

United States Senate

June 24, 2024

The Honorable Mike Johnson
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
H-232, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20512

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
Democratic Leader
United States House of Representatives
H-204, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20512

Dear Speaker Johnson and Democratic Leader Jeffries:

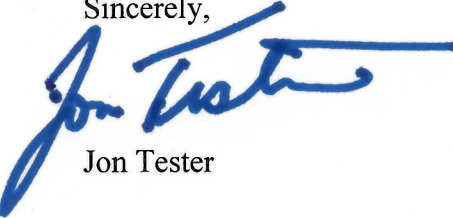
One week ago today, Montana experienced a disaster when the Milk River Irrigation Project near Babb, Montana suffered a catastrophic failure. The Milk River Project in north-central Montana supplies water for the irrigation of around 120,000 acres of farmland, municipal water systems, and two tribes. This catastrophic failure flooded the surrounding area, wiped-out small businesses, and destroyed the primary feature of an irrigation system that hundreds of farmers and ranchers depend on to support their families and feed America.

I am proud to share that the Senate immediately jumped into action last week and passed my bipartisan Fort Belknap Indian Community Water Rights Settlement of 2024 (S. 1987), which includes emergency funding to rehabilitate the Milk River Project. When disaster strikes, Americans expect their leaders to put aside differences, roll-up their sleeves and go to work to address the crisis. That's exactly what the Senate did last week and exactly what is now required of the House of Representatives to get the Fort Belknap Indian Community Water Rights Settlement of 2024 to the President's desk. Today, I write to urge the House of Representatives to immediately take up and pass this critically important bipartisan legislation without any further delay.

The bipartisan Fort Belknap Indian Community Water Rights Settlement of 2024 is well over 100 years in the making and it originally passed the Senate nearly a year ago. This legislation enjoys broad bipartisan support from the state of Montana, the Department of Interior, agriculture and conservation groups, local county governments and numerous other stakeholders. The bill provides resources to update and expand the Fort Belknap Indian Irrigation Project system, develop water infrastructure both on and off the reservation, restore Tribal land, and affirm the tribe's historic water rights. When finalizing its settlement, the Fort Belknap Indian Community recognized how important the Milk River Project is to all water users in North Central Montana, which is why more than a year ago, the tribe chose to include a now vital investment to fully rehabilitate the section of the Milk River Project that failed last week.

The Fort Belknap Indian Community Water Rights Settlement of 2024 has passed the Senate with unanimous support on two separate occasions over the last 11 months. Congressman Matt Rosendale introduced a companion bill nearly a year ago on July 28, 2023. During this period, the House of Representatives has had ample time to review the legislation, examine the hearing record, and confirm support with stakeholders. With this timeline in mind, I believe it is appropriate for the House to immediately schedule a vote for the Fort Belknap Indian Community Water Rights Settlement of 2024 and send it to the President's desk. The thousands of impacted Montanans living in rural Montana can't wait any longer.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Tester", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jon Tester