

United States Senate

May 19, 2020

The Honorable Brenda Burman
Commissioner
Bureau of Reclamation
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Commissioner Burman:

I write to you request your urgent and continued assistance in emergency assessments, repairs, and replacement work for the Drop 5 structure of the Milk River Project. Drop 5 failed this past weekend and is no longer functional. While the full extent of the damage is still being assessed, the water supply for nearly 150,000 acres of irrigated land is in jeopardy.

A wide variety of users rely on the Milk River Project, including eight irrigation districts, three municipalities, and two tribal communities. The Bureau of Reclamation must take immediate action to assess the full extent of the damage at Drop 5. Understanding the damage will help chart a path towards the work necessary to restore functionality at Drop 5, and secure a reliable water supply for those that rely on this system.

It will also be critical for Reclamation to coordinate extensively with the Milk River Joint Board of Control, the state of Montana, Tribes, affected landowners, and other stakeholders. You have a great deal of expertise on hand to assist in this emergency, and you will need to harness that knowledge and drive to put forward a collaborative plan forward in a timely manner.

Finally, as you transition from an immediate assessment to planning the necessary repairs for the structure, it will be critical for any work to be conducted without an unreasonable cost to water users. I have led bipartisan legislation to address the current large nonfederal cost share requirement for work on the system, which has held up the needed repairs on Drop 5 and other critical work on the project. This is a cost Reclamation will need to shoulder, or irrigators will have to choose between breaking the bank on emergency repairs or not receiving enough water this season. I stand ready to work with you on any effort to secure the needed funding or authorization to see this work done rapidly and safely.

Thank you for your rapid response to this evolving situation. Please contact me immediately with any support you need to respond rapidly to this emergency.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Tester". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jon Tester