January 31, 2005
House Natural Resources Committee

EXHIBIT 5
DATE 1.31.05
HB 379

Testimony of Ms. Julia Doney, Vice-President of the
Fort Belknap Indian Community Council

House Bill 379 – Zortman/Landusky Water Treatment

Mr./Madam Chair, Members of the Committee:

My name is Julia Doney. I am the Vice-President of the Fort Belknap Indian Community Council. Members of the Fort Belknap community have traveled to Helena today to testify on a matter that is of great importance to us – our water.

In 1979, the State of Montana approved two cyanide, heap-leach gold mines in the Little Rocky Mountains. The tribes at that time raised concerns about the effect these mines would have on our water. In fact, we specifically warned the State that acid mine drainage would become a problem, and we strongly objected to the proposed mining plans. The State brushed off our worries and criticisms, and for the next twenty years approved continuous expansions of the mining operations in the Little Rockies.

Now, 25 years later, our worst fears have come to pass. Spirit Mountain, once used by our people for religious ceremonies, is entirely gone – replaced by two massive pits. All of the surface and ground waters connected to the pits are contaminated by heavy metals, due to acid mine drainage. The Department of Environmental Quality has said that this contamination will continue into perpetuity, and will require permanent water treatment.

Current water treatment measures at the sites do not effectively clean up the water so that it meets basic water standards. There are constant, on-going water quality problems throughout the area. These are some of the water quality violations that have been recorded by the Department of Environmental Quality in the last few years. There is no money to fund the water treatment plants, even in their current inadequate form, into perpetuity. Funding for water treatment will run out soon after the year 2017, at which time the current contamination of our waters will become many times worse.

Over the years, many profited from the mines. The mining company made millions of dollars. State and local governments took in millions in tax money. Fort Belknap, however, has never profited in any way from the mines. We received no tax monies, and only a very few tribal members worked at the mines. Orange colored water is flowing onto our reservation. Everyone seems to agree that the mines are an enormous problem. But the 2003 state legislature did not help us. The federal government is not helping us. We are expected to bear the burden of permanent environmental devastation alone.

So we stand before you again, asking for your help. Please consider very carefully the testimony that you hear today. Representative Windy Boy's bill is critical. The State cannot escape these issues.

Thank you.