

Turner bison bid sparks debate

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BILLINGS — With 88 bison from Yellowstone National Park facing possible slaughter, billionaire TV mogul Ted Turner has swept in and offered to hold the animals for five years on his sprawling Montana ranch while a new home for them is found.

But Turner, ever the shrewd businessman, won't do it for nothing. The media mogul says he will care for the bison only if he can keep up to 90 percent of their offspring. And in the Rocky Mountain West — where wildlife is cherished both for its aesthetic value and as meat on the table — the plan is stoking a sharp debate over the role of deep-pocketed private entities in conservation.

Hunters, environmentalists and property law experts have all weighed in and most say Turner's plan sets a dangerous precedent for the commercialization of public wildlife. Others describe Turner as a responsible steward of the land with the resources needed to take care of animals that desperately need a home.

Even the urgency of the situation is open to question.

Despite warnings from Montana about possible slaughter, federal officials said earlier this month that the bison could be kept longer if needed at a quarantine compound north of the park. They have already been there for several years to make sure they are disease free.