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December 19, 2019

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Tester Introduces Historic Fort Belknap Indian Community Water Compact

*Bill will ratify Tribal water rights, fund critical irrigation projects, and
invest in economy*

(U.S. Senate) – U.S. Senator Jon Tester today introduced the historic Fort Belknap Indian Community (FBIC) Water Compact in the United States Senate.

The FBIC Water Compact will ratify the FBIC water rights settlement with the State of Montana, establish resources for critical water infrastructure development, provide for Tribal and non-Tribal irrigation rights, and return sacred FBIC lands to federal trust.

“The FBIC Water Compact will provide certainty for water users, help boost our state’s economy, and protect the rights of irrigators in northcentral Montana—all with the support of a broad array of stakeholders across the state,” Tester said. **“It took years of hard work and negotiation to get here, and I look forward to working with our Tribal leaders, businesses, and recreationists to preserve our state’s most valuable resource and get this bill signed into law.”**

The *Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Tribes of the Fort Belknap Indian Community Water Rights Settlement Act of 2019* will provide nearly \$630 million to improve infrastructure and economic development for the FBIC and improve the efficiency of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation [Milk River Project](#), which furnishes water for the irrigation of about 121,000 acres of Tribal and non-Tribal land. The bill will also restore tribal management to 58,553 acres of state and federal land for the FBIC.

Tester’s bill is supported by the Fort Belknap Indian Community, the Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council, and conservation and sportsmen groups across the state. A water rights settlement is also supported by local irrigators.

After more than a decade of negotiations, the FBIC Tribal Council approved its Water Compact with the State of Montana in 2001. The Montana Legislature approved the Compact later that spring. FBIC and Senator Tester have worked together for years to bring together partners to advance this critical settlement. The Compact must now pass through Congress, be approved by a simple majority vote of FBIC members, and be entered into the Montana Water Court as a final decree.

“We are grateful for Senator Tester’s support of our Water Rights Settlement Act. Settlement is long overdue,” **said Andy Werk, Fort Belknap Indian Community President.** “The U.S. Supreme Court affirmed our water rights on the Milk River more than 100 years ago in the “Winters” case that also affirmed water rights for reservation tribes establishing permanent homelands. Then, almost 20 years ago, our Water Compact overwhelmingly passed the Montana Legislature on a bipartisan basis. The settlement will provide important water infrastructure on our Reservation, certainty for Montana water users, and economic opportunities that will benefit our Reservation and the entire region. Approval by Congress is needed and will provide the resources we need to settle our claims and provide water to our Reservation.”

“Senator Tester deserves great credit for crafting this important legislation that secures both Tribal and non-Tribal water rights and rights a historic wrong by returning the Grinnell Notch to the Tribes,” **said Tom France, Regional Executive Director for the National Wildlife Federation.**

“After a century of injustice, it is time to remedy the historic inequities faced by the Fort Belknap Indian Community. We support this important legislation which will resolve tribal water rights, support the tribe’s economic development, and restore land to the reservation that was unjustly removed. We thank Senator Tester for his leadership and look forward to ensuring that the legislation is improved and signed into law,” **said Paul Spittler, Director of Wilderness Policy at The Wilderness Society.**

“For more than 150 years, the U.S. government repeatedly violated the water rights and mismanaged the water resources of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Tribes, allowing some of those resources to become contaminated by gold mining,” **said John Todd, Deputy Director of the Montana Wilderness Association.** “The government also forced the Tribes off of land that is sacred to the members of the Tribes, land that had been part of their reservation until gold was discovered there. Senator Tester's legislation acknowledges this history of injustice the Tribes have suffered and offers them reparations they should have received long ago.”

“In addition to honoring some long overdue Tribal claims, this proposal will benefit wildlife populations, habitat integrity, and water quality,” **said Dave Chadwick, Executive Director of the Montana Wildlife Federation.** “We are also grateful to Tribal leaders for their commitment to protecting hunting and fishing access by non-Tribal citizens, and making this proposal a real win for all Montanans.”

As a former Chairman and long-time member of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, Tester is a steadfast champion for Tribes and Montana water users. He originally sponsored the Blackfoot Water Compact in 2010 and guided it to the President's desk to be signed into law in 2016. He also sponsored the Crow Water Compact, which was signed into law and ratified in 2010. Earlier this month, Tester introduced the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Water Compact along with Senator Steve Daines. He [first introduced the CSKT Water Compact in 2016](#), but this is the first time it has gotten bipartisan support.

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