

September 7, 2021

Flow ramping for shutdown on the St Mary diversion to the Milk River started with reductions on September 8. [Detailed shutdown schedule](#). It is anticipated that the diversion will be fully shut down by September 15th. Return to natural flow generally takes 3-4 days across the watershed dependent on location. There may be changes to the schedule based on actual conditions and weather.

August 9, 2021

Milk River water levels continue to be stable east of the Town of Milk River at approximately 17m³/s. The USBR continues to operate the St Mary River diversion to the North Fork Milk River at 600cfs (17m³/s) with an anticipated shutdown around September 15th 2021. The “full” river we see on the Canadian side is American water under the Boundary Waters Treaty and desperately needed by both Montana irrigators and municipalities.

Recreational conditions continue to be exceptional and will provide some late summer flows for canoe or kayak not available from most eastern slopes river systems.

Due to low or zero natural flows, and excess 2020 stored water in Sherburne reservoir in Montana, irrigators on the Milk River were shut down in early July. When in combination with drought like conditions production losses will be significant to extreme for much of the watershed.

[Hydrograph](#)

River and Recreational conditions update

June 21st 2021

River Conditions will continue to be stable at around 18-19m³/s east of the Town of Milk River. The USBR St Mary Diversion operations report anticipates sufficient storage on the St Mary's System to continue the diversion to the North Fork Milk River at 600cfs (17m³/s) at least until the start of September.

Unfortunately, without significant additional rainfall we will likely hit zero natural flow in the Milk River by the end of June. Under the Boundary Waters Treaty, Milk River licenced water users are only entitled to 25% of the natural flow. With delivery disruptions to Montana last season, excess US licenced water means no Canadian water was diverted from the St Marys for repayment this summer prior to May 15th. Our Irrigation farmers will likely face a disappointing early season shutdown again this summer despite a full river flowing past us.

With the anticipation of a busy recreational season on the river and start up of the irrigation and diversion for water users we will kick off a new program with weekly water reporting and conditions information!

After a week delay for repairs to the diversion dam gates on the St Mary's River, diversion to the North Milk River has been held steady at approximately 600cfs this joined with additional melt water from the South Fork and recent welcome precipitation on the Milk River ridge has resulted in approximately 18-20 cms or near bank full flows at the Town of Milk River and east. These flows are approximately 200 cfs higher than average for this time of year and anticipated to stay fairly stable for at least the next month. The gauging station Milk River – at Milk River, is not accurately reporting flows on the Alberta Rivers app, but it is anticipated this will be corrected shortly.

As reported earlier, the headwaters snow pillow in the upper St Marys basin sits just below average and 96% peak mean Snow water equivalent. With last season diversion failure, additional water was held in the Sherburne reservoir, at nearly 90% full this is considerably high for this time of year. The availability of additional Montana apportioned water may result in less to zero accumulation of a water credit for Alberta Milk River licenced water users repayment during the summer under the letter of intent. Montana has until May 15th annually to access additional Canadian apportioned water for balancing available primarily for irrigation purposes. Officials are watching the situation closely.

Natural Flow River Monitoring Program

With the failure of the Milk River Diversion this summer, we will have natural flow only on the Milk River for the remainder of the season for the first time in over 100 years. This is a unique opportunity for us to monitor and document changes not only in the water levels but the impact on the aquatic environment, wildlife, and land management.

The Milk River Watershed Council Canada is working with Alberta Environment and Parks to collect information on the conditions in the Milk River during this rare period of natural summer flows and we need your help. We have put together a volunteer monitoring form that we are asking people to complete once a week or when something changes down at the river. Completing this form will help us gather information on the river, land uses, wildlife, algal growth, other changes that might occur as well as possible impacts to species at risk.

We will not disclose any personal information from anyone, but need to be able to link locations with observations. For example, if you notice that there are fish mortalities in an area, fisheries biologists from Alberta Environment and Parks may contact you to access the location and record further details about the event.

Please access the form on the link below. Completed observation forms with photographs may be emailed directly to: tim@mrwcc.ca you can also simply text us your observations and photos to 403-647-4342

[Record of Observations during Natural Flow Period.pdf](#)

Collection of this information will be important to tell our community's story after this event; and support improved land and water management decisions that balance water security needs and the environment.

Thank you for your help!

Questions? Contact the MRWCC office; Tim: 403-647-4342 or Mary: 403- 647-3808

October 2020

Diversion repairs are now completed.

September 24, 2020

Work continues in Montana on the diversion repairs and they are nearing completion:

Drop 2 structure is complete and only the liner and site grading remain.

