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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2602

February 1, 2011

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Secretary of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0002

Dear Secretary Salazar:

I am writing to you today regarding the Bighorn River in southeastern Montana. This River system is an iconic water system, home to one of the state's most robust blue ribbon fisheries. The Department of Interior plays an enormous role in the health of this river and its ecosystem. Flows are managed by the Bureau of Reclamation through its work at Boysen and Buffalo Bill reservoirs and the Yellowtail Dam and the National Park Service and its management of the Bighorn Canyon Recreation Area. I am very concerned that the Bighorn River is suffering due to a failure to fully recognize the multi-purpose nature of the Yellowtail Dam driven by a set of misplaced and outdated priorities of the National Park Service at the Bighorn Canyon Recreation Area. On October 18, 2010, I met with senior Department of Interior officials as well as the Director of the National Park Service and the Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation to discuss opportunities to improve the management of this valuable resource. Today I am writing to follow-up on that meeting and request a progress report on each of the items discussed.

The Bighorn River is an iconic water system in Montana's southeastern corner, home to one of the state's most robust blue ribbon fisheries. The fishing industry in Montana generates about $3 billion per year, statewide. Anglers spend between 70,000 to 90,000 days per year fishing on the Bighorn River, contributing about $30 million per year to the local economy. The Bighorn River, like most western waterways, is also home to conflict between upstream and downstream users.

Flows in the Bighorn River are controlled by the Bureau of Reclamation. The most direct impact stems from the Bureau's operation of Yellowtail Dam, a multi-purpose project that supports hydropower, irrigation, and flood control, as well as recreation and conservation. I am very concerned that the Bureau's management of these features fails to recognize the multi-purpose nature of the project and does not optimize the use of the water resources available. Part of this situation appears to be driven by misplaced priorities of the National Park Service at the Bighorn Canyon Recreation Area. I urge you to conduct a full review of the management of this system.

I am concerned about the excessive focus on recreation at certain locations within the boundaries of the Bighorn Canyon Recreation Area, and the failure to consider the impact of that focus on the downstream fishery. To address this, the Bureau of Reclamation should review its

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management of Yellowtail Dam and ensure that it is taking a balanced approach, and the National Park Service should re-evaluate its priorities on the River. The Bureau of Reclamation's development of interim operating criteria is a step in the right direction, and I am pleased steps are being taken to incorporate the views of Montanans into that decision-making process. I continue to believe that maximum opportunity for public review and comment should be provided, particularly on a document of this importance. The Bureau should also ensure that its management of the river is optimized by consolidating the management of Boysen and Buffalo Bill reservoirs and the Yellowtail Dam under one individual. Using this approach, water management decisions in each location can be optimized.

In addition, the National Park Service should update its 1996 Water Resources Management Plan which fails to address the downstream fishery. Additionally, the National Park Service should re-evaluate its prioritization of recreational opportunities at the Horseshoe Bend site, which has already been identified as unsustainable into the future due to sedimentation issues. Continued prioritization of recreation at this site commands resource and water management decisions that impact recreation and cause damage at other sites within the boundaries of the Recreation Area and at the downstream fishery.

A lack of current, accurate information about use and economic value is also impeding appropriate prioritization and decision-making on the Bighorn River. The National Park Service and the Bureau of Reclamation should conduct an updated study, using accurate counting methods, current data, and modern analysis to quantify the economic impact of recreation both upstream and downstream of the Yellowtail Dam.

During our meeting, I requested that the National Park Service update its 1996 Water Resource Management Plan to reflect the downstream fishery resources that are part of the aquatic ecosystem on the Bighorn and to evaluate the appropriateness of the management priorities in that plan. In addition, I requested that the Department develop the economic analysis described above. I am writing to request an update on your progress on these two items.

The Bureau of Reclamation and the National Park Service have a difficult job to balance upstream and downstream uses, and the Department has a difficult job to ensure that the two agencies are cooperating for the good of the entire ecosystem. I trust that the Department can find a way to balance the priorities of all of the water users who care about recreation, flood control, and power generation on the Bighorn to ensure that adversity and prosperity are equally shared. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Max Baucus