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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2602

January 4, 2011

Mr. Dan Jewell
Area Manager
Bureau of Reclamation, Montana Area Office
PO Box 30137
Billings, Montana 59107

Dear Dan:

Those of us from the west abide by the saying: whiskey is for drinking, water is for fighting. Water is the lifeblood of our economy, our environment, and our outdoor heritage in Montana. The Bighorn River is no exception. The Bighorn 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 $30 million dollars per year to the local economy. The Bighorn River, like most western waterways, is also home to conflict between upstream and downstream users.

The Bureau of Reclamation and the National Park Service have a difficult job to do to balance upstream and downstream uses. The key word there is BALANCE. Montanans recognize that we are all in this together. Upstream and downstream users must share the consequences in times of water shortage as well as water surplus, and ensure that no permanent, unrecoverable damage is done to the irreplaceable resources in the Bighorn.

You have a difficult job. People in Montana, and I suspect, people in Wyoming are going to complain and raise concerns. Someone once said to me – this is a western water project, no one is going to be happy. Probably true, but, level of difficulty is not an excuse for simply retaining the status quo.

The Yellowtail Dam is a multi-purpose project supporting hydropower, irrigation, and flood control, as well as recreation and conservation. The structure does not exist solely to support recreational opportunities within the boundaries of Bighorn Canyon Recreation Area. I am very concerned that the Bureau's management of this feature fails to recognize the multi-purpose nature of the project.

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Today's meeting on the Draft Operating Criteria may be a step in the right direction. I am pleased that this group is gathered here today to provide comments directly from the users of this system to the Bureau.

Today, the Bureau of Reclamation will be hearing comments from a wide variety of stakeholders, each of whom is likely to believe that their priority should be the Bureau's priority. I am no different – the downstream fishery, flood control, and power generation must be a part of the Bureau's balanced management plan for this structure. But, I trust that the Bureau can find a way to BALANCE these priorities with those of upstream users to ensure that adversity as well as prosperity are equally shared.

Wallace Stegner wrote in Marking the Sparrow's Fall: "It is true that the West's history is punctuated with the lives of rugged individualists—Henry Villard, Marcus Dailey, Henry Miller, Jim Hill—but they built such things as railroad empires, land empires, and the Anaconda Copper Company. Who built the West as a living-place, a frugal, hard, gloriously satisfying civilization scrabbling for its existence against the forces of weather and a land as fragile as it is demanding, was not rugged individuals but cooperators, neighbors who knew how to help out in crises, who could get together to build a school and figure out a way to get the kids there, pool their efforts to search for lost cattle or lost people, and join in infrequent blowouts, dances, and fairs."

I trust that the Bureau, and each of us, will find a way to work together as neighbors to manage this resource for us all.

Sincerely,

Max Baucus

MSB/bd

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