Drop 5 has four more wall pours remaining, of which two will be completed today, and the final two next week. There is a lot of site grading on Drop 5 that still needs to be done as well as rip rap placement.

Drop 1 has had a new floor poured earlier in the week, and wall overlay to help extend its life before water comes on.

Environmental concerns at the diversion on the St Marys River are being addressed with the installation of new fish barrier screens; these are intended to reduce potential canal entrapment and allow for the operation of the system later into the season.

Montana water has been held in Sherburne Reservoir in anticipation that if possible, this would be diverted in the repaired system to replenish municipal water along the Montana highline before winter. This water is now scheduled to be released starting the week of Sept 28th and will raise water levels through to the St Marys reservoir in Alberta. If all goes well and the weather cooperates, **Montana intends to send diversion water through the canal system to the North Fork Milk River starting October 8th through to October 31st** again, this is very weather dependent.

Montana intends to run the canal at full capacity(600cfs) for the full duration of time, which means we will see the Milk River in Alberta come up to near bank full conditions. Producers/land managers should prepare for higher water. Any livestock panels, pumps, or temporary fencing needs to be safely removed prior to the water level rise. Under the navigable waters act it is illegal to construct fencing on, in, or above navigable waters and is subject to significant fines and penalty. Fences along the Milk River in the past have caused accidents to recreational users both during summer months and snowmobiling during the winter.

The MRWCC will continue to provide updated information as soon as possible, thanks again for everyone's support over this summer! Once again, if you have important/interesting observations to report or for additional information feel free to contact our office.



Drop 2 on the left and Drop 5 on the right

September 8th, 2020

Please click on the link below to see how the St. Mary's repairs on Drop 2 and 5 are progressing:

<https://youtu.be/SdHkZfVJ7sQ>

August 4th, 2020

St Mary's Diversion Repair and Milk River Operations Update

With the St. Mary's Diversion Drop 5 failure on May 17th we have been entirely reliant on natural flow only through the 2020 season. Since the failure, we have received approximately 180mm of rain at the Town of Milk River, this 7+ inches is shadowed by the 270mm (10.6inches) approximately just southwest of Del Bonita in the Montana headwaters. Projections for crop production losses were in the 2.5 to 3million dollar range during May but timely rains have helped producers limit loss in production. Final numbers will not be available until the end of the harvest season, but considering we have a harvest is likely a blessing.

The MRWCC would like to thank all irrigators for their assistance in providing water use information and making weekly usage projections to provide near real-time and accurate information to the provincial regulator and International Joint Commission (IJC) Commissionaires. The Council would also like to thank resource conservation minded producers who had voluntarily implemented industry best management practices to adjust timing and application of water over the last few weeks. As water levels continued to recede the IJC Commissionaires made the decision July 24th to cease all water diversion from the Milk River in Alberta; though flows would not drop to zero at the Eastern Crossing for an additional week, and flows were maintained at the Town of Milk River between 0.7 - 0.9m³/s. This past weekend, flows at the Town of Milk River had dropped to zero as well. The Town of Milk River and Village of Coutts continue with Level 2 Water use restrictions as pumps are incapable of replacing stored water to meet demand from the municipal storage ponds. Emergency contingency plans are in place with all municipal partners to meet any emergency water

demands. Alternative arrangements are available for farm and acreage water needs that would otherwise access the bulk water filling station from the Town of Milk River.

Repairs continue on both Drop 5 and Drop 2 along the St Mary Diversion. Weather delays did slow progress on Drop 5 but crews have made up additional time on Drop 2 with Rebar Crews framing much of the structure. With the help of both MP Glen Motz and Associate Minister MLA Grant Hunter, permission was granted to source aggregate materials from Del Bonita/Whiskey Gap and concrete from Cardston using the Emigration Gap irregular crossing which saves significant budget for the US and time cutting down travel from over 20 miles of dirt trail to less than 2 miles. Decisions will still need to be made regarding potential additional repairs to Drop 1 in the next two weeks. The USBR is hopeful to move some water to support municipal reserves in the late fall though no guarantees are being made that this will happen. Conservation measures are also being implemented by the highline MT communities as Fresno Reservoir storage projections are on par with low conditions experienced during the flash drought of 2017.

All activities, actions, and communications are being documented by the MRWCC throughout this year; lessons are being learned regarding improved communications, and water security. Monitoring continues along the Milk River. Time lapse cameras are strategically placed from the North Fork Milk River through to the Milk River Natural Area and Pinhorn Grazing Reserve. Fisheries Assessments are scheduled to be conducted over the next few weeks. Water Quality monitoring is ongoing including enhanced monitoring of dissolved oxygen, water temperatures, bacteria, algae, and additional sites including below the Town of Milk River to evaluate assimilation of waste and storm water during low flow.

