

Berthold residents anxious for water from NAWs pipeline

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For 35 years or more, dogged persistence by Berthold-area residents has brought only dashed hopes of ever getting a rural water system.

Now, it finally appears their thirst will be quenched.

North Prairie Rural Water District plans an expansion project from Des Lacs to the rural Berthold area. Service would come by tapping into a Northwest Area Water Supply pipeline being built this year from Minot to Berthold.

North Prairie still has work to do on its end in developing a distribution system around Berthold, but North Prairie manager Ralph Packulak said construction could begin next summer, depending on availability of federal funding.

Gary Neshem of rural Berthold is cautious, recalling that his father signed up three times for rural water that never came.

"When they are running the line in front of my house, that's when I'll believe it's here. But it sounds like it's going to happen," he said.

What's different this time is the NAWs pipeline. It's opened a door for folks who have been waiting – in some cases all their lives – for good water. "I am 68 years old and never had a drink of water out of a tap at my farm," Ralph Birdsall of Berthold said. "You can't cook with it and it's not real good drinking water."

Like many of his neighbors, Birdsall has water delivered to his residence.

"I have been part of several rural water outfits that thought they might come in here," Birdsall said. "But this is the first one that they are really going to make it."

The problem always has been in finding a way to get water from Minot. NAWs, a project initiated in 1987 for bringing Missouri River water to the region, remained a distant possibility until the decision to move up construction on the Berthold pipeline.

NAWs originally sought to get Missouri River water first to Minot and then expand to outlying communities. A lawsuit brought by Manitoba over the potential for biota transfer from the Missouri to Hudson Bay basins led to the need to complete an Environmental Impact Statement before construction of treatment facilities.

While waiting out the two-year study, NAWs officials have diverted their attention from completing Minot's portion to constructing pipeline beyond Minot. Because the city of Berthold's water is so poor that residents can't drink it, the decision was made to lay pipe and bring Minot's treated water to the city while waiting for the day when NAWs water can flow.

That decision solved the rural delivery problem for the rural area as well.

"It's going to be a wonderful deal for everybody out here," said Neshem, who looks forward to throwing away the peroxide. He treats water that he collects in a dam designed to catch runoff.

Good water is expected to increase property values and encourage rural development.

"When we sold our house, that was the major drawback on selling," said Carole Luetzen, who lived much of her life on a farm near Berthold before moving to Minot. She said the water was high in sodium and dark like coffee because it came from coal veins.

Berthold Mayor Alan Lee, who farms west of town, said water problems exist in nearly all directions around the city. There is some question about how far the rural water lines will be able to extend because of the cost of serving areas that are less populated or are on the continental divide, he said.

"Most of the farms in this area are really looking forward to, hopefully, getting rural water," he said. "We will all be just tickled – really, really happy – to get water."

In addition to Berthold residents, people in the Burlington area will be able to get rural water because of the NAWs pipeline.

The North Central Rural Water Consortium will use the NAWs pipeline and existing North Prairie pipeline to bring water to more than 130 customers from Speedway to Talbot Mobile Home Park and from Old Settlers Park to the split of U.S. Highways 2 and 52, west of Burlington.

Agri Industries of Williston was hired for \$896,581 to construct the Burlington and a Logan-area project. Work is to begin soon.

North Prairie was looking at providing temporary service to both the Berthold and Burlington areas before NAWs officials decided to build the Berthold line this summer, Packulak said. North Prairie, which uses water treated by the City of Minot, was considering developing another water source for the rural Berthold area.

By constructing the NAWs line to Berthold now, duplication will be eliminated and people will get water sooner, Packulak said.

Pipeline proceeds despite easement dispute

The pipeline being constructed across Wayne Moe's land will bring water to thousands of northwest North Dakota residents.

Moe wishes he were one of them.

"They are forgetting about the first person on the line," said Moe, a Tierracita Vallejo resident who hauls his water and stores it in a cistern. "It would be nice to have the valve turned on and not have to worry about hauling water, especially in the dead of winter. That's no fun."

The compensation that NAWs is providing Moe for an easement would go a long way toward helping him pay for a hookup through North Prairie Rural Water District, project manager Michelle Klose with the State Water Commission said.

"If he wants to use this easement payment to help him get water, that's an advantage for him," she said.

Moe said the amount that NAWs is offering for an easement falls at least a few thousand dollars short of paying for the cost of a hookup to North Prairie. NAWs won't directly distribute water to customers, but will provide water to cities and rural water systems, such as North Prairie.

Moe lacks service now because he moved to Tierracita Vallejo after North Prairie's water lines already were established.

Moe also believes his easement is worth double the amount NAWs has offered. His argument is based on the county's listed valuation for a pie-shaped piece of his property. He said the entire piece would become undevelopable because the easement would prevent construction of a road access.

Klose said NAWs is using only a half acre of Moe's property, although it offered to pay for a full acre. She also questioned whether the easement would prohibit access.

While Moe considers challenging the NAWs offer in court, contractors are tearing up ground at the edge of his property.

Under eminent domain, NAWs has the right to "quick take." That means if a property owner and a government entity can't reach an agreement on an easement payment, the government can take immediate possession of the property upon making a purchase offer and depositing the money with the clerk of the district court.

"It kind of bothers me that they can just come in and throw money at you," Moe said. "You come home and there's a excavator sitting in your front yard."

The law gives a property owner the right to appeal the quick-take price in the court within 30 days.

In a separate case, Minot attorney Jim Nostdahl said he has a client who is waiting to see if NAWs will negotiate its quick-take price before proceeding with a court appeal. Nostdahl declined to identify his client.

NAWs project manager Michelle Klose said only two quick takes have occurred relating to the pipeline on Minot's west side. They involve property belonging to Moe and the Behm family.

On the 45 miles of pipeline between Minot and Lake Sakakawea, there were seven condemnations, or quick takes, out of about 100 private properties involved in the easements.

Klose said all eventually were settled except for a case involving First Baptist Church of Minot. That dispute focused on the cost of sewer line development should the church build on its land south of Minot someday.

In 2003, a jury determined that crossing the NAWs pipeline would increase sewer construction costs and awarded the church about \$50,000 plus \$26,000 in attorney fees.

"We definitely have been trying to work with the landowners since then to make sure we understand their concerns and try to address them," Klose said.

NAWs responded to Moe's concerns about a blow-off station by altering its plans slightly. A blow-off station consists of a valve for releasing water from the line when repairs are needed. Klose said NAWs will discharge the water through a hose onto nearby Ward County land rather than on Moe's land.