



April 18, 2021

Gov. Greg Gianforte
Montana State Capitol
1301 E. Sixth Ave.
Helena, MT 59601

RE: Request for veto of SB 115, a bill requiring state Land Board approval for conservation easements under Habitat Montana

Dear Governor Gianforte,

The Public Land/Water Access Association has been dedicated to maintaining, restoring, and perpetuating public access to the boundaries of all Montana's public lands and waters since 1985. The rights of Montanans and visitors to our great state to recreate on public lands and waterways are enshrined in the State Constitution, and PLWA works to educate about these rights, maintain and enhance access, and ensure that our state's wild places remain in public hands for years to come.

Over the past three years we have had the pleasure of working with staff at the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks office, landowners, conservation and sporting organizations in Montana, and the Governor's office to protect access - access which our public and state economy rely so dearly upon. We were heartened that your campaign highlighted so strongly the need to protect public lands, access, and conservation programs. In light of this, PLWA would ask that you veto SB 115, as this bill would require state Land Board approval for conservation easements under the Habitat Montana program. Habitat Montana, founded more than thirty years ago, has provided a stable source of funding for incredibly important wildlife conservation and access. Nationally, it is a landmark program that brings together ranchers, conservationists, and public access users, and serves as a model for other states and government departments.

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This issue has previously been addressed, and it was concluded that while conservation easements under Habitat Montana have gone through the Land Board in the past, this was not a requirement. FWP is well qualified and capable of working with landowners during the lengthy and complicated process of establishing terms of easements. Further oversight is provided by the Fish and Wildlife Commission. Adding another bureaucratic process, which SB 115 does, seems not only to undercut the authority of the Governor-appointed Fish and Wildlife Commission, but wastes Montanans' time and money, adds unnecessary red tape to negotiate, and would serve to deter Montanans from enrolling in the program.

Conservation easement programs under Habitat Montana represent an incredible opportunity for Montana's economy – they increase access to public lands and waters, avail ranches and farms of opportunities many communities would not otherwise enjoy, and extend financial and recreational promises to industries across the state. They also protect wildlife and habitat that is disappearing in other places across the country, allowing for research by public and private entities from around the world.

Governor Gianforte, we appreciate the leadership role you took in your campaign to protect and promote public land stewardship for generations to come. We ask that you veto SB 115 and keep Montana on the forefront of public access and conservation, and a model for other states in our nation.

Sincerely,

Drewry Hanes, MS, MPH
Executive Director, PLWA

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