put in upon settlement. No dams, no wildlife. Then there is active vegetation management: “We build hunting and wildlife habitat every day,”



This derelict sign west of Wolf Point hints that somebody tried to attract “buffalo viewing” tourists on U.S. Hwy. 2, without much success.

declares Dustin Hofeldt, tempered with the understanding that “this country punishes you if you don’t do things right.”

Darrell and Vicki Olson checked the records. “On our place, private and BLM, there are 56 original homesteads,” Darrell says. “We’ve built a legacy here, and now Gov. Schweitzer or whoever wants to use this to create a legacy for themselves?”

A few days later, the governor answered Darrell via *The New York Times*: “A hundred years from now, no one is going to know who the governor of Montana was who brought the buffalo back,” he said. “But when they hoist me down into my place on the prairie, with the tall grass blowing and the bison walking over my grave, I’ll know.”

Brewing a Fight

Schweitzer might not get his legacy. In late 2010, the Valley County Resource Use Committee contracted with Sierra Holt, Ph.D., and her husband Jason, who has a doctorate in mathematics, to conduct a multiple-topic

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Clyde Robinson, shown here with wife Iris, isn’t smiling about the prospect of free-roaming buffalo in his backyard. “They just can cause too much havoc.”

economic survey of 200 randomly selected Valley County businesses and residents. When asked to favor or oppose a “wild, free-roaming bison herd,” 79 percent of respondents opposed the idea, 67 percent “strongly.”

Opposition is likely higher in Blaine and Phillips counties, with the exception of the Fort Belknap reservation, because Valley County has gas-patch and railroad jobs making it less dependent on farming and ranching. Also, meetings packed with opponents and petitions with hundreds of local names in opposition have greeted every proposal for a monument or park. The implication is clear: Montana’s Buffalo Commons has almost no local support.

World Wildlife Fund researcher Curt Freese has tried to sanitize the discussion by writing such Orwellian prose as, “The major challenge is primarily a socioeconomic one of securing sufficiently large areas of land,” while skipping discussion about how such lands might be “secured.” APF has secured some land, possibly from willing sellers given

THE GENE WAR

The official version of events—the, um, “scientific consensus”—has been that Yellowstone bison have the purest genetics as well as the most diverse genetic makeup. Get rid of the brucellosis, and Yellowstone is the best source herd.

But down in the Timber Creek draw, 50 winding miles from pavement, the story’s different. Ron Stoneberg is a retired Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologist who, among other things, shares membership in the Montana Range Days Hall of Fame with his veterinarian wife, Rose. Daughter Sierra Dawn Stoneberg Holt has a doctorate in biology and she married Jason Holt, who has a doctorate in mathematics. Ron says, “The talk about genetic purity or superiority is a political smokescreen.”

Sierra Dawn, whose doctorate work focused on DNA genetic sequencing, is uncomfortable with the current fad of selecting bison to breed or cull on the basis of DNA sequencing. Like thousands of ranchers, she has seen firsthand the results when “best genes” fail in real-world conditions. “If it thrives, it is a fit bison. If it has strong, healthy, intelligent offspring, it is a good bison. It does not need the blessing of some geneticist from Connecticut.”

Even worse, Yellowstone bison might not be so superior in the end. Stoneberg Holt pointed out a February 2011 paper in *Nature Proceedings* by Thomas H. Pringle, Ph.D., warning that 145 of 179 Yellowstone bison tested had mitochondrial disease. That’s 81 percent. Simply put, mitochondrial disease impairs food-energy conversion at the cellular level. Afflicted animals are basically wimps. However, mitochondrial disease is noninfectious and inherited strictly from mothers. Bulls do not pass on the defect.

Yet Stoneberg Holt is not ready to jump on the mitochondrial bandwagon. While Pringle is a much-published molecular biologist and Ph.D. mathematician specializing in vertebrate comparative genomics, Stoneberg Holt emphasizes that his paper, “Widespread Mitochondrial Disease in North American Bison,” has not been through the vital process of peer review.

After a little digging in search of a peered article, *RANGE* found that Pringle—in a declaration for Western Watersheds in a lawsuit brought against the federal government in early 2011—stated, “I serve as a scientific advisor for...Western Watersheds Project.” Oh, great...

“If Dr. Pringle rushed his results to publi-

cation because of a lawsuit, that casts some doubts on his objectivity and credibility,” warns Stoneberg Holt. “But if legitimate peer review finds Pringle’s conclusions are correct? Well, it sure makes it hard to claim that those Yellowstone bison are genetically superior to the other 495,000 out there, now doesn’t it?”—*Dave Skinner*



Sierra Dawn Stoneberg Holt with future doctorate-holders Zora and Linden Holt.



