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OUR OPINION

Stockgrowers picked the wrong fight

The Montana Stockgrowers Association may have picked the wrong hill to die on in its quest to force the state's hand on the Yellowstone National Park bison issue.

The association and two ranchers filed suit in Madison County last week seeking to force the Montana Department of Livestock to drive bison grazing in the Horse Butte area west of the park back into the park or — in the alternative — kill them. This after a winter during which state and federal officials killed more than half of the park bison, leaving only an estimated 2,300 surviving.

The ranchers and the association say they merely want the DOL to comply with the requirement in the Interagency Bison Management Plan adopted in 2000. That plan was an attempt to address the ranchers' concerns that the bison, many of whom are carrying the disease brucellosis, could infect domestic cattle, even though that has never happened outside of deliberate controlled experiments.

But the problem is that there are now no cattle grazing in the Horse Butte area, an area isolated from neighboring grazing lands by wide arms of Hebgen Lake, which constitute an effective barrier for preventing any bison-cattle contact. Add to this the fact that many landowners in the Horse Butte area now welcome the bison, and the ranchers' arguments become increasingly irrational.

The livestock interests appear to be mired in the give-'em-an-inch-and-they'll-take-a-mile school of thought. About 135 bison were grazing in the area last week, and state officials planned on hazing the bison back toward the park with helicopters to avoid trespassing on land owned by bison sympathizers.

This obsessive insistence on adhering to a plan that doesn't make sense anymore merely sticks a thumb in the eye of activists seeking to let bison roam out of the park, a group that is gaining growing numbers of converts in the arena of national public opinion.

Montana livestock growers deserve to be protected from the threat of wildlife-borne brucellosis. But the real threat comes from elk — not bison. Elk were the suspects in a brucellosis outbreak in a cattle heard near Bridger last year.

But brucellosis will not be controlled in or eliminated from Yellowstone-area elk herds — or bison, for that matter — until the state of Wyoming ceases the extremely ill-advised practice of maintaining elk winter feedgrounds where large numbers of animals congregate to consume state-provided feed and, in the process, spread the disease.

If the Stockgrowers Association wants to pick a meaningful fight — one that might even be joined by their bison-advocating adversaries — it should direct its litigation at the state of Wyoming and try to force that state to adopt prudent elk management policies.

Elimination of the feedgrounds — not the harassing of a few Horse Butte-area bison — will improve the prospects for domestic cattle and wildlife alike. If the livestock growers lead that charge, it could win them some badly needed friends.