

NORTHWEST AREA WATER SUPPLY

Federal judge rules NAWS needs more scientific study

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Stenehjem



Waind

A ruling on the Northwest Area Water Supply project issued by a federal judge in Washington, D.C., late Thursday had some good news for Minot, but overall was a "mixed bag."

That was the assessment by State Engineer Dale Frink and Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem, both of Bismarck.

NAWS is designed to bring Missouri River water via pipeline from Lake Sakakawea to Minot, where it will be

treated and distributed to other communities through rural water systems.

The ruling by Judge Rosemary Collyer said the project needs more scientific study.

The province of Manitoba sued the Bureau of Reclamation and its parent agency, the Interior Department, in 2002, challenging the project. Canadian officials said in the suit they were worried about the potential transfer of aquatic life from the Missouri River basin to the Hudson Bay basin and

sought a more comprehensive environmental review.

Minot City Manager David Waind said Friday that the good news from the city's point of view is that the judge did not require a complete environmental impact statement. Waind said the project has already had an environmental study.

He said had a full EIS been required, it could have increased the project's cost and also result in a delay. Stenehjem said Friday afternoon the

cost would be significant and "in the millions," but added he didn't know the exact amount.

The city manager said he was pleased that the judge did not issue an injunction that could have stopped construction. Stenehjem said that issue will have to be resolved "somewhere down the line."

Waind said he has been in touch with Frink who said that the ruling doesn't stop work on the pipeline

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project. "Bids were just taken this week on the last stretch of pipeline and work is expected to resume this spring," Waind said.

Waind also said the judge ordered the Bureau of Reclamation to put more work into the environmental study and the Finding of No Significant Environmental Impact.

The questions concern the possibility of a pipeline break north of the continental divide, which is located in the area of the former Minot Radar Base, south of Minot. Another issue is whether aquatic life or biota would become resistant to the initial treatment at the pumping site and require full treatment at the lake.

Stenehjem also said the project has been studied and he is comfortable that it can be shown

that the transfer can be done safely with no environmental problems.

The city manager said water in the pipeline on the north side of the divide would have been initially treated but not fully treated. The latter would be done at the city's water treatment plant before it's distributed to other users.

Frink said the State Water Commission was in the process of analyzing Collyer's ruling on Friday.

Frink said of the ruling, "It's not all good and not all bad."

Collyer said she plans to schedule another hearing on the status of construction and whether the project should be halted.

Construction on the NAWS project began in 2002, with plans to start treating water in 2007 and finish the entire project in 2016.

(The Associated Press contributed to this story.)