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Panelists nix split zone for cattle

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HELENA - After hours of rancorous debate punctuated by yelling and boos from the audience, the Montana Board of Livestock on Tuesday stepped away from a plan to split Montana into two zones to manage a dreaded cattle disease.

On a 6-1 vote, the seven-member panel that governs the Montana Department of Livestock decided to pursue other ways of preventing the spread of brucellosis from infected bison and elk in Yellowstone National Park into Montana's neighboring cattle.

The decision does not mean the state will never pursue a so-called "split state" to deal with brucellosis, said board Chairman William Hedstrom. Something major, like a second case of the disease or an outcry from ranchers, would have to come up before the board would consider the issue again, he said in an interview after the meeting.

"This has divided the industry, and the board is divided," Hedstrom said of the issue and the board's carefully worded resolution on the matter. It seemed to remove split-state status from consideration while not fully closing the door on the idea.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer said the decision represented "misinformation" spread by the lobbyist of the Montana Stockgrowers Association. The group's lobbyist ought to be personally blamed when or if another case of brucellosis comes up and all of Montana is saddled with the stiffer restrictions that brucellosis brings, the governor said.

"They were misled by the lobbyist of Montana Stockgrowers Association," he said of the outspoken group of ranchers who testified at Tuesday's meeting. "They were given faulty information by the lobbyist who knew it would get people excited."

Errol Rice, executive director of the Montana Stockgrowers Association and one of the group's registered lobbyists, applauded the board's decision to stand up to Schweitzer, who appointed five of the board's seven members.

"The industry spoke today, and the board grudgingly put to rest the governor's marching orders," Rice said.

Brucellosis is primarily a cattle disease, although it can affect wildlife and people. Since the 1930s, the federal government has pursued efforts to eradicate the disease from American cattle. Today, only Texas is known to have brucellosis in its herds.

However, the disease persists in bison and elk in Yellowstone National Park, and the wild animals can spread the disease to cattle on neighboring ranchers. In recent years, both Wyoming and Idaho have found the disease in cattle near the park.

Montana had not seen a case of the disease for more than 20 years until last May, when livestock near Bridger tested positive for the disease.

Those cases prompted the slaughter of all 600 head of cattle in the affected herd and started a clock ticking: If a second case of the disease appears in Montana cattle in another 18 months, the state will lose its brucellosis-free status.

Losing that designation will force some ranchers to spend time and money testing cattle before selling to out-of-state markets. Other ranchers who specialize in cattle genetics may have a harder time selling frozen calf embryos or bull semen if Montana is known to have the disease.

At Schweitzer's request, the federal Animal Health and Inspection Service, which oversees national brucellosis rules, told Montana officials this summer that the federal government would consider splitting Montana into two zones if another case of the disease appears in that time.

One zone around Yellowstone would be considered affected by brucellosis. The rest of the state would be considered brucellosis-free.

Schweitzer said he told the Montana Board of Livestock to find out what the cattle industry thought of the plan, which Schweitzer described Tuesday as a "life rope."

The state's two largest cattle groups split over topic, with the Montana Stockgrowers Association coming out locally against it and the Montana Cattlemen's Association supporting it.

Most of those who spoke at Tuesday's meeting were strongly against the idea, saying it would pit Montana ranchers against one another and waste time and money needed for the entire state to reclaim its brucellosis status.

Others said there's no guarantee that other states would accept the split-state status, which had never been done before.

State Rep. Debby Barrett, R-Dillon, a rancher in southwestern Montana, spoke against the idea. She said she was pleased with the board's decision.

It's better than it was at the beginning of the day," Barrett said of the debate. "That's encouraging."

Many board members said that although they didn't want to pursue the controversial split-status decision, they also didn't want to rule it out should another case of the disease come up. Others, like Janice French, a board member from Hobson, said she thought the vocal group at Tuesday's meeting didn't speak for all Montana ranchers.

At one point, as the board tried to work out a resolution to capture the nuances of the group's stance on issue one audience member yelled that the board wanted to be on "both sides of the fence."

At other times, the audience booed when board members discussed pursuing the status.

For now, said Christian Mackay, executive director of the department, the state is pursuing voluntary efforts by ranchers around the park to prevent the disease from getting into cattle. There are no mandatory efforts like testing or vaccinating for the disease.