

Fort Belknap Indian Community



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Fort Belknap Indian Community
(Tribal Govt.)
Fort Belknap Indian Community
(Elected to administer the affairs of the community and
to represent the Assiniboiné and the Gros Ventre Tribes
of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation)

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Fort Belknap Leadership Helps Secure Pause on Montana State Trust Land Grazing Policy

The Fort Belknap Indian Community is continuing government-to-government discussions with the State of Montana following Tribal concerns regarding a proposed Production Livestock Policy considered by the Montana Board of Land Commissioners.

At the July 20th Land Board meeting, Fort Belknap Tribal Councilman Mike King appeared on behalf of the Fort Belknap Indian Community and urged the Board to postpone adoption of the proposed policy until its potential effects on Tribal governments and Tribal buffalo restoration could be fully considered.

The proposed policy would establish a preference in certain competitive grazing lease decisions for operations that use state trust lands primarily and directly for raising and marketing livestock or livestock products. The policy does not specifically address how Tribal governmental buffalo programs—which may serve cultural, food sovereignty, conservation, ecological restoration, and other governmental purposes in addition to agricultural purposes—would be treated.

Councilman King emphasized that, for the Aaniiih and Nakoda people, buffalo are not simply livestock.

“The buffalo are our relatives,” King said during his testimony. ***“Our responsibility to them has existed since time immemorial. Tribal buffalo restoration is about our culture, our land, our food sovereignty, and the responsibility we have to future generations.”***

King asked the Board to provide clarity and engage Montana’s Tribal Nations through meaningful government-to-government consultation before adopting the policy.

Following the discussion, the Land Board postponed action on the proposed policy to allow additional consideration and dialogue.

That dialogue is now continuing. The Governor’s Office has contacted Fort Belknap regarding a meeting scheduled for August 10th to discuss the Tribe’s concerns and the proposed policy.

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Fort Belknap approaches those discussions as a governmental partner. The Community's Land Department reports that Fort Belknap currently leases at least 20,000 acres of Montana state trust lands within the exterior boundaries of the Reservation, giving the Community a direct interest in policies governing the leasing and stewardship of those lands.

Fort Belknap also has a longstanding buffalo restoration program. For the Aaniiih and Nakoda people, restoring buffalo is inseparable from cultural revitalization, ecological stewardship, food sovereignty, education, and Tribal self-determination.

The issue has also gained broader Tribal attention. At Fort Belknap's request, the Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council recently adopted a regional resolution supporting meaningful Tribal consultation and recognition of Tribal governmental buffalo restoration, land stewardship, and food sovereignty.

Fort Belknap's position is not that the State should disregard its constitutional responsibilities for state trust lands. Rather, the Community seeks a policy that fulfills those responsibilities while recognizing the governmental interests and stewardship responsibilities of sovereign Tribal Nations.

Recent federal litigation concerning bison grazing on Bureau of Land Management lands in Montana further demonstrates the importance of clear grazing policies. Although that litigation concerns federal lands and a private conservation organization—not Fort Belknap or Montana state trust lands—it illustrates how uncertainty surrounding the treatment of bison under grazing policies can lead to significant disputes.

Fort Belknap believes collaboration before adoption is preferable to disagreement after the fact.

"We opened the door, and now we need to go through it and make sure Tribes have a voice," President Werk said. ***"Our goal is not just a delay. Our goal is to work together and make a meaningful difference."***

The Fort Belknap Indian Community will continue working with the Governor's Office, the Montana Board of Land Commissioners, the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, the Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council, and other Tribal Nations to seek a solution that respects Tribal sovereignty, protects responsible stewardship, and ensures the buffalo continue to have a place on the landscape for generations to come.