

Turner bid for Yellowstone bison draws protest

January 8 2010, By MATTHEW BROWN , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Ted Turner's bid to get 74 wild bison from Yellowstone National Park is drawing stiff opposition from those who say the animals are being given up for private profit instead of conservation.

Turner has offered to take the animals at the request of Montana's Democratic Gov. Brian Schweitzer.

The media mogul would keep the bison five years and then return them to the state. As compensation, Turner would keep 90 percent of the animals' offspring, meaning he would gain an estimated 190 bison from a herd prized for its genetic purity.

But some conservationists and federal officials - plus a group representing dozens of Indian tribes - say the animals should not be commercialized. At a Thursday public hearing over the Turner proposal, they said the bison belong on public or tribal lands. That's what state and federal officials had promised over the last several years.

"You're not being true to your commitment not to commercialize these animals," said Glenn Hockett with the Gallatin Wildlife Association.

The animals are now in disease quarantine just outside Yellowstone. They are part of a 5-year program to divert some park bison from the periodic slaughter the animals face, part of efforts to prevent the spread of the disease brucellosis to cattle.

After prior attempts to relocate quarantined bison failed, state officials had warned they could soon be slaughtered.

Russell Miller with Turner Enterprises said keeping most of their offspring would be necessary to offset the cost of keeping 74 animals for the state for five years.

"We thought there was an emergency," Miller said after Thursday's hearing. "We're not a philanthropy. We're trying to create a blend between conservation and commercialization."

Public comment on the proposal ends Jan 12. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Director Joe Maurier will then have the final say on the fate of the quarantined bison.

Some of the Guernsey animals' offspring could be sold after five years, Ken McDonald with Fish, Wildlife and Parks said. But that commercial prospect has gone largely unnoticed by critics of the bison relocation effort, who have focused their ire on Turner.

The 2006 decision approving the quarantine program stated "the bison will remain wild and noncommercial." Opponents of the Turner plan have pinned their complaints on those words and similar statements from state and federal officials.

McDonald acknowledged the state could have come up with a better plan for the animals years ago, but said there is now little choice. He said they need to be moved by the end of March to make room for a second round of about 80 quarantined bison.

"I know we can be criticized for, 'We should have done this 5 years ago,'" McDonald said. "Where we are today is, we've got these bison and we've got to find somewhere" to put them.

Despite the state's warnings of slaughter if a new home for the bison is not found soon, a U.S. Department of Agriculture representative, Ryan Clarke, said that slaughter was not imminent. Clarke noted the [bison](#) have been in quarantine for years and could remain longer if needed.

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