

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
STATE OF MONTANA

GREG GIANFORTE
GOVERNOR



KRISTEN JURAS
LT. GOVERNOR

July 22, 2021

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John Mehlhoff
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Bureau of Land Management
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Ms. Culver and Mr. Mehlhoff:

As you are aware, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) yesterday held its only public hearing regarding the BLM's Environmental Assessment of the American Prairie Reserve's (APR) bison grazing proposal (DOI-BLM-L010-2018-0007-EA). As you are further aware, the BLM conducted yesterday's public hearing remotely, behind a computer screen.

I write today to reiterate the same concerns I raised on July 1, 2021. Yesterday's public hearing, specifically, and the BLM's plan to solicit public comment, more generally, fail to provide for adequate public comment and participation, particularly for Montana residents in the impacted communities.

While I appreciate the BLM considered my request to extend the public comment period by 45 days, I again request the BLM to recognize and accommodate the conditions on the ground. While the BLM extended the public comment period by 30 days, that period continues to coincide with haying and harvest season. Further, we are experiencing a significant drought that has created additional challenges for our agriculture and grazing industries. I again urge the BLM to consider expanding the public comment period by 15 additional days to ensure Montana farmers and ranchers in the impacted communities have a sufficient opportunity to have their voices heard.

I also continue to assert that a single virtual public hearing, like the one conducted yesterday, is inadequate to ensure voices of the local communities are heard. One of my core principles of public lands policy, which I hope the BLM shares, is to listen to the voices in our local communities. One public hearing, conducted via Zoom in the middle of the afternoon, cannot

and should not replace engaging face-to-face with residents in the impacted communities. I urge you to talk with local residents where they live and work, not behind a computer screen.

To that point, I understand only roughly 25 individuals participated in yesterday's online-only public hearing, which provided less than three hours for public comment. Further, I understand at least two local registrants (one from Phillips County and one from Fergus County) were called on to participate, but were unable to, perhaps because of technical difficulties.

As I indicated on July 1, 2021, "[t]he Montanans most affected by this proposal spend their days in the field, far from a computer, and in many instances, far from reliable internet service. These Montanans are currently in the midst of an unprecedented drought. I ask that the BLM recognize these compounding factors and take action to facilitate comment and public participation in a comprehensive and meaningful manner."

None of the conditions I cited in my first letter has changed in the last three weeks.

In Mr. Mehlhoff's response dated July 9, 2021, he wrote, "Upon the conclusion of that virtual meeting and upon review of early submission of public comments, we will consider whether additional public meetings are warranted and what format any such meeting should take."

Given the lack of local voices at yesterday's virtual public hearing and the technical difficulties potentially experienced by those local residents who did try to appear, the State of Montana again formally requests the BLM hold in-person public hearings in, at a minimum, each of the affected counties – Phillips, Chouteau, Fergus, Petroleum, and Valley counties.

Finally, in case you were unaware what a local resident may have experienced when trying to provide public comment, I attach an image of what the participant saw. The virtual meeting could not remotely be described as a face-to-face effort. I hope the BLM can do better by the people who live in these impacted communities.

I request your prompt consideration and approval of this request. If you or your staff have any further questions, please contact Mike Freeman at 406-444-3111.



Sincerely,

Greg Gianforte
Governor

Enclosure

Recording

You are viewing EMPSI - Amanda Biedermann's screen

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To access the raise hand feature, click on the participants list icon or reactions icon at the bottom of your Zoom screen, then click on the raise hand button. If you are calling in using your phone, press ***9** on your keypad.

If you are having issues with your computer microphone, please dial in to the meeting: **Phone:** 720 707 2699 ; **Meeting ID:** 844 8894 9750

Current Commenter: Thomas Baumeister

Stop Timer

File Edit Help

Minutes: 1 2

00:00:10

Next Commenter: Tim Warner

*If you are unable to offer or complete your verbal public comment during the meeting today, strongly encourages you to submit the remainder of your comment in writing at <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/103543/>

Molly Masters

David Mari

Sarah Bates

Allen Beard

Jim Steinbeisser

Jenifer Anderson

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Participants 83

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