Community observations are still critically important, if you see issues such as: fish stranding, exposed lines, invasive species, upwelling of groundwater, or even incidents of trespass or ATV use along the bed and river channel please contact us or fill out an observation form available at www.mrwcc.ca

Alberta Environment has also posted a water shortages advisory for the Milk River Basin <https://rivers.alberta.ca/> (or on the Alberta Rivers App), and updated with a brief statement here: <https://www.alberta.ca/boundary-waters-treaty.aspx> (July 27th) along with FAQ and important Ministry contacts.



Top Left photo - Drop 2 - J Patrick - July 25
Top Right photo - Drop 5 - J Patrick - July 25
Bottom photo - Milk River Sandbed Reach - July 23

June 11th, 2020

We received an update on the St Mary's Diversion and repair timeline. The Milk River Joint Board of Control has met and a decision was made to immediately replace Drop structure 5 as well as Drop 2, another high risk drop structure that was anticipated to fail. An interim fix was not seen as justified considering the anticipated costs and minimal gains in water supply this season.

No more water is scheduled to be transferred from the St. Mary Basin to the Milk River Basin in 2020.

Reclamation and the Milk River Joint Board of Control are actively working on the repairs. There is a possibility that the St. Mary Canal will be operable by September 2020. If this is the case, the plan would be to transfer water stored in Lake Sherburne to the Milk River Basin during September and early October.

Alberta producers should not count on any water above natural flow for the balance of the season. If possible, implementation of temporary riparian fencing and alternative livestock water supplies should be explored. This would be a good time to review your grazing management plans and pasture use rotation.

We will continue to provide updates when available,

US Press release Full link:

<https://www.usbr.gov/newsroom/newsrelease/detail.cfm?RecordID=71243>

June 5th, 2020

We have been working behind the scenes to provide support and collect up to date information regarding the St Marys diversion and conditions along the Milk River.

Most importantly, we have been encouraged by the level of support from All levels of Government both in Alberta and Montana, there is a steadfast commitment to ensure we are adaptive and resolve the immediate problems with the St Mary diversion and long standing water security concerns that are facing our community. The following is an information update from Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP):

1. We have no new information at this time on any repairs to the St. Mary River diversion canal. We hope to get an update on June 10th during a conference call with the International Joint Commission Accredited Officers.
2. Until repairs can be done, flows in the river are reliant on natural flows that are supported by precipitation and baseflow groundwater inputs. Analysis of historical estimated natural flows show that there is a 50% probability that flows will exceed 2 cubic metres per second through to the end of June and a 75% probability that they will exceed 1.0 cubic metre per second as measured at the Milk River at Milk River flow station; even less flow is expected to occur in July. Current flows can be viewed on the Rivers website here: <https://rivers.alberta.ca/>
3. Should anyone have problems accessing the flow that is present in the river, they **must not** do any work in the river without having all proper authorizations under the provincial *Water Act*. **Please contact Water Approvals in Lethbridge, if further information is required on authorization requirements at 403-388-7710.**

4. It is AEP's intention to hold a teleconference/online town hall with users in the coming weeks based on the assumption that we will have more information on the canal repair at that time. STAY TUNED.

The MRWCC's Water Supply and Management Team in conjunction with the Milk River Water Users Association (Irrigators) is working to support improved collection and bi-weekly reporting of water use information. We are also working towards recommendations regarding the allocation and timing of water use as water levels continue to recede. If you are a water user who has not received a call from AEP your contact information might be out of date, please contact either Water Approvals In Lethbridge at 403-388-7710 or Kevin Reese with the Water Users Association at 403-642-7284.

The river at the town of Milk River is currently sitting at $\sim 2.85\text{m}^3/\text{s}$ most of this is flow from the South Fork, with less than $\sim 0.5\text{m}^3/\text{s}$ from the North Fork Milk River, with the rain in the forecast this weekend we will hopefully see a short term boost in base flow and buy some time for our producers, and relieve some stress on the aquatic environment. We will continue to provide more updates when available.

There will be low natural flow only in the Milk River for the foreseeable future, on average 80% of summer flow is St Mary Diversion water. To better understand the interconnected nature of the system check out the [MRWCC – Transboundary State of the Watershed report](#)

For more information please see the USRB press release here:

<https://www.usbr.gov/newsroom/newsrelease/detail.cfm?RecordID=70963>