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NAWS work progressing

NAWS makes progress while awaiting EIS

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Contractors work Tuesday on erecting a reservoir tank at the top of Speedway Hill, west of Minot, that will be part of the pipeline system delivering NAWS water to Berthold. The 2008 construction season is under way and progressing well for the Northwest Area Water Supply Project, according to information provided to the Minot City Council this past week.

A major part of the project planned for this year is construction of a high-service pump station. The low bid of \$12.4 million from John T. Jones construction of Fargo was less than the engineer's estimate of \$15.4 million. The project also has received court permission to proceed with developing the remaining portions of the distribution system. Engineers are working on plans for a line to Kenmare and to Mohall. Meanwhile, a final Environmental Impact Statement is due late this year.

The comment period on the draft EIS that closed March 26 brought 39 comments. Most comments supported the "no action" alternative. The "no action" alternative means no changes in an existing plan calling for disinfection at a facility near Max and full treatment at the Minot Water Treatment Plant. Comments against the project came from Canada, Minnesota, Missouri, the Peterson Coulee Outlet Association in Maddock and the National Wildlife Federation. Criticisms of the draft EIS include the failure to consider certain issues, including the cumulative effect of various water projects, the impacts of biological species transfer on the Hudson Bay Basin and the groundwater alternatives to Missouri River water.

The Canadian government commented that risk should be determined by the combined impact of both NAWS and the Red River Valley Water Supply Project. Both would divert Missouri River water to other areas of the state. "Canada remains concerned about threats associated with such projects, including biota transfer as well as the poorly understood consequences and values of such projects. Specifically, the government of Canada advocates exercising caution in considering the need for inter-basin transfers and endorses other less disruptive alternatives, such as demand management and water conservation to satisfy societal need," wrote Kim Perry Butler, director general for the North America Bureau of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources commented that the draft EIS didn't include information about the possible effect of invasive organisms on Minnesota should new species get into the Hudson Bay drainage. It called on the Bureau of Reclamation, which is preparing the EIS, to set a "high bar" in recommending a treatment method for the water.

The Missouri Department of Natural Resources stated that it "strongly opposes the inter-basin transfer of Missouri River water to the Hudson Bay drainage basin under any circumstance. The Missouri basin is already significantly depleted by consumptive uses of water and it is challenging enough trying to address these in-basin water quantity problems. To further add to this burden by creating the first transfer of water into the Hudson Bay drainage is not only unsustainable, it is irresponsible." The agency noted the draft EIS was too narrowly focused on treatment. It urged the bureau to revisit the purpose and need for NAWS.

The Missouri Attorney General's office noted that a previous environmental assessment for NAWS found sufficient groundwater in the Missouri River Basin to achieve the goals of the project. The National Wildlife Federation suggested drilling more wells and constructing 18 reverse osmosis systems for each of the communities and rural water systems. It calculated the systems would cost only \$27 million than the NAWS preferred alternative. Another alternative would be to increase the capacity of the Minot water treatment plant and supply from Sindre Aquifer to distribute by pipeline to the region, it stated. "...the bureau may not cite the fact that construction already is underway on the pipeline from the Missouri River to Minot to justify not considering alternatives to the construction of a pipeline," the federation wrote.

The Peterson Coulee Outlet Association took a similar stance regarding alternative water sources, indicating multiple groundwater sources are more reliable in drought. The State Water Commission provided comments stating that the draft EIS fulfills and goes beyond the court's order for information on the NAWS project. It noted that the risk of additional transfer of invasive species beyond what is naturally occurring is negligible. The Environmental Protection Agency agreed with the Bureau of Reclamation finding that a low risk of species transfer exists under the "no action" alternative. However, the EPA did suggest installing ultraviolet treatment at Max, rather than in Minot. The environmental study is looking at the \$8 million, "no action" alternative as well as three other more intensive forms of pre-treatment at Max that range in estimated cost from \$68 million to \$90 million.