

Save the Cowboy, Stop the APR! What does this mean?

Written by Dana Darlington | March 26, 2019



Dana Darlington is a leader with the credentials to explain this complicated answer...

Big Sandy, MT - We have all seen the colorful banners posted on roadsides, near ranch entries, and even in the windows of town businesses. A cowboy sits on horseback in front of a sunset with the words "Save the Cowboy, Stop the APR" emblazoned across the sky. Picturesque to say the least, but what does it really mean? Why must we stop the APR to save the

cowboy? This is the question recently posed to me, Dana Darlington, and as current President of North Central Stockgrowers, the current chairman of the Big Sandy Conservation District, past chairman of the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council, past vice-chair of the BLM RAC, I believe I have some credibility to answer this question.

There are two distinct issues that the American Prairie Reserve (APR) brings that cause conflict in the region. The first is their widely publicized goal to create a bison preserve in the Northern Great Plains of Montana for wild, free-roaming bison. To fully understand why bison creates such a rub with the local communities, let's look back 20+ years at the history of this region.

In 1998, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and US National Park Service formed a Bison Conservation and Management Working Group. They met annually to discuss culling practices, wildlife health, and to share information about the herds of bison that were already established on federal land. One of their first actions was to develop a list of wildlife refuges and national parks, including Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge in Nebraska, Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota, and the Charles M Russell National Wildlife Refuge in Montana for consideration of developing bison habitat in cooperation with adjoining landowner, including the BLM. Fast-forward to October 2008, when the Department of Interior released their Bison Conservation Initiative. Principle Number 5 of the initiative states: "The Department of the Interior will work with interested parties, including states, tribes, landowners, and conservationists to discuss advantages and concerns associated with specific actions, guided by Executive Order Number 13352-Facilitation of Cooperative Conservation". Furthermore, the Introduction of the Bison Conservation Initiative states: "One of the iconic symbols of American frontier expansion is the image of vast herds of North American bison grazing on the Western Plains. While the days of millions of free-roaming

bison are gone, it may be possible to develop partnership arrangements that will permit bison herds to re-create their natural role in areas where biologically suitable and socially acceptable". Clearly, there is an interest by the federal government, specifically the Department of the Interior, to re-establish bison herds on a large landscape in the western US. Even more clear, is the constraints that the Dept of the Interior, and its sub-ordinate agencies, including the US FWS, US NPS, and the BLM, will work with partners to make this happen where it is *socially acceptable*.

The next obvious question is, what does it mean to be "socially acceptable"? In my opinion, "socially acceptable" means putting these large herbivores in communities that are in favor of bison restoration. Now, its 2019, and the American Prairie Reserve has this robust plan to put together a 3.5 million acre bison preserve, which includes the CMR NWR and the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument. After years of going to meetings, and being involved in setting up the CMR Community Working Group and visiting with the people who live in these communities, it is plain to see that bison are not socially acceptable according to the people who reside in this area and make a living. On a federal level, I believe that the Dept of Interior has ignored their own guidelines in the Bison Conservation Initiative directing their activities to be socially acceptable. It is easy to prove this is not socially acceptable in these communities that depend on agriculture for their high-schools, small-businesses, main-street business and general feeling of communities. To this, I would like to see the honorable Steve Daines, and Representative Gianforte do some investigating into how the Dept of the Interior can continue to steamroll these local communities that have repeatedly said, NO, NO, NO to bison. If you do not believe that the local communities have said NO to free-roaming bison, take a look at the bison ordinances passed by counties in Montana. In McCone, Phillips, Valley, and Fergus Counties along with the Big Sandy Conservation District, 69% of the voters approved a land-use ordinance for protection of water and soil from wild, free roaming or domestic bison grazing. That means that 69% of actual citizens (registered voters in these counties) are concerned about the impact that wild and free-roaming bison could have on their counties ecological and economic situation.

In my opinion, this is what I have seen unfold in the past 11 years. The Department of the Interior was charged to head up the Bison Conservation Initiative, but lack of funding or other resources prevented them from fulfilling these goals. Once the Department realized that they were not going to get this done on their own, they began working with the APR behind the scenes to allow APR to get the bison herd started, with the Department of the Interior opening all the right doors to enable this to happen.

There has been much debate about whether the threat of losing our brucellosis free status is legitimate; to me this concern is very real. In a survey conducted in 2008, in the Greater Yellowstone Area, 1,500 brucellosis positive bison were found out of a total of 2,100 animals in Yellowstone and 950 animals in the Grand Teton National Park that were tested for the disease. While the agencies assure the ranching community that these bison will be

quarantined and tested before leaving the park to various locations, we all know that errors can occur. So my question is, “Is it really worth the millions and millions of dollars that could be lost to the ranching industry if there was a brucellosis outbreak in Central and Eastern Montana?” Again, my challenge to the state law-makers would be to realize how much revenue the ag industry brings to the state coffers of Montana as compared to the tourist industry which has no real tax mechanism to capture these dollars.