Jim and Lesley Robinson at home at Beauchamp Creek with the Little Rockies as background.

a generous enough offer. But most of the willingness is of the no-other-option class.

“Willing seller? No, no, no.” Mike Ereaux says. “It’s not about money; it’s about quality...quality of life. I think about places like New York City and, well, they just don’t have enough money to make us willing sellers.”

Could Vicki Hofeldt be bought off? “Willing seller? People don’t understand the roots we have.”

Mike Ereaux explains that he and his neighbors feel they’re under a three-pronged attack: “First, there was the secret Salazar memo and the implied threat of a monu-

ment. Second, we have the bison, whether that’s APF, the tribes, the refuge, the Park Service in Yellowstone. Third, we now have the feds claiming reserved water rights for wildlife.”

The reservation claims are stunningly disproportionate. One affecting the Ereauxes and Olsons reserves 342 acre-feet for wildlife, leaving the Double O Ranch .62 acre-feet for livestock. Really. RANGE was shown several other claims with the same 99-to-1 “share.”

Dustin Hofeldt brings up a fourth prong. “Western Watersheds has begun challenging



Mike Ereaux and Darrell Olson. Seriously, do these guys look like willing sellers?



Vicki and Dustin Hofeldt run several operations in the region from their base near Chinook, and have become active against the “Buffalo Commons” crusade. A fifth-generation producer, Dustin wonders, “If Montana is ‘the last best place,’ then why in heck do people come in here wanting to change everything?”

grazing lease renewals,” he says.

Nancy Ereaux grumbles: “We have to keep track of all these things, go to all these meetings, and still do all our ranch work. Sometimes I feel like we have our backs against the wall and a target on our chests.”

But for all the frustration, there is determination to prevail in the long run. As Vicki Olson says, “We come from tough stock,” having weathered everything nature and the markets could throw, and survived. Those prone to giving up easily are long gone, leaving the “last best place” with, as logger Bruce Vincent says, Montana’s “last best people.”

May they hang tough...Montana tough. ■

Dave Skinner roams freely from Flathead County, Mont.

Editor’s Note: As we went to press, RANGE learned that Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, at Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer’s request, issued a “Directive on the Placement of Yellowstone Bison” on May 12 concerning “the relocation of the bison to suitable federal or tribal lands,” as in “lands managed by DOI in Montana.” Agency staff were directed to “begin planning to relocate” by Dec. 1, 2012. This directive, addressed to seven agency heads, wasn’t leaked until at least late June.



Just four of the folks who help Phillips County feed 2.3 million fellow Americans: Lee, Perri, Dolores, and Francis Jacobs.

BUFFALOED

Big Green plans of Big Park under the Big Sky.

By Dave Skinner

THE LINKS

WCS Potential Bison Recovery Areas map

http://headwaterseconomics.org/bison/bison_recov_all.jpg

WCS "Second Chance" paper

<http://www.americanbisonsocietyonline.org/Portals/7/Freese%20et%20al%202007%20-%20Second%20chance%20for%20the%20plains%20bison.pdf>

ABS Vermejo Statement

http://www.buffalofieldcampaign.org/legal/esacitations/Sanderson_et_al_The_Ecological_Future_of_the_North_American_Bison-Conceiving_Long-Term_Large-Scale_Conservation_of_Wildlife.pdf

Grist interview with Mike Phillips

<http://grist.org/article/phillips/full/>

From Dust to Dust, the Poppers' Buffalo Commons paper

<http://www.lacusveris.com/The%20Hi-Line%20and%20the%20Yellowstone%20Trail/The%20Buffalo%20Commons/From%20Dust%20to%20Dust.shtml>

Montana FWP/Fort Peck Tribes MOU

fwp.mt.gov/fwpDoc.html?id=55164

APF's high-roller donor list

http://americanprairie.org/about/annual_reports/Benefactors.pdf

Linden paper on how to coordinate high rollers and grab government money

<http://lindentrust.org/pdfs/2011-07-13-Project-Finance-for-Permanence-Report.pdf>

World Wildlife Fund list of Northern Great Plains publications

<http://www.worldwildlife.org/what/wherewework/ngp/publications.html>

Judge John McKeon's Preliminary Injunction

<http://balanceduse.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/CBU-bison-lawsuit-DV2012-1ORDERGRANTINGPRELIMINARYINJUNCTION1.pdf>