

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-2601

February 11, 2024

Charles Dankert
Office of Policy, Management and Budget
Department of Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Mr. Dankert,

Congratulations on your appointment and I thank you for your service to our nation at what I consider to be the best department in government – tied with the Department of the Navy, of course. I'd greatly appreciate your attention to the following urgent matter.

Topline

In June of 2024, the St. Mary's River Siphon experienced a catastrophic failure putting at risk the health and livelihoods of nearly 20,000 municipal water users, hundreds of family farms and ranches, and four native tribes (Blackfeet Nation, Fort Belknap, Rocky Boy, and Fort Peck Tribes).

Funding for emergency repairs to the St. Mary's Canal and Siphon in northwest Montana was appropriated by Congress in the December 2024 disaster supplemental has been inadvertently caught up in the freeze of Biden green agenda spending.

I ask that Secretary Doug Burgum and the Bureau of Reclamation immediately review the project to resume funding.

Background

Like much of the irrigation infrastructure in North Dakota, the St. Mary's Canal and Siphon is a critical water infrastructure system that is over one hundred years old. After suffering several failures over the last fifty years, the siphon finally experienced a catastrophic failure when one of the 100-inch diameter pipes that carry water from one side of the mountain to the other blew-out. Following the blow-out, delivering water to municipal and agriculture users became extremely difficult. Ranchers were trucking water hundreds of miles a week to keep cattle alive over the summer, and due to repairs at reservoirs down-river, storage capacity for the upcoming spring runoff is minimal. Farmers, ranchers and municipalities have an emergency plan to get through this year, but any delays put the projected disaster timeline out 2- or even 3-years. Family farms and ranches will shutter and the reliable delivery of clean water will not be possible.

Thanks to emergency appropriations by myself and Senator Daines, along with state monies, construction to replace the siphons is currently underway. Despite temperatures dipping to 50 degrees below zero as I write this letter, work continues today because the crews understand the dire need for this infrastructure.

The current review of federal disbursements has inadvertently caused a pause on the disbursement of funds for this critical infrastructure project.

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The St. Mary's system is part of the Milk River Project (MRP), which is under a cost-share agreement with the water users, the state, and the federal government. This core infrastructure project long pre-dates the Biden Administration, the Inflation Reduction Act and the Green New Scam. The MRP has received substantial federal funding since 1905 via annual appropriations. While it is true that the Biden Administration distributed funding for the irrigation system in Spring of 2024 prior to the blowout, and Senator Tester tried to take credit that it was a result of his infrastructure bill in the heat of the election season, the fact is the system has been funded by the federal government for over a century.

Since the June 2024 blowout, all funding for this project has come from \$46 million in federal appropriations that was secured in the 2024 end of year disaster supplemental. See page 22 of the bill:

*DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF RECLAMATION WATER AND RELATED RESOURCES*

For an additional amount for "Water and Related Resources", \$74,464,000, to remain available until expended, of which \$27,930,000 shall be for necessary expenses related to the consequences of natural disasters that occurring in or prior to calendar year 2024: Provided, That \$46,534,000 shall be available for deposit into the Aging Infrastructure Account established by section 9603(d)(1) of the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 (43 U.S.C. 510b(d)(1)), and shall be made available for reserved or transferred works that have suffered a critical failure, in accordance with section 40901(2)(A) of division D of Public Law 117-58: Provided further, That such amount is designated by the Congress as being for an emergency requirement pursuant to section 251(b)(2)(A)(i) of the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985.

In addition to the impact on Montana specifically, the Milk River Valley is both a main tributary and headwaters of the Missouri River which dumps into the Mississippi River, making it one of our nation's busiest inland waterways for commerce. Additionally, the river facilitates electricity generation at six hydroelectric dams that deliver electricity to ratepayers in Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and Nebraska. Steady and reliable water supply from upstream ensures usable river flows in the lower basin. Keeping this construction project moving forward is vital to our economic, energy and national security.

I completely agree with President Trump and Secretary Burgum on the need to freeze, review, and pull back the wasteful spending from the previous administration's green scam agenda. In fact, I have a lot of ideas for rocks for you to look under. However I believe that this funding has been mistakenly identified as being related to the Biden Administration's nefarious heist of Americans' tax dollars.

My request is for the Secretary to immediately review this critical infrastructure project and that the Bureau of Reclamation immediately resume the funding schedule. Should Secretary Burgum require more information I am available at his earliest possible convenience.

Please reach out to my Chief of Staff, Heather Swift, if you have any questions. She can be reached at (315) 409-9783 or Heather.Swift@mail.house.gov.

For additional reading, below is a link to an article from the Montana Free Press describing the St. Mary's River Siphon failure:

<https://montanafreepress.org/2024/06/17/catastrophic-failure-of-st-mary-siphon-leads-to-localized-flooding-in-babb/>

Thank you very much for your immediate response to this extremely serious and difficult challenge. I wish you success in your new role and hope you enjoy your time serving at the Department of the Interior as much as I did. Keep the faith.

For God and Country,

A handwritten signature in red ink, reading "Ryan Zinke". The signature is stylized with a large "R" and "Z".

RYAN ZINKE
Member of Congress