

PRESS ADVISORY

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**State Legislators Call For Federal Assistance
With St. Mary Rehabilitation**

HELENA, Mont.—State Legislators are calling on the federal government for assistance with the St. Mary Rehabilitation Project.

On Tuesday, January 18, 2005, Legislators, the Governor's office, and members of the St. Mary Rehabilitation Working Group joined together during a meeting of the Joint Subcommittee for Long Range Planning and the Joint Subcommittee for Natural Resources Appropriations to discuss bills that support about \$1.6 million in critical rehabilitation work on the decrepit and deteriorating St. Mary Canal and infrastructure.

"The State is making a bold statement by supporting this funding—now we need the support of the federal government to move this project forward." said Senate President Jon Tester. "We can't continue to wait for failure of the St. Mary system. Too many people, too much land, and too much of the economy will suffer if the waters of the Milk River don't run."

The St. Mary facilities are located entirely on the Blackfeet Reservation in Glacier County. As the main source of water for the region, on average, St. Mary facilities divert 150,000 acre-feet of water from the St. Mary River to the North Fork of the Milk River for use by municipalities, irrigation, and recreation in the Milk River Basin.

Without imported water, the Milk River would run dry every six out of 10 years.

Though owned and operated by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, to date the federal agency has not supported rehabilitation funding, claiming financial obligations now lie with the current contract holders and irrigators as required under the 1902 Reclamation Act.

Recently, on behalf of the St. Mary Project Working Group, the office of Governor and Lieutenant Governor have submitted legislation to Montana's Congressional Delegation

seeking an appropriation of \$9.5 million, which will be used to complete engineering, NEPA, and economic studies necessary to rehabilitate or replace decrepit St. Mary facilities, assess environmental concerns of the Blackfoot Tribes, and assess the current status of the Blackfoot Irrigation Project.

Currently about 121,000 acres of land in the Milk River Basin are irrigated with water imported from the St. Mary River. These lands contribute about \$15 to 17 million each year in increased alfalfa production alone, supporting many livestock operations in the region.

An estimated \$15 million is generated annually in recreation benefits.

Additionally, about 14,000 people living in communities such as Havre, Chinook and Harlem derive their drinking water from the Milk River.

During the hearing, the following bills were discussed:

- HB6 (Long Range Planning Subcommittee)
Joint Board of Control is requesting funding through the Renewable Resources Grant Program in the amount of \$200,000
- HB7 (Long Range Planning Subcommittee)
On behalf of the St. Mary Working Group, DNRC will be requesting funding from the Reclamation Department Grants Program in the amount of \$900,000
- HB11 (Long Range Planning Subcommittee)
Through the Treasure State Endowment Program, \$500,000 will be requested for cost-share towards federal funds
- HB2 (Natural Resources Appropriations Subcommittee)
DNRC is requesting to Full-Time Employees (FTE) for a new hydrologist and senior-level engineer who will be dedicated to the St. Mary rehabilitation project