

House Committee on Natural Resources

Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries

H.R. 7240 "Fort Belknap Indian Community Water Rights Settlement Act of 2024"

Mark Manoukian

Representing: St. Mary Rehabilitation Working Group

My name is Mark Manoukian. I live near Malta Montana and irrigate alfalfa and grass hay with water from the St. Mary project and the Milk River. Without water from the St. Mary project, the Milk River would run dry 6 out of 10 years. I support passage of H.R. 7240 to repair the St. Mary project.

Since 2003, I have been a member of and in 2014 became the Co-Chair of the St. Mary Rehabilitation Working Group. This 15-citizen member group comprises municipalities, irrigators, recreationist, and members of the Fort Belknap and Blackfeet Tribes. This group was formed to raise awareness of the potential loss of the Federal Irrigation System managed by the Bureau of Reclamation. We have known since 2003 it was in emanate danger of catastrophic failure. Our main goal was to "Address the needs of the St. Mary project before it suffers a catastrophic failure".

The water I and 700 other family farms use travels from Glacier Park through a 29-mile canal, which contains the St. Mary siphons and Halls Coulee siphons. On June 17, 2024 the St. Mary siphon system failed and water transfers to Fresno Reservoir halted. Water from Fresno Reservoir provides drinking water to 18,000 people in Havre, Chinook and Harlem, and irrigation water to 140,000 acres. We have the ability to feed more than 1,00,000 people annually with this water.

As a member of the working group for 21 years I was keenly aware of the damage that a broken siphon could do. This siphon failure deposited more than 100,000 cubic yards of dirt from erosion from the 8-foot pipe discharging 300 cubic feet per second of water into the St. Mary River.

H.R. 7240 not only settles the Federal part of the Fort Belknap Tribal Water Compact; it will provide needed funding to fix the 110-year-old St. Mary project.

One thing that is overlooked in the recent disaster is that through the 1921 Order, which is the document that splits the water between the US and Canada on the St. Mary River, the legal right of the US is to divert 850 cubic feet per second during the irrigations season. In 2003, when we started the working group, due to loss of canal capacity, through degradation, the project was only able to divert 700 cubic feet per second. Today, this degraded system is only capable of transferring 600 cubic feet per second. Through our own neglect, St. Mary Canada receives 250 cubic feet per second during the diversion season of US water. This is enough water to irrigate 20,000 acres in Montana annually.

Our cost share on this Federal Project is 75% for irrigators and the Bureau of Reclamation contributes 25%. With a Safety of Dams repair currently on Fresno Reservoir and the loss of the siphons, irrigation cost for the 700 family farms is estimated to increase \$1.5 and \$5.41 per acer respectively, for less water. Water is not estimated to be available until August of 2025. The loss of production will impact 20,000 head of cattle. Some farms may not be able to overcome these mounting costs.

H.R. 7240 funding will be a game changer in providing much needed repairs to the St. Mary system and modernizing our irrigation project so we can use our legal entitled US water amount, 850 cubic feet per second. Without immediate repairs to this 110-year-old system, the communities of Havre, Chinook and Harlem will literally have no potable water and 140,000 acres will be turned into to dryland farm ground.

I recommend passage of H.R. 7240 and thank the committee for this time to testify on this important water project.