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CITY OF
Lethbridge

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August 17th, 2004

International Joint Commission under the
Boundary Water Treaty
Secretary, Canadian Section
234 Laurier Avenue West, 22nd Floor
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 6K6

Dear Members of the International Joint Commission:

I am writing on behalf of the City of Lethbridge to urge the International Joint Commission not to reopen at this time the Water Apportionment Agreement of 1921 governing the waters of the St. Mary and Milk rivers.

In requesting a reopening of the IJC agreement of 1921, the Governor of Montana was not doubt responding to strong pressures from within her state. During the IJC public meeting held in Lethbridge on July 29, 2004 it became clear that this pressure takes three forms.

First, both the St. Mary and Milk river systems appear to be impacted by climate change, as we move towards a future in which drought is more common than not. The Milk River, for example, derives most of its water from ice fields in Waterton National Park and Glacier National Park, and those ice fields have been dramatically degraded over the last several decades.

Second, as both Canadian and American speakers at the Lethbridge meeting of the IJC noted, development of water infrastructure in Montana has not kept pace with new knowledge or "best practices." Much of the irrigation infrastructure on the Montana side is not only out-of-date, it is inefficient and wasteful.

A third problem facing the Government of Montana relates to the prior water rights of First Nations communities, an issue that does not appear to have been addressed by American signatories of the 1921 agreement. The State of Montana and the U.S. Federal Government recently allocated water from the St. Mary River to members of the Fort Belknap Reservation in recognition of their prior rights and discussions have commenced with the Blackfeet. The assertion of First Nations water rights at this time complicates an already difficult situation. To some, the issue anticipates a future in which more people will be competing for a shrinking resource.

Notwithstanding the considerable challenges facing producers and government officials in Montana, the City of Lethbridge believes that reopening the apportionment agreement on the St. Mary and Milk rivers at this time would be unwarranted, inconsistent, and ruinously disruptive to the economy of Southern Alberta. Nor would it provide anything more than a temporary respite for Montana farmers. Let me briefly explain.

Rick Ross, a spokesperson for the Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce, was one of several speakers at the July 29th meeting who noted that the 1921 agreement spurred Canadian investment in dams, irrigation canals, and water pipes. It has also led to the creation of an extensive food-processing sector that is linked to irrigation crops such as sugar beets, potatoes, beans, corn, and canola. This investment was based on confidence in the international agreement on water sharing for Alberta and Montana users. Sizable investments made over the last 83 years by governments, private corporations, and individual farmers in Southern Alberta would be at risk if the sharing agreement were to be opened for political purposes.

The City of Lethbridge further suggests that allocating Montana a larger share of the St. Mary and Milk rivers would be a stopgap measure that would do nothing to ensure a sustainable future for Montana producers. The solution to the water crisis on both sides of the border lies not in assuming either partner will have more water in the future—in fact, the science leads us to believe we will have less—but rather in making the best use of what little we have. Several American speakers at the Lethbridge IJC meeting acknowledged that the Montana side of the 49th parallel has not seen anything like the investment in state-of-the-art water management infrastructure that is evident in Alberta. The extensive water management infrastructure on the Alberta side of the border includes off-stream storage facilities, lined irrigation canals, and irrigation pipelines. This investment reflects a commitment that began with the signing of the IJC treaty 83 years ago.

But the sustainability of irrigation farming and a related food processing sector in the St. Mary and Milk River watersheds does not rest with infrastructure alone. It depends on research as well. The commitment on the Canadian side of the border to water management research is evident in a number of projects. At the Agriculture Canada Research Centre in Lethbridge the federal and Alberta governments work side-by-side, with the federal government assuming responsibility for pure research and the Alberta Agriculture Irrigation Research arm assuming responsibility for field applications.

Water is also a central research priority for the University of Lethbridge. In the last three years U of L researchers have played a key role in establishing the Canada Water Network and the Water Institute for Semi-Arid Ecosystems (WISE). The U of L is also the administrative home of the Alberta Ingenuity Advanced Water Centre. And finally, the U of L has just received a federal grant to build a Semi-Arid Ecosystem Research Network linking researchers from central British Columbia to Winnipeg, Manitoba.

It is the position of the City of Lethbridge that if the future of water on the western plains is anything like that predicted by scientists, citizens in both our countries would do better to enhance both our infrastructure and our knowledge. Communities on both sides of the 49th parallel won't cope with prolonged drought conditions by focussing on getting a bigger share of a diminishing resource. We need instead to focus on achieving "best in world" status in using water wisely, efficiently, and fairly.

Yours truly,



Robert D. (Bob) Tarleck, M.A., M.Ed.
Mayor

RDT/klh