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Water decision could be near

By *BLAKE NICHOLSON, Associated Press Writer*

A federal judge in Washington, D.C., could soon decide whether a project to bring Missouri River water to northwest and north-central North Dakota requires more study.

U.S. District Judge Rosemary Collyer heard arguments in the case late last week.

"Both sides have filed a motion for summary judgment," state Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem said. "I expect we will have her decision within a month or so."

The province of Manitoba sued the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and its parent agency, the Interior Department, in October 2002, challenging the Northwest Area Water Supply project.

Canadian officials are worried about the potential transfer of unwanted aquatic life into the Hudson Bay Basin.

The state of North Dakota intervened in the lawsuit. Stenehjem and other state officials say NAWS is a sound project that does not need further study.

Stenehjem said Manitoba is "trying to frustrate our effort to provide a basic service to our citizens."

Bernard Etzinger, a spokesman for the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C., said NAWS presents serious worries.

"I think the issue is about taking the time to do the full review that is necessary," he said.

Stenehjem said the project was studied for 10 years "and repeatedly delayed to address Canadian concerns."

NAWS will bring water from Lake Sakakawea to Minot, where it will be treated and sent to other communities.

Construction began in 2002, and officials in Minot hope to begin treating water in 2007. The project is not scheduled to be complete until 2016, Stenehjem said.

The cases made in court last week were similar to those made in August 2003, when Collyer heard arguments over the state's motion to have the case dismissed, Stenehjem said.

"The arguments were pretty much the same -- the question of whether the assessment conducted by the Bureau of Reclamation was adequate," he said.

Stenehjem said the case likely is a long way from being resolved.

"I presume that whichever side loses will appeal it," he said.