



Inspiring Native Leadership So Our Communities Flourish!

July 7, 2020

Senator John Hoeven, Chairman
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Senator Tom Udall, Vice Chairman
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Support for S. 3019, the Montana Water Rights Protection Act

Dear Chairman Hoeven and Vice Chairman Udall:

On behalf of Western Native Voice, we write in support of S. 3019, the Montana Water Rights Protection Act, jointly introduced by Senators Steve Daines and Jon Tester of Montana. This legislation will provide Congressional approval for the water compact negotiated between the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) and the State of Montana, and it also transfers the National Bison Range from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to the CSKT. We strongly support both objectives.

Western Native Voice is a non-partisan, Native-led, nonprofit organization, based in Billings, that works on all of Montana's Indian reservations and key urban centers to increase Native involvement in civic affairs, especially voting. We supported the CSKT Compact when it was approved by the 2015 Legislature. It is wonderful to see bi-partisan support for this historic legislation. The compact represents more than a decade of negotiations and has been the subject of dozens of public meetings and hearings. It has been fully vetted.

Passage of this legislation will settle the CSKT's water rights and also claims regarding mismanagement of the tribes' water resources. Importantly, by settling the CSKT water claims, it avoids decades of water rights litigation by hundreds of Montana farmers and irrigators who would be forced to litigate their rights. That is precisely why Montana's major agricultural organizations are also in support of this legislation. The legislation also provides for rehabilitation of an aging irrigation project. This will improve overall water efficiency for the future benefitting all water users, including for fish and wildlife.

We also strongly support the provision of the bill that restores tribal ownership of the National Bison Range to the CSKT. The courts have ruled that the unilateral taking of the CSKT's lands for the bison range was unconstitutional. The CSKT were leaders in bison preservation long before their lands were taken for the bison range, and so it is just and right that these lands be restored to tribal ownership especially where, as here, the lands are right in the middle of the

Flathead Reservation. The CSKT are recognized as national leaders in conservation and fish and wildlife management. Time and time again they have demonstrated they are fully capable of managing tribal natural resources, resulting in extensive fish and wildlife restoration on their lands, and strong collaborative relationships with federal, state and other fish and wildlife managers. The legislation requires that the bison range lands continue to be managed exclusively for bison and wildlife purposes, as well as for public access.

We appreciate the Committee holding this important hearing and ask that this letter be entered into the hearing record for 2. 3019

Sincerely,



Pat Smith
Chairman
Western Native Voice
Board of Directors