

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Question the American Prairie Reserve

September 5, 2019

Whose side did you take with the spotted owl controversy back when it grabbed the national headlines?

The environmentalists who argued that this small predator bird was at risk of extinction, or the 10,000 loggers and sawmill workers in the Pacific Northwest who lost their jobs because of federally mandated restrictions on the timber industry?

Whose side do you take in the battle between Eastern Montana ranchers and the American Prairie Reserve? Like any controversy you should educate yourself on all the facts and unintended consequences before deciding who you support.

The American Prairie Reserve is a private organization made up of a small group of very wealthy East Coast tycoons including family members of the Mars Candy dynasty. This group is using their economic power to pursue an idealistic dream of changing Eastern Montana into a vast primitive wilderness free of people, fences and any other evidence that ranchers ever existed there. The group envisions thousands of bison roaming the prairie as they did before the West was settled.

There's just one problem.

Accomplishing their goal requires the removal of hard-working ranching families who have scraped out a living in the hard-scrabble environs of Eastern Montana for many generations. Free-range bison and ranch cattle cannot co-exist. Eliminating the latter would put an end to the romance and heritage that people associate with the rugged Rocky Mountain states.

I wonder how the Mars family would react if the cacao plantations in West Africa (which produce 70% of the world's supply of cocoa beans from which chocolate is produced) were bought up and then the new owners destroyed the cacao trees so as to return the land to its natural state? Thousands of jobs would be lost and the Mars family would find themselves without products to sell.

Such would be no different from what the APR is doing right now here in Montana.

The dream of free-range bison has merit; however, if it means hardships for the people standing in the way, then maybe this isn't the right time or place for it to happen.

The state Legislature tried to enact compromise bills that would have restricted "free-range" bison to tribal lands; however, Governor Steve Bullock vetoed the bills. Makes you wonder who Bullock represents, doesn't it? As for the controversy between ranchers and the APR you must decide which is more important.

—John Merlette, Bigfork