JON TESTER
MONTANA

COMMITTEES
APPROPRIATIONS
BANKING
INDIAN AFFAIRS
VETERANS' AFFAIRS
HOMELAND SECURITY AND
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

United States Senate

SENATE HART BUILDING
SUITE 724
WASHINGTON, DC 20510
202-224-2644

MONTANA TOLL FREE NUMBER
1-866-554-4403

INTERNET:
http://tester.senate.gov/contact

January 28, 2011

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Secretary of the Interior
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Salazar:

I am writing to comment on the Bureau of Reclamation's draft operating criteria for Bighorn Lake, and urge you to ensure all users--upstream and downstream--are accounted for in this process.

As with every multi-use water project, operating the Bighorn Lake and Yellowtail Dam requires a host of difficult decisions. The Bureau must consider a multitude of competing factors and find the delicate path to address them all to the maximum extent possible. This water system is authorized for flood control, hydropower, irrigation, recreation, fish and wildlife, and sediment storage. An equitable management of the resource is a complicated issue, but a very important one.

The Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area in Wyoming is an important cultural and recreational resource. But the operation of the lake must be accomplished in a way that also gives proper weight to the many important downstream uses of the water. Water must not only maintain the lake and the recreation area, but must also be released in proper quantities and with proper consistency to maintain the 50 million dollar annual downstream tourism economy that depends on it. The Bighorn River is the lifeblood of southeastern Montana, and if flows come too high and fast, or too low and slow, my constituents pay a real price to their economy and quality of life.

In the past, decisions have been made that appear to provide relatively minor benefit to the National Recreation Area at significant expense to the blue ribbon fishery, power generation, recreation at the north end of the lake, and the downstream communities. Rather than providing stable and predictable flows and lake levels for all users, the lake has been brought to a very full level early in the season, at the expense of downstream river flows. Once the lake is filled to this high target, the Bureau is left without the flexibility to effectively achieve the flood control purposes of the project while still producing power for the region.

BOZEMAN (406) 586-4450 | BUTTE (406) 723-3277 | GLENDIVE (406) 365-2391 | GREAT FALLS (406) 452-9585 | HELENA (406) 449-5401 | KALISPELL (406) 257-3360
BILLINGS (406) 252-0550 | MISSOULA (406) 728-3003

When the lake is filled to an unnecessarily high capacity, late season rains can necessitate large, rapid water releases on an emergency basis. These releases reduce hydropower generation, damage downstream infrastructure, and stress an important Montana blue ribbon fishery. I encourage you to work to craft an operating plan that maintains a more predictable and stable flow, makes volatile releases less necessary, and makes judicious use of the flood pool. I also encourage you to incorporate all of the river system's dams into the plan, so that water flows can work in concert, rather than opposition.

I applaud the Bureau for engaging in an open and transparent process, and working to engage stakeholders throughout the area. Particularly with water issues, with such an important and immediate economic impact, working together could not be more critical. I look forward to working with you to achieve a fair solution.

Sincerely

Jon Tester
United States Senator