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Testimony of Senator Tom Daschle before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

on

S.1996, the Oglala Sioux Tribe Angostura Irrigation Project Rehabilitation and Development Act

June 16, 2004

Good afternoon, Mr. Vice Chairman. Thank you for chairing this hearing on legislation of vital importance to the Oglala Sioux Tribe. Your dedication and committed leadership to Indian country over the years is something that Native Americans in South Dakota and across the country appreciate very deeply.

I also want to thank the Chairman, Senator Campbell, for his leadership and his willingness to schedule this hearing. Of course, I am pleased to have my good friend, Senator Johnson, here today. He has cosponsored S. 1996 with me and has been a steadfast advocate for not only our South Dakota tribal constituents, but Indian country at large.

I have worked with the leadership of the Oglala Sioux Tribe to develop this legislation, which is intended to benefit the Lakota people by restoring critical water resources and promoting economic development on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. I am pleased to be here today and join my good friend, President John Yellow Bird Steele, who is providing important testimony in support of this legislation.

The Angostura Unit of the Bureau of Reclamation was first authorized by Congress under the Water Conservation and Utilization Act of 1939, and later continued under the Flood Control Act of 1994, otherwise known as the Pick-Sloan Missouri River Basin Project. The program consisted primarily of building the six mainstem dams on the Missouri River, to be operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, along with several Bureau-operated irrigation and water development projects. The Angostura Unit was designed to provide irrigation to 12,218 acres of farm and ranch land in the Angostura Irrigation District, as well as flood control, fish, and wildlife benefits.

Tribes in South Dakota existed long before the creation of the Bureau of Reclamation or the implementation of the water development projects in South Dakota today. Tribes, therefore, have a vested interest in the operation of these projects. While the projects have been helpful in meeting their authorized goals, they also contribute to adverse economic and environmental conditions on the lands that surround them. In particular, the Missouri River reservoirs managed by the Corps led to the taking of thousands of acres of fertile river land from Indian tribes, and with that taking, the tribes lost valuable natural resources.

Federal agencies were directed through subsequent acts to provide for the rehabilitation of the lost fish and wildlife habitat and to generally improve conditions on the reservations, but results were slow in coming, and often never materialized. Legislation was enacted several years ago to finally address some of these issues, but much more remains to be done before South Dakota's tribes realize the benefits that Bureau of Reclamation and Corps projects have provided other parts of the state.

In addition to the irrigation benefits the Angostura Unit provides to ranchers and agricultural producers in the area, a substantial recreation industry has developed around the reservoir, including boating and fishing. However, members of the Oglala Sioux Tribe on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation have not seen equal economic benefits from the Angostura Unit. The Cheyenne River forms the northern boundary of the reservation, is an important natural resource for the tribe, and is essential to the survival of riparian vegetation, traditional medicinal plants, fish, and wildlife habitat. The impoundment of water in the reservoir has curbed the Cheyenne River's natural flow. This, coupled with the worst drought the region has seen in a decade, severely affects water resources on the reservation.

The Oglala Sioux Tribe, led by President Steele, has long had a desire to address these problems, and this legislation is an important manifestation of the Tribe's effort. During revision of the Angostura Unit's water management plan in 2002, the Bureau considered a variety of alternatives for future operations, but the tribe felt its concerns about the economic and environmental effects the reservoir has on the reservation were not adequately addressed. One alternative considered by the Bureau proposed returning natural flows to the Cheyenne River, which would provide more water downstream for the tribe and would improve reservation conditions. The Bureau took a different approach, however – one that calls for improved irrigation operations and a more efficient distribution of water resources in the irrigation district. These improvements would help free up additional water resources and improve conditions on the Cheyenne River that would benefit the tribe.

The Angostura Irrigation Project Rehabilitation and Development Act would authorize the efficiency improvements proposed by the Bureau of Reclamation, benefitting both existing water users and the tribe. The legislation also would authorize the creation of a trust fund to be used by the tribe to promote economic development, improve infrastructure, and enhance the education, health, and social welfare of the Oglala Lakota people. This dual track will help ensure continued and efficient operation of the Angostura Unit and the Angostura Irrigation District, while also helping to mitigate the problems facing the Oglala Sioux Tribe, and providing the tribe with the natural and financial resources it needs to plan for the future and improve the quality of life for all tribal members.

Mr. Vice Chairman, this legislation is just one small, yet important, step toward ensuring that U.S. natural resource policies are fair to American Indians, and I look forward to working with you, Chairman Campbell, and the members of this committee to enact it.