



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF RECLAMATION
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Greg Gianforte
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Subject: Milk River Project, St. Mary Canal, St. Mary River Siphon Catastrophic Failure

Governor Gianforte:

On Monday, June 17, 2024, the St. Mary River Siphon suffered a catastrophic failure that necessitated ceasing operations of the St. Mary Canal. The St. Mary Canal is a key component of the Milk River Project that provides 60 – 80 percent of the water for irrigation and potable uses in Northern Montana through a transbasin diversion from the Hudson Bay to the Missouri River drainage.

Reclamation has been working closely with the Milk River Joint Board of Control (MRBJOC), the Blackfeet Nation, the State of Montana, and other key parties as we assess options of returning the St. Mary Canal to service and restoring critical water supplies.

On July 3, 2024, Reclamation made two key decisions that are instrumental in returning the canal to service. The first relates to the Commissioner of Reclamation exercising her delegated authority in the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009 (Pub. L. 111-11). Commissioner Touton has determined that both the St. Mary River and Halls Coulee Siphons are qualified Emergency Extraordinary Maintenance (EXM). The determination by the Commissioner qualifies the replacement of both sets of siphons on terms more favorable to project beneficiaries than the current Operation, Maintenance and Rehabilitation allocation.

The second key decision is to focus efforts on replacement of the St. Mary River Siphon. A technical team: including staff from Reclamation, MRJBOC Consultants, the Blackfeet Tribe, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, met on site on June 25, 2024, to assess the condition of the siphon and to explore if any viable alternatives exist for partial restoration of service. Based on input from the technical team, I concurred with the recommendation not to pursue a temporary repair and to instead prioritize permanent replacement.

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Reclamation has also initiated a temporary transfer of operation, maintenance and replacement responsibility for the St. Mary River and Halls Coulee Siphons to the MRJBOC. This will allow Reclamation to work closely with the MRJBOC to expeditiously work to return to St. Mary Canal to service. This follows the relationship that was developed for the emergency replacement of Drop 5 in 2020.

Please feel free to reach out me if you have any questions at (801) 699-6341. On behalf of Reclamation, I am grateful for all of the support provided by the State of Montana and look forward to continued assistance as we work to restore this key source of supply for the Milk River Project.

Sincerely,

Brent C Esplin
Regional Director

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