

**TESTIMONY OF BILL WHITEHEAD, CHAIRMAN
ASSINIBOINE AND SIOUX RURAL WATER SYSTEM
BEFORE THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR AND RELATED AGENCIES
BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS: CONSTRUCTION ACCOUNT
February 11, 2020**

FORT PECK RESERVATION RURAL WATER SYSTEM (\$3,280,000)

The Assiniboine and Sioux Rural Water Supply System (ASRWSS) submits this testimony in support of continued Operations, Maintenance, and Replacement (OMR) Costs associated with the Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System. The Assiniboine and Sioux Rural Water Supply System Board is the tribally chartered entity charged with the planning, design, construction, operation, maintenance and replacement of the Assiniboine and Sioux Rural Water Supply System, which is the part of the Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System that is on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. We are strong partners with Dry Prairie Rural Water System (DPRWS), which operates the part of the Project that is off the Reservation.

The most basic of governmental function is the delivery of clean, safe drinking water and we are honored to provide water and service in northeastern Montana to an area of 7,750 square miles connected by 3,200 miles of pipeline when completed in 2023 (The year following full project funding). The project provides safe, adequate, and reliable drinking water to an area larger than New Jersey and just smaller than Massachusetts.

ASRWSS wants to thank the Subcommittee for the full funding of Operations, Maintenance, and Replacement (OM&R) costs of the Water Project at \$3.210 million in FY 2020.

As the Project works toward completion of construction, our OM&R needs continue to increase. Thus, for FY 2021 will need an additional \$70,000 for total level of funding at \$3.280 million in appropriations to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Construction account.

The funding increase of \$70,000 is necessary to:

- i) safely operate, maintain, repair and replace system features,
- ii) employ the necessary level of qualified and certified staff
- iii) purchase chemicals for treatment
- iv) purchase power for pumping and treatment facilities.

The Congress (Energy and Water Subcommittee) will appropriate \$320 million to complete the project in today's dollars. The project is 86% complete and full funding will be available to complete the project in FY 2022. It is imperative for ASRWSS, through Interior appropriations and the DPRWS cost share, to maintain the investment in our infrastructure valued at \$220 million and held in trust by the United States. The DPRWS cost share covers the OMR cost of common facilities use by Dry Prairie as agreed upon between ASRWSS, DPRWS and the Secretary and is paid monthly and timely by DPRWS.

ASRWSS will provide drinking water to more than 21,000 residents in Northeast Montana in 2020, 22,000 residents in 2022, and 31,000 residents as the population of the region continues to grow over the next several decades. The population served at the end of 2016 was less than 10,000, and OMR funding needs have been increasing accordingly. The project also serves social and governmental agencies, including the BIA Agency Office, schools, clinics, hospitals, Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Fort Union Trading Post National Historic site, U.S.- Canadian border stations, as well as the towns of Poplar, Wolf Point, Frazier, Culbertson, Medicine Lake, Scobey, Nashua, Fort Kipp and Brockton.

The Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System was authorized by the Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System Act of 2000, Pub. L. 106-382. The enactment ensured a safe, adequate, and reliable municipal, rural and industrial water supply for the residents of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation and the residents of Roosevelt, Sheridan, Daniels, and Valley Counties outside the Reservation. As noted in the President's previous budget requests: "*Groundwater from shallow alluvial aquifers ... for the municipal systems . . . is generally poor with concentrations of iron, manganese, sodium, sulfates, bicarbonates and total dissolved solids above recommended standards.*" This project provides a perpetual remedy to historic water quality issues that impaired health and stunted economic growth.

The Project called for the construction of a single treatment plant on the Missouri River near Wolf Point, Montana, that will distribute water through 3,200 miles of pipeline to both the Reservation Tribal system and through three interconnections to the Dry Prairie system. A single water source on the Missouri River replaced nearly two dozen individual community water sources and ensured a clean, plentiful and safe water supply.

The Federal legislation authorizing the Fort Peck Reservation Rural Water System requires that the OMR of the ASRWSS – the facilities on the Reservation that are held in trust by the federal government – be fully funded by the BIA. This is consistent with the federal trust responsibility to the Tribes who were promised a permanent home when the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes agreed to move to the Reservation. A permanent home requires safe drinking water. The funding request ASRWSS to deliver superior drinking water meeting all federal and state standards to all of the people, towns, and federal, tribal, state, public and private agencies, and businesses.

Thus, the \$3.280 million requested in FY 2021 for the OMR of this vital infrastructure project is critical. The increased funding of \$70,000 over the FY 2020 level for the OM&R of the Project is needed as the Project buildout increases the service population and requires additional personnel, power, chemicals, repairs, replacements and improvements to operate the water treatment plant and other facilities, including the intake, pipelines, pumping stations and reservoirs, to continue to meet this expanded service.

Again, we thank the Subcommittee for the continued support of OMR funding for ASRWSS as authorized by PL 106-382.