

NAWS wants Minot water as stopgap measure

By JILL SCHRAMM, Staff Writer jschramm@minotdailynews.com, 2-24-07

Drought and stricter federal drinking water standards are making it difficult to wait much longer for Missouri River water, representatives of area communities told the Northwest Area Water Supply Project Advisory Committee Thursday.

The committee responded by voting to seek permission from a federal judge to build more pipeline beyond Minot. The city of Minot would provide some area communities with treated groundwater until the day that Missouri River water can be piped north. Minot City Manager David Waand said Minot is willing to provide water to the extent that it can.

"The view has always been, what's good for the region is good for Minot," he said.

NAWS already is on track to build a \$4.25 million pipeline project between Minot and Berthold this year, getting Minot water to Berthold by Christmas.

Kenmare officials asked the advisory committee Thursday to continue laying pipe from Berthold to Kenmare. The city of Kenmare has been planning to build a water treatment plant to address arsenic levels, which exceed levels allowed by the Environmental Protection Agency. The new federal arsenic rule took effect last year, but Kenmare is able to claim a three-year exemption as long as it is working toward a solution.

Kenmare's project engineer, Ryan Ackerman of Ackerman-Estvold Engineering and Management Consulting in Minot, said the North Dakota Health Department won't let Kenmare wait for NAWS water because the time table for the project is so indefinite. However, new conversations with Minot officials have opened the possibility that Kenmare could get water from Minot if a connecting pipeline is built, he said. That would give Kenmare a water supply that meets federal standards until the day that NAWS water begins to flow.

The committee approved a feasibility study that will provide information within the next few weeks about whether running a line from Berthold to Kenmare will work. Quick turnaround time is needed because NAWS is preparing to call for bids on the Berthold line. Specifications given to bidders must indicate the size of the pipeline. A larger pipeline will be needed if the line is to handle water for Kenmare, too.

Kenmare's request to move up on the construction schedule concerned committee representatives from other communities, particularly Mohall and Bottineau, who believed they were ahead in line.

"I am all for helping Kenmare out," committee member Wanda Emerson of Mohall said. "But I am also concerned that the funding that's going to be used for that is going to take funding away from the pipeline out to the air base, to Mohall, to Westhope, to Bottineau. With the drought that we are again anticipating, I fear that our area — Mohall's area — is going to be without water again within the next five to six years."

Dan Schaefer, manager of the All Seasons Water Users District, said the rural water system has had wells go dry in the past. The system could have similar problems this year if dry weather persists, he added. The district serves much of northcentral North Dakota.

Committee Chairman Bob Schempp of Minot suggested the NAWS sales tax levied by Minot could pay to lay all the pipeline beyond Minot.

"I believe that with the sales tax revenues that have been collected and that will be collected, the balance of the system, apart from the treatment, is relatively minor, and I believe it could be built if we had permission. So if we wind up in a situation where people are going thirsty, I think we should start building," he said.

The court already has approved construction of the Berthold line.

A federal judge had ordered an environmental study as the result of a lawsuit brought by the province of Manitoba over potential biota transfer from the Missouri to Souris river basins. Until a study identifies the best treatment method for the water, no treatment facilities can be built and no Missouri River water can move through the pipeline. Construction unrelated to treatment can proceed with the judge's permission.

NAWS project manager Michelle Klose said the question is whether NAWS has the financial capacity to simultaneously fund pipeline construction and treatment facilities.

The water commission wants to construct treatment facilities once an Environmental Impact Statement is completed next year, Klose said.

"With that record of decision, then we can start construction on that treatment plant that actually gets the water to Minot. To the water commission, the priority is moving that water, trying to get it to Minot. In the meantime, until that EIS is done, we do have some time to work on this project. That's why we are working on the Berthold line. That's why there is a possibility of working on the Kenmare line and more. There's possibilities there. But if you are using up all the funding that is available on those pieces, then you won't have it available for the treatment plant," she said.

Schempp noted a problem wouldn't exist if the federal government appropriates the money for the treatment facilities. The cost is estimated at \$75 million.

NAWS was designed with just 35 percent local funding. However, to keep the project moving with limited federal dollars, Minot's NAWS tax has advanced money for later reimbursement with federal dollars when available. NAWS is asking Minot to advance \$6 million over the next three years for construction. Klose said the state plans to request \$1.2 million in federal dollars this year.

Minot public works director Alan Walter also reported that although Minot can easily supply Berthold and Kenmare with water, the city's treatment plant would be stretched to serve the entire region. The total NAWS system would put peak water use at 16 million gallons a day.

With water restrictions, the Minot plant might be able to handle the load for the short-term, but it couldn't sustain that level of production, Walter said.

Whether Minot's aquifers can handle the draw-down is another concern.

Going ahead with pipeline construction increases the urgency of getting treatment facilities built, Schempp said.

"There's no question that if the lines are in to serve the cities and water districts that are going to be served by NAWS and we don't connect to the Missouri River, we are in trouble," Schempp said.

The projection for getting NAWS water to Minot is four to six years.

Bottineau city officials also informed the advisory committee of their efforts to find new water supplies to come into compliance with federal standards for gross alpha emitters, a radioactivity linked to cancer with long-term use.

In recent years, Bottineau had resolved a problem with uranium by drilling new wells. Corey Chorne, the city's engineer with Advanced Engineering and Environmental Services in Bismarck, said the drought this past summer forced Bottineau to use a well with higher uranium to meet the peak demand.

"If this drought continues and they are required to turn on wells that they really shouldn't be, they might be in a situation where they not only have the alpha emitters but also uranium issues to deal with again," he said.