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Federal officials plan environmental study of water project

MINOT (AP) - The federal Bureau of Reclamation plans an environmental review of the Northwest Area Water Supply project, which would bring Missouri River water to this city and northwestern North Dakota, city officials say.

Manitoba officials asked for the study, fearing the NAWS project would pollute their waterways. City Manager David Waind told the City Council on Monday that the study will help determine whether the water is treated in Minot as planned, at the Missouri River or somewhere in between.

"That's a fairly dramatic change from the direction we have gone in this project over the past several years," Waind said.

"We expect that it will find that what was proposed, or something close to it, is environmentally sound," Waind said. "But it opens every door again."

Minot wants to treat Missouri River water in its plant, giving the city access to aquifer water. If the study finds that a water treatment plant is necessary at the river for NAWS, it would add to the cost and could jeopardize use of the aquifers, officials say.

"It will put us in the position of deciding whether we want to keep this plant or not," Waind said. "If we don't keep it, we lose this source. I see that as a critical backup."

Manitoba sued over fears about transfer of organic matter from the Missouri River to the Souris River basin.

The federal government and the North Dakota Water Commission had appealed a judge's ruling in favor of more environmental study.

Waind said the state expects a full environmental review to take two years, but he said it should now slow the construction timeline.

The bureau previously conducted a less-extensive environmental assessment that found no significant impact if treatment is done in Minot. Because of work already done on that assessment and on a proposal to bring Missouri River water to the Red River Valley the time frame for the latest NAWS review should be shortened, Waind said.

The bureau plans public hearings in Minot and other area communities between April 20 and May 5 as part of the study.

In the meantime, a federal judge is allowing construction of non-treatment aspects of the project to continue.

Waind said contractors will put in more pipeline south of Minot this year. The water commission is asking the judge for permission to put in pump stations and some pipeline in the city in 2007.

The two-year construction time table coincides with projections for the environmental impact statement.

"So if they get the EIS done in the time frame we are looking at, we can expect that the project will not slip any further behind in the construction plans," Waind said.