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June 13

St. Mary - Milk River Irrigation Forum  
Lethbridge, Alberta  
Senator Joyce Fairbairn  
May 24/06

I am glad to be here tonight to listen to the discussion of what I believe to be one of the most fundamental issues on which our agriculture industry is based here in Southern Alberta.

I should say at the beginning that I am not an expert on the science of irrigation, but I am a constant observer of its role in the future of agriculture in this area. On reflection, my father as a young man was very much involved in the early promotion of the St. Mary's irrigation system by forward-thinking activists, who were cheerfully viewed as stark-raving mad to come up with such a concept at that time. So probably some of that enthusiasm was transferred on to me.

We live in a beautiful part of our country which, when our settlers came, was breathtaking scenery surrounding a semi-arid desert where they set up the foundation of our farming community. One cannot imagine how tough it was to even get seeds in the ground, let alone grow a crop.

Our forefathers did us a great favour in negotiating the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909, leading to the formation of the International Joint Commission in 1921 which has bonded our development of irrigation on both sides of our border with the flow of the St. Mary and Milk Rivers.

Alberta and Montana farmers have worked together with skill and friendship ever since, in a mutual development that continues to be critical to the well being of our citizens, a secure future for our towns and, indeed, the City of Lethbridge itself.

All of us know that across our country there is constantly a focus of concern about the pressures within our urban society. Sadly, at the same time, vast numbers of Canadians seem to forget that if the supports that farmers need are not available to them—if they do not have the conditions to continue to work their land, grow and sell their products and make a decent living for their families—then we are talking about the gradual loss of our small towns, villages, counties and municipalities. We cannot and must not let that happen.

The creation of the Task Force studying administrative measures which we are discussing tonight was a very good idea. Having these public meetings in Havre and Lethbridge offered the chance to lay out the needs and concerns on both sides of the border for the beneficial use of our precious water resources.

For decades our producers have invested heavily in their irrigation systems, based on the flow method of apportioning the water. The accounting has always been founded on the concept of those mutual benefits. To change the allocation assumption now would, I believe, threaten that investment.

I think we all would agree that we cannot play lightly with cross-border success and expect that nothing will change in the climate nor the process that we have come to take for granted for a very long time. On both sides of that shared border we have a good view of our glorious mountains—and a clear indication that one and maybe two of their glaciers will be gone in my lifetime.

I can assure you, for what it is worth, of my support for taking great care, step after step, to maintain the security of the farming community that its leaders have worked so hard to build in both our countries through the structure that has flowed from the creation of the International Joint Commission. We absolutely must maintain that cooperation and fairness that has brought benefits to all our citizens.