

Salazar to highlight water challenges in West

By MATTHEW BROWN

Associated Press writer

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BILLINGS, Mont. -- Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said Monday that the West's limited water supplies face growing pressure from agricultural uses, changing demographics and climate change -- underscoring the need for more federal money for water projects.

Salazar spoke at a water issues forum sponsored by Montana State University-Billings, part of a two-day trip to Montana made at the request of Democratic U.S. Sen. Max Baucus.

As a Colorado native whose family has farmed arid lands for 150 years, Salazar said he understands the region's urgent need for secure water supplies.

"There is an absolutely inextricable tie between water supplies and food supplies in this country," he said. "We need to make sure we're beating our drum loudly."

He said climate change threatens to make dry areas in the West even drier -- even as a rapidly expanding population and ongoing agricultural needs amplify demands for water.

The secretary also said the administration was releasing \$60 million for previously announced drinking water supply projects on the Fort Peck and Rocky Boy reservations. That's a small installment on billions of dollars in pending water projects on Indian reservations and elsewhere -- a price tag that in the past has far exceeded available funding.

Baucus said he and the state's other Democratic senator, Jon Tester, would use Salazar's visit to press for his agency to release more water into the Big Horn River.

The Bighorn flows into southeastern Montana out of Wyoming and has been a long-standing point of contention between the two states. Interior's Bureau of Reclamation controls releases into the river from Yellowtail Dam.

Salazar pledged to more closely examine the issue, but declined to side with Montana in the interstate fight.

Tester and Baucus said Salazar's Western roots should help him sympathize with Montana's water needs - - something Baucus said wasn't the case under the Bush administration.

"Our annual precipitation in Montana is 13, 14 inches," Baucus said. "Washington, D.C., is 44 inches a year. It just doesn't rain here, so we really need to protect our water."