

EXHIBIT 8
DATE 2-7-05
HB 499

My name is Gayla Wortman. I am the coordinator for the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council, a coalition of 15 conservation districts that lie adjacent to the Missouri River from the headwaters in Gallatin County to the North Dakota border in Richland County. I am also on staff with the Cascade County Conservation District.

The Missouri River Conservation Districts Council is made up of supervisors elected to serve their conservation districts. Our purpose is to represent natural resource and environmental interests on the Missouri River through grassroots collaboration, education, incentives, and voluntary action. We provide leadership, assistance, and guidance to the conservation districts along the Missouri River Corridor in order to present a unified front and collective voice when addressing natural resource issues, opportunities, and challenges. We are a forum for Missouri River stakeholders to share perspectives, solve problems, and exchange information on Missouri River resource management.

There are 1.68 million acres along the 725 mile corridor of the Missouri River. Just over half is in private ownership. The conservation districts lead grass roots conservation efforts on those private acres and must not be hamstrung by the loss of vital programs funded by the Coal Tax Trust Fund. The MRCDC adamantly opposes House Bill 499 because it eliminates funding for the Rangeland Resource program, salinity control, the 223 program, conservation district administration, and watershed planning and assistance. All of these programs have been used widely along the Missouri River Corridor to serve our constituents. Funding is put toward education programs, stock water development, drought abatement, irrigation projects, monitoring wells for salinity control, water quality monitoring, stream bank restoration, and many others.

Currently, in my district alone, we are using 223 funding to continue to host our outdoor classroom, maintain 5 weather stations used in drought management, and help fund Math and Science based resource studies at a small, financially strapped, rural school. The funding is also used to continue water quality monitoring on the Sun River, administer the demanding Streambank and Land Preservation Act, funding a stream assessment on the Smith River, and mitigating the damage from sediment delivery to the Missouri caused by unchecked storm water runoff from MAFB. This is just my district alone; there are 15 districts along the Missouri and 58 state-wide that rely on this funding to continue the work vital to the preservation of Montana's natural resources, and our treasured way of life.

On behalf of the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council and the Cascade County Conservation District, I respectfully urge you to vote no on passage of HB 499. Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you; I'll be available for questions should you have any.