

April 8, 2003

The Honorable Conrad Burns  
United States Senator  
187 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, D. C. 20510

Dear Senator Burns:

I hold the title of Refugekeeper for Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), a 10,000 member, non-profit group of federal, state, and local natural resource management professionals. We are dedicated to upholding environmental laws and values, and to assisting employees in legitimate conflicts which inevitably arise along the interface of public policy and laws.

I'm sure you are aware of the on-going issue of transferring management and other controls of the National Bison Range (NBR) and affiliated National Wildlife Refuges (NWR) to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT). Similar proposals are on the table in Alaska, and are also in various exploratory stages in other states.

It is especially ironic that the NWRS reached its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which was celebrated at Pelican Island NWR in Florida on March 14, 2003. The irony, of course, is that long-dormant legislation has been resurrected as a rationale to effectively divest the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) from its' 100 years of core responsibility for these lands.

This issue is not even one of whether the CSKT could or should have management responsibility for NBR and its affiliates. Rather, it is more a question of the establishment of far-reaching precedents for the fragmentation and eventual dissolution of the rich history and legacy of the NWRS as we know today. There are many, many NWR's across the nation where the "...geographical, historical, and cultural..."nexus will, or could be applied. What then, once the precedent has been established?

The NWRS represents a legacy of wildlife habitats unlike anything seen on our planet. The NBR complex is one of the crown jewels of the system, and is emblematic of our nation's turn from waste and non-conservation of many species of plants and animals. The NWRS, NBR, and its affiliates are gifts to and for all of the people of the U.S. –irrespective of ethnic derivation of skin color or past history.

You and your other elected federal colleagues in Montana, through no fault of your own, are truly at a decisional crossroads where we believe the long-term welfare and integrity of the NWRS lies in the balance. Because of the

precedent –setting nature of your decisions, your handling of this complex issue will have a major impact upon the sort of NWRS that is passed on to Montanans and the nation as a whole.

Consequently, we sincerely ask you to view this issue, and similar ones, from the larger perspective of a truly national system of wildlife refuges. It would be helpful and statesmanlike if you and other elected officials were to appeal to officials in the Office of the Secretary of Interior to withdraw these proposals, and all work together to maintain and strengthen the functional integrity and mission of the NWRS.

Sincerely,

Grady E. Hocutt  
Refugekeeper/PEER

