

Barrasso battles Crow water bill

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Thursday, February 5, 2009 9:30 PM MST

BILLINGS, Mont. -- Montana's Congressional delegation has revived a \$527 million bill that would settle the Crow Tribe's water rights claims, after making changes to a similar measure that was opposed last session by a Wyoming lawmaker.

The settlement would resolve water claims by the tribe that go back decades.

It would entitle the Crow to 300,000 acre feet of water annually from Bighorn Lake and 500,000 acre feet from the Bighorn River. The measure also authorizes \$527 million for an industrial and municipal water system, a tribal irrigation system and other projects.

A similar measure last year from Sen. Jon Tester, a Montana Democrat, passed out of a Senate committee but never came to a full vote. It was opposed by Wyoming Republican Sen. John Barrasso.

"We've been working with him [Barrasso] now for close to a year on this," Tester said Wednesday. "I don't see it the same way he does, but we'll try to find common ground and move forward."

However, Barrasso spokesman Gregory Keeley said Wednesday that "there is no agreement in place" between the two senators.

"Sen. Barrasso will continue his efforts to make sure Wyoming's needs are met," Keeley said.

One change in the new bill clarifies that the Bureau of Reclamation would handle competing water demands on the Bighorn River and Bighorn Lake, which span the Montana-Wyoming border.

Another change specifies that the Crow settlement has no bearing on a pending U.S. Supreme Court case that deals with the Yellowstone River drainage, which includes the Bighorn River. In that case, Montana has claimed Wyoming violated a water compact that details how much water each state can use.

Crow Tribe Vice Chairman Cedric Black Eagle said the tribe was willing to "tweak the language" in the bill to satisfy Wyoming's concerns, but would be reluctant to embrace any broader changes.

"We are making sure the rights of the Crow tribe are protected. We're not going to do anything to jeopardize that," Black Eagle said.

Tester said any remaining differences over the bill would have to be worked out in the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, which counts both Tester and Barrasso as members. But he said major changes to the bill were unlikely to be made because it could delay its passage.

The bill's \$527 million price tag includes \$200 million for a municipal and industrial water system, \$160 million for irrigation and \$40 million for economic development. Most of the rest of the money would be spent on maintaining those projects and for operations of Yellowtail Dam, a Bureau of Reclamation project within the reservation.

It's been almost a decade since a similar compact was signed by the tribe and state officials in Montana.

Any settlement approved by Congress would have to be voted on by the full tribal membership.