



Fort Belknap Indian Community Obtains Introduction of Water Settlement Bill in the United States House

Act would resolve long-standing issues, avoid costly litigation

Harlem, MT – Representative Ruben Gallego introduced the “Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Tribes of the Fort Belknap Indian Community Water Rights Settlement Act of 2019” in the U.S. House of Representatives. Gallego serves as Chairman of the House Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States. The Fort Belknap Indian Community (FBIC) is grateful for Gallego’s support and commitment to protecting and settling Indian water rights.

“Our Water Rights Settlement Act will confirm our water rights and provide critical funding for the rehabilitation and expansion of our Indian irrigation project and providing municipal water supplies,” said Andy Werk, Jr., President of the FBIC Council, the governing body of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Tribes in north central Montana. “The Act will allow us to improve the economic conditions on our Reservation while also providing certainty to water users on and off our Reservation. We are thankful for Representative Gallego and Senator Tester’s support for our Act.”

The Act was introduced by Senator Jon Tester in the U.S. Senate on December 19, 2019. Introduction of the Act in both the House and the Senate is an important step and will allow for additional hearings and consideration of the Act. Eventually the Act must pass both sides of Congress.

The Act is supported by irrigators who will benefit from agreements originally negotiated as a part of FBIC’s Water Compact. The FBIC Water Compact was overwhelmingly approved by the Montana State Legislature with bi-partisan support in 2001, but approval by the U.S. Congress is still needed. The Act would approve those agreements, protect FBIC’s water rights and provide funding to settle FBIC’s water rights claims—claims that have been outstanding for more than 100 years.

President Werk commented, “Water is a precious resource and sacred to our people. Passage of our Water Rights Settlement Act will help us move forward by protecting our water rights, settling our claims, providing funding to improve our water infrastructure, and creating economic development that will benefit our current and future generations.”

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