

Opinion: The Missouri River Is a Shared Resource, Not a Battleground

By Reice Haase, Director, North Dakota Department of Water Resources

In a recent opinion column, Missouri Department of Natural Resources Director Kurt Schaefer described Missouri's relationship with North Dakota over Missouri River water as a "water war." That characterization reflects Mr. Schaefer's perspective, but it does not reflect ours. North Dakota has never viewed Missouri River water as something to be won, but as a resource to be responsibly used. Our focus is on meeting water needs within a Missouri River system designed to serve many purposes within its states, not a single interest or geography.

Water within the borders of North Dakota belongs to the State of North Dakota. To suggest otherwise defies both common sense and the foundational principles of state sovereignty. All states were admitted to the U.S. on equal footing, making Missouri's position fundamentally inconsistent with the sovereign authority it would unquestionably claim over waters within its boundaries. Defending and putting our water to beneficial use is not an act of hostility toward downstream states. Rather, it is a responsibility to the people we serve, a responsibility we will continue to defend in full exercise of our state's sovereignty.

North Dakota's approach is shaped by a long history of broken promises from the federal government. Under the Flood Control Act of 1944, our state agreed to the construction of large federal reservoirs, including Garrison and Oahe Dams. In doing so, North Dakota sacrificed half a million acres of highly productive farmland, land with significant economic and cultural value, to support federal flood control, navigation, and hydropower objectives that continue to benefit the entire basin, including Missouri.

In return, North Dakota was promised a multipurpose water project to irrigate 1.2 million acres of farmland, provide municipal water, and improve water quality in the Red River of the North. Those federal commitments were never fully delivered. Our efforts today are not about expansion or exploitation, but rather fulfilling a long-recognized need to use our share of the river to benefit North Dakotans and to receive promised benefits for our contributions.

Much has been made of North Dakota's use of Missouri River water, but the reality is less dramatic than the rhetoric suggests. North Dakota uses about six-tenths of 1 percent of the water that flows through our state, a negligible volume in the context of the entire river system. Put another way, if the Missouri River's average annual volume at St. Charles, Missouri, were represented by a single gallon jug, North Dakota's use would amount to roughly half a tablespoon. At that scale, there is no impact on downstream navigation, public water supplies, power generation, or electric grid reliability. The Show-Me State will be unable to show otherwise.

North Dakota's use of Missouri River water is strategic and responsible. It reflects decades of planning funded through revenues that North Dakotans have deliberately invested into long-term water security. These investments are about strengthening the resilience of our communities and ensuring reliable drinking water, not about diminishing the river or disadvantaging our neighbors.

North Dakota has consistently sought cooperation, but opportunities for meaningful, basin-wide dialogue have gone unrealized. On several occasions, we convened meetings of Missouri River basin states to pursue collaborative river management, invitations which Missouri declined. Missouri later withdrew from the Missouri River Association of States and Tribes, narrowing avenues for coordination when basin-wide engagement mattered most.

Litigation, legislative conflict, and public posturing have produced limited results at significant public expense. The more productive path forward is for all states to take their rightful seat at the table and work together toward durable, basin-wide solutions that allow the Missouri River to continue serving everyone who depends on it.