

United States Senate

October 10, 2024

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Mr. John Berge
Acting Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs
Farm Service Agency
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Deputy Administrator Berge:

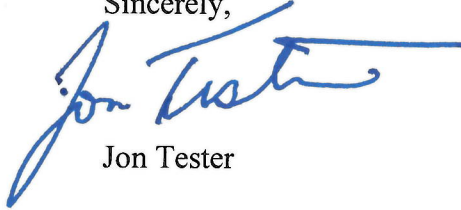
I write to bring your attention to the catastrophic failure that occurred on the Milk River Irrigation Project on June 17, 2024, and some of the negative effects it will have on Montana's farmers and ranchers. While the repair work on the irrigation system is making significant progress, the system won't be fully operable again until after the 2025 growing season. This means that affected irrigators along the Milk River will likely experience a growing season entirely without irrigation or only one pull of water. As such, it is critically important for USDA to begin working with local producers now to ensure farmers and ranchers have the tools and resources necessary to persevere as they face this challenge and continue to produce the best food in the world.

As a first step, I urge you to use your statutory authority to determine that the siphon failure constitutes an eligible loss condition for producers seeking assistance under the Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees and Farm-Raised Fish Program (ELAP). I am hearing concerns from producers in the area who raise grazing and forage crops that I believe ELAP assistance could help resolve. Specifically, these concerns include the loss of grazing lands, the added costs of potentially transporting feed and water for livestock, the lack of critical income from selling second or third cuttings, and the likelihood of diminished overall crop yields.

Many of the projected losses that producers in the region are concerned about are those that ELAP was specifically designed to alleviate. For these producers to receive assistance through ELAP, USDA must first determine that loss of irrigation due to the failure of the Milk River Irrigation Project constitutes an eligible loss condition. That's why I respectfully request that you swiftly make this determination to give the farmers and ranchers that rely on the Milk River Irrigation Project some certainty going into the growing season.

As I continue to talk to the produces affected by the failure of the Milk River Irrigation Project, I will remain in close contact to ensure that all parties are working together to get these hardworking folks the support they need to get through what may be a difficult year. Thank you for your attention to this initial request. I stand ready to work with you on this important matter.

Sincerely,

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

Jon Tester