

International St. Mary-Milk Rivers Administrative Measures Task Force Public Meeting at  
Havre, Montana on May 23, 2006 – Statement of the Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Department of  
the Interior

The April 2006 report of the International St. Mary-Milk River Administrative Measures Task Force addresses a serious issue affecting the economy and social fabric of Montana's High Line. The Bureau of Reclamation would like to commend the Task Force for completing a thorough review of the administrative measures, and identifying options for improving the accounting of the shared waters of the St. Mary and Milk Rivers. We believe the report not only provides the IJC a sound basis for improving the existing administrative orders, but shows ways for Canada and the United States to collaborate on other options that could lead to a better distribution of the region's boundary waters.

The Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) operates the U.S. St. Mary Canal and associated facilities that divert and store a significant share of the United States' portion of the St. Mary River flow for use in the Milk River basin. This water is used mainly to irrigate 110,000 acres of Reclamation's Milk River Project and 30,000 acres of non-project land. Three cities, Havre, Chinook and Harlem contract for municipal and industrial supplies. The Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge near Malta contracts for supply of water to maintain important migratory waterfowl habitat. Fishing, hunting, water-based recreation, and the riverine environment greatly benefit from the imported St. Mary water.

The Blackfeet Reservation in the headwater of both rivers, and the Fort Belknap Reservation along the middle reaches of the Milk River also have much at stake. Most of the reserved water rights of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre Tribes of the Fort Belknap Indian Community are based on the natural flow of the Milk River. Continued success of the reserved water rights compact for the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation depends on the steady import of St. Mary River water into the Milk River to supply the non-Indian users. The Blackfeet Tribe is working with the State of Montana and the United States government to define its water rights in both river basins.

Reclamation is reviewing the report and will submit written comments by the Task Force's June 30 deadline. Comments will focus on the technical issues related to changing the administrative measures to give a more equitable distribution of waters under the 1921 order of the International Joint Commission. To help assure its comments addresses all the pertinent issues, Reclamation sent a letter to its customers and the tribal governments located on the St. Mary and Milk Rivers asking them to share their perspectives and concerns regarding the Task Force's report. In the spirit of collaboration and cooperation, Reclamation has offered to meet with its customers and the tribes to discuss the report. Mike Ryan, Great Plains Regional Director, and Mary Sexton, Director of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, have agreed to meet and review each other's comments before submitting them to the Task Force.

Thank you for the opportunity to make these comments.