

National water groups weigh helping St. Mary diversion group

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The St. Mary Rehabilitation Working Group made quite an impression this week on two national advocacy groups that may help the advisory panel in its mission to get the federal government to spread the cost of rebuilding the St. Mary diversion and come forward with a significant funding contribution.

Representatives of the National Water Resources Association and the Family Farm Alliance, two organizations that deal with water issues in Western states, toured the facility Tuesday with Gov. Brian Schweitzer, Blackfeet tribal representatives, a Bureau of Reclamation regional director and working group members. They then met with the full working group Wednesday at a meeting in Great Falls.

Working group executive director Larry Mires said National Water Resources Association executive vice president Thomas Donnelly and Family Farm Alliance executive director Dan Keppen visited the site to investigate whether the groups would get involved in the effort to rehabilitate the crumbling system of canals, siphons and drop structures that keeps the Milk River flowing year-round by augmenting its flow with water from the St. Mary River.

The adjusted flow of the Milk is used to irrigate more than 100,000 acres of farmland throughout the basin and provide drinking water for Havre and other communities in the region.

"Both of these organizations, unlike a professional lobbying firm, deal specifically with the issues we're dealing with," Mires said Thursday. "It only makes sense that we work with them."

Donnelly and Keppen will take the information they gathered back to their organization's boards, which will decide whether the groups will offer their help.

Keppen said his organization doesn't usually advocate for specific projects, but this one is unique. The diversion is an example of other aging water systems in the West, and its rehabilitation could provide a framework to address those other issues, he said.

"The solution that is going to be needed to take care of this problem is going to be pretty innovative," Keppen said. "If that is the case, that's going to provide a template for us to use in other parts of the West."

He said the group would be able to do much for the project if its board of directors decides to take on the diversion's repair. The Family Farm Alliance would work with members of Congress and try to publicize the issue across the West.

"There are opportunities for us to educate folks in Congress," Keppen said. "I'd like to see some exposure West-wide on this. People need to understand what's happening up there. There are a lot of different things we can do.

"I was very impressed with the makeup (of the working group) and the very collaborative, constructive approach," Keppen added. "I'm impressed that your governor is so engaged in this issue. That's going to be very important in this issue's success."

The alliance advocates specifically for farmers, ranchers, irrigation districts and allied industries in the West.

The working group decided Wednesday to join the Montana Water Resources Association, which gives it membership in the National Water Resources Association, a nonprofit federation of state organizations whose membership includes rural water districts, municipal water entities, corporations and individuals.

Mires said the association's board will decide whether to make the diversion's reconstruction one of its primary issues. Donnelly offered Mires the chance to make a presentation on the diversion at the organization's national meeting on Nov. 8.

"I gladly took up that offer," Mires said. Communicating with other people dealing with water issues is one of the ways the working group can push the rehabilitation forward, he added.

"What's important is networking on a national level to meet people with similar problems," Mires said.

The two organizations concentrate solely on water issues and will be able to help working group members stay abreast of issues in Washington, D.C., that could affect the project, he added.

"All they do is monitor water issues. They're not interested in all of the other scenarios out there," Mires said.

He said the groups will be able to provide working group members with daily updates on happenings in Washington, D.C.

Keppen said he was astounded by the amount of deterioration to the diversion's facilities. The fact that all of the infrastructure is located in remote areas will drive up the cost of rehabilitation. The latest cost estimate for the repairs is about \$120 million.

"When you go out and look at these drop structures, they look like Roman ruins," he said. "They are big, concrete structures that are crumbling and have exposed rebar."

Mires agreed that the diversion is in bad shape. The diversion dam, located on the St. Mary River southeast of Babb, has a number of weak spots, he said.

"It's really wearing and deteriorating at the base of the diversion dam," Mires said.

The working group is still planning to get Congress to consider authorizing the reconstruction of the diversion in January. Members want the federal government to share the cost with state and local governments. The diversion was originally conceived only as an irrigation project. Irrigators in the Milk River Basin are responsible for all of the operating and maintenance costs. The federal government does not take into account the other benefits provided by the diversion, which include flood control, recreation, wildlife and municipalities.