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Letter from Representative Burdick to Thomas Curtis Responding to Curtis's Request for Burdick's Views on the Inundation of the Fort Berthold Reservation due to Construction of the Garrison Dam, June 25, 1951

Usher Burdick

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June 25, 1951

Honorable Thomas B. Curtis
House Office Building
Washington 25, D. C.

Dear Colleague:

This is in reply to your letter of June 22, with reference to the matters discussed in the reprint from the June issue of ADVANCE which you enclosed.

A lot--a very great lot--of the damage to be done to Indian lands and lands owned by whites could be avoided at the Garrison Dam if the Army engineers had followed the law creating the dam. When this Act was passed, based upon the signed agreement of the Army and the Bureau of Reclamation engineers, it was agreed to for a pool of 17 million acre-feet. That was incorporated into the law. No greater pool has ever been authorized. The Army engineers, however, have taken it upon themselves, against the law, to create a pool of 23 million acre-feet of water. This extra pool of six million acre-feet will boost the water level from around 1830 feet above sea-level to 1850 feet. This extra twenty feet cleans out all the bottom lands of the Indians and covers 80,000 acres of the best lands in the white area around Williston.

This whole performance is unnecessary, as all of the multiple purposes of the dam can be accomplished on a water level of 1830 feet. Those multiple purposes are:

1. Creation of hydro-electric power. This extra twenty feet of level would create more power if it was intended to use this elevation for that purpose---but that isn't the intention. It is intended to use this extra level from which to drain water off for irrigation purposes by the Army engineers, who signed up an agreement when the act was passed, to leave all irrigation to the Department of the Interior.
2. Navigation. Aid to navigation and the creation of a nine-foot channel from Sioux City to St. Louis can be accomplished by an elevation of 1830 feet. Flood control is in the same category---and in addition, flood control by the building of this dam will be disappointing because at the times when flood waters cover the Southland the area around Garrison dam is frozen as solid as cement.

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3. Irrigation. That was left to the Bureau of Reclamation, and that Bureau does not think the Garrison dam is the answer to irrigation.

The taking of Indian lands at Fort Berthold Reservation could be reduced 50% if the Army engineers would follow the law.

Now we don't intend to let these arrogant engineers race pell-mell over the people, including the Indians. We intend to hold them to the law. Whenever they attempt to fill a pool of 23 million acre feet they will be met by an injunction. We do not have to attempt to enjoin the government; we enjoin the engineers who have taken it upon themselves to violate the law.

There is a further question, and that is the value and necessity of building dams across the Missouri for the creation of hydroelectric power. The new process of creation power out in the coal fields is now demonstrating that power can be produced cheaper, and with a continuous 12-months' run than the same power can be produced by a dam. Western North Dakota has the greatest coal deposits known in the world today. The coal is right there, and all it requires is machinery to convert this coal into power. It is working NOW, and a government plant is nearing completion near Velva, North Dakota, to produce power; and it is my conclusion that to destroy entire communities and counties with a dam is a very questionable procedure.

This is not in any way taking into account the danger flowing from a dirt dam. The engineers' first report said it was not safe; the second report said it was. I have lived along the Missouri River a long time, and I know how quickly a dam can be cut out by the seepage of water through a dirt fill. I would rather live above such a dam than below it.

Sincerely yours,

Usher L. Burdick, M. C.