

Abstract Proposal: Conservation Easements and Bison Restoration on the Wind River Indian Reservation: Exploring Opportunities, Challenges, and Alternatives

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Abstract: The Wind River Tribal Buffalo Initiative (WRTBI) aims to restore bison to the Wind River Indian Reservation (WRIR) located within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in Wyoming through land acquisition and conversion to bison pasture, with the ultimate goal of returning the land to tribal trust ownership. Conservation easements, as voluntary legal agreements that restrict land use to protect conservation values, could be a valuable tool in facilitating the acquisition of private land for bison pasture expansion on the WRIR. However, the use of conservation easements in this context presents unique challenges, including potential impacts on the fee-to-trust process, concerns regarding tribal sovereignty, and the enforceability of easements on tribal lands. We are developing a report and law review article that explores various scenarios for achieving the WRTBI's goals, such as the a land trust holding a conservation easement on fee land within the WRIR, supporting the creation of a tribal land trust, and the Wind River Tribes holding the land in fee title rather than converting it to trust status. Each scenario is evaluated based on its potential benefits and drawbacks, including the provision of funding for bison restoration, protection of land from development, and support for tribal sovereignty.