

January 22, 2019

The Hon. Bob Brown
Chairman
Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee
House of Representatives
State Capitol
Helena, MT 59620

Re: House Bill 161

Dear Chairman Brown:

We write to express our opposition to House Bill (HB) 161, a bill to revise the decision-making process of the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

HB 161 would end public input into the management of Montana's fish and wildlife, overturning the democratic governance of fish and wildlife, a core tenet of how these resources have been managed in Montana - and across the nation - for more than a century. In addition, HB 161 would substantially limit the ability of the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks to implement science-based wildlife management by excluding certain scientifically collected data from the department's decision-making process.

1. HB 161 Erodes Public Ownership of Wildlife and the Democratic Process

Fish and wildlife in the United States are a publicly-owned resource, and the government is entrusted to manage these resources on behalf of the people. Management of these public trust resources is inexorably tied to the use of transparent, public processes to understand the public's needs, interests, and desires. Since the adoption of Montana's first wildlife management law in 1864 - limiting the harvest of fish to hook and line - the public benefit has been ensured through the adoption of laws and regulations that are determined by a democratic process.

By eliminating the use of "social science, human dimensions, or people's attitudes, opinions, or preferences in decision-making processes related to fish and wildlife," HB 161 effectively ends democratic participation in wildlife management and substantially erodes the public ownership of fish and wildlife. This threatens the entire system of fish and wildlife management that has been in place in Montana - and all over the nation - for more than a century.

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2. HB 161 Sabotages Scientific Wildlife Management

HB 161 purports to advance scientific wildlife management by directing that the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks to “only use facts and science” while specifically prohibiting the use of “social science, human dimensions, or people's attitudes, opinions, or preferences” in management decisions. In fact, the exclusion of scientifically-collected data on public opinion from the allowable universe of management information will ultimately result in arbitrary unscientific decisions.

The reality of wildlife management is that biological data often indicate that many different management decisions can have the same outcomes for fish and wildlife resources. Effective wildlife management demands that professional wildlife managers have access to facts and data on the preferences and opinions of private landowners, hunters, anglers, and a wide range of other wildlife stakeholders in order to make a fair and defensible choice among different management alternatives. If the Department is denied the ability to consult scientific data on public preferences, managers run the risk of making arbitrary decisions or responding to political pressure.

We urge you to reject HB 161 and maintain the ability of the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks to manage fish and wildlife for the public benefit and according to all of the best scientific data the department can obtain.

Sincerely,

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