Furthermore, wildlife are the responsibility of Montana FWP. However, bison have a dual status and are not considered wildlife outside of the park. With that said, there is no place for Montana FWP or US FWS to be collaborating with APR to achieve what can in Montana legally be described as nothing more than livestock grazing on federal lands. To further strengthen this position, Montana should do away with any dual status classification of bison. Bison should be considered wildlife in Yellowstone National Park, but anywhere outside the Park including private ranches, BLM ground, and tribal grounds, they are currently considered, and should remain classified as, livestock and should be managed as such.

My challenge to the State of Montana Legislative Body is to listen to the people who live in the communities that will be most affected if this land grab continues. Additionally, I would encourage the legislature to ensure that Montana FWP not be a partner with the APR in encouraging bison restoration as wildlife outside of the Greater Yellowstone Area. Senate Bill 212, which defines the steps that Montana FWP must follow if considering establishing a free-ranging bison herd, became law in 2017. Montana FWP has not yet issued a record of decision on the EIS for bison, and as such has no role in bison restoration as wildlife outside of Yellowstone National Park.

Land Acquisition

The second action that makes American Prairie Reserve (APR) not popular among local communities is their current land acquisition and their future plans to amass 3.5 million acres in order to create the largest park in the Northern Great Plains. This is 26.6% of the total 13,143,680 acres of the 5-county region where the APR plans to operate. What does this mean for the people who already live in this region, within the bounds of this planned park?

The APR currently owns 400,000 acres of private land. According to their website, this land supports 8 families and returns \$1.9M to the local economy. Contrast that to 400,000 acres of privately owned land in Phillips County that supports 124 families and returns \$9.6M to the local economy. Can the local counties, businesses, schools, and families afford for APR to achieve their ultimate land ownership vision? It is time for the Montana Legislature to stop this by limiting the number of acres that can be owned by non-profit organizations.

Furthermore, the APR’s claim that they are opening up land for public access is inflated to say the least. When you examine the map of the APR “project area” 3M acres of the APR vision or 86% of the total APR vision of 3.5M acres, are already accessible public lands

(BLM, CMR NWR). What gives APR the right to claim ownership of the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument and the Charles M Russell National Wildlife Refuge? Is it because they believe that they have a “better” idea or a “higher” use of the land, than a working landscape? APR is openly playing on the ignorance of US citizens and potential donors about public land accessibility and uses.

We must remember that in Montana, agriculture is our leading industry. I’m not saying that there is not a place in Montana for tourism, because there is, but I wholeheartedly believe that tourism cannot replace our ag economy. For example, the ranchers that are still there and not affected by the APR, cannot all open dude ranches and glamping operations, or that market will get flooded as well. Again, my challenge to everyone in Montana is to realize how much revenue the ag industry brings to the state coffers of Montana as compared to the tourist industry, which has no real tax mechanism to capture these dollars.

A question was posed to me, what would happen to Central and Eastern Montana if the APR was stopped, and quit buying up all these acres? What does that change? There are still wealthy landowners that are not traditional ranchers that will buy these properties. In my opinion, a certain percentage of these inflated land values would drop to a more realistic point. However, even if land prices stay inflated, and these lands are bought by private individuals with enough money to purchase these ranches for hunting or recreation, chances are, that ranch will be leased back to a local family, and cattle will continue to be raised in the area with all the economic benefits. Moreover, these ranches often change hands again within less than 20 years, making them available for new agriculture operations in the future. The non-profit status of the APR makes it doubtful that these properties will ever enter the market again in the future, which means they are permanently removed from agriculture. Yes, the APR is leasing to cattle producers....for now; but, this is temporary while they build their bison herds to the point that would not allow this land to be grazed by cattle in the future.

It boils down to a simple matter of economics for rural Montana Communities. I recently attended a CMR Community Working Group meeting where I listened to what Mark Haggerty of Headwaters Economics had to say about rural communities dying. He had some good points, but in all reality, rural Montana has always struggled. We understand hardship, and know what it is like to fight the weather, the markets, and infringements from local, state, and federal governments and encroaching special interest groups. But in my opinion, that does not mean that rural Montana is dying off.

In conclusion, the simplest way that I can explain the difference between ag dollars and tourism dollars to people, is to describe what one piece of machinery sold at the local equipment dealer means to the community. When a farmer or rancher purchases a combine and a new header at the estimated price tag of \$480,000, that money turns over 7 times in that local community. That equals \$3.3Million. So, my question is how many tourists have to visit Winifred, Winnett, and Big Sandy to replace \$3.3Million? And that is just one piece of

machinery! If you don't like my economic analysis, then provide me with real numbers based on research. At least you now understand the concerns of citizens living in these areas, and we can start to have a factual conversation about the impacts of the APR. I will leave you with these thoughts of mine to ponder, agree with, disagree with, but at least there will be 2 sides to the story and you will have something to think about from top to bottom as I see what is transpiring in our Montana agriculture lifestyle.

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