

United States Senate

November 10, 2021

The Honorable Shannon Estenoz
Assistant Secretary, Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington DC 20240

Dear Assistant Secretary Estenoz,

Over six months have passed since the Department of the Interior announced plans to launch a multi-year planning process to consider the introduction of bison on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge. Despite the stated objective of developing an inclusive, informed, and deliberative process to engage local stakeholders and Tribes, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services have not provided any information on the planning process or the intent behind the process nor have they published any information about public meetings or engagement online. Furthermore, troubling email exchanges between the agency and stakeholders about moving forward with a proposal “without Montana’s permission” have been brought to my attention.

Understandably, and in the absence of a transparent process and intentional engagement process, this rhetoric is cause for much consternation in the state. I respectfully urge you to make easily accessible and publically available all relevant information on public meetings and the scope of this planning exercise. I ask for your commitment that any plan for bison reintroduction has the support of the State of Montana, local communities, and Tribes before being formally proposed. I also request answers to the questions below:

- What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s position on the introduction of bison on public lands such as the Charles M. Russell Wildlife Refuge and what factors will you consider to determine what is appropriate for the ecosystem and surrounding community?
- What authority and role do you believe the federal government has over bison management decisions and how does that square with state wildlife agency’s authority to manage wildlife?
- What is the anticipated scope and timeframe for considering bison introduction on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge?
- Is consideration of bison introduction on the refuge in any way coordinated with the proposal to convert Bureau of Land Management cattle grazing permits to bison grazing permits on nearby public lands?
- Do you believe the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service can introduce wild bison on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge without the cooperation or approval of the state of Montana?"

STEVE DAINES
MONTANA

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Thank you for your commitment during your confirmation hearing to communicating with my office on this issue. I look forward to hearing from you and ensuring the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service upholds its commitment to a “transparent, including, and deliberative engagement process.”

Sincerely,



STEVE DAINES
United States Senator