

North Dakota officials lobby for NAWS funds

By Blake Nicholson
Associated Press

BISMARCK – North Dakota officials on Thursday lobbied the Bush administration to support funding for the Northwest Area Water Supply Project.

President Bush's 2004 budget proposal eliminates funding for the project, which will bring Missouri River water to Minot and other north central and northwestern North Dakota communities, said Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D.

"Construction of NAWS would virtually stop," he said after Thursday's meeting with officials at the White House.

Sen. Kent Conrad, D-N.D., said representatives from the Office of Management and Budget and the Bureau of Reclamation were at the meeting.

Dorgan said officials hope to get NAWS funding restored in Congress and want the White House to support that funding. He has asked for a response within two weeks.

Minot Mayor Curt Zimbelman said he stressed to administration officials that the \$145 million project has local support.

"Minot put on a 1 percent sales tax in order to fund our 35 percent," he said. "Once this project is built, our (water) rates will take care of

operation and maintenance. We consider it our project once it's built; we'll take care of it."

Construction on the project's first phase, a 7½-mile stretch of pipeline between Minot and Lake Sakakawea, was completed last summer. Crews currently are working on another stretch.

"A project like this, once started, needs to be completed," Dorgan said.

Dave Koland, manager of North Dakota's Garrison Diversion Conservancy District, said delaying NAWS might also delay other water projects in the state that are less of a priority.

"It would have a domino effect," he said.

NAWS faces other hurdles. The Canadian province of Manitoba has filed a lawsuit in Washington, D.C., seeking to stop the project. Missouri River water eventually would end up in the Souris River basin, which flows north into Canada.

Officials in that country want a more detailed study of whether NAWS could bring potentially harmful water organisms into the Hudson Bay watershed. North Dakota officials say the project has already cleared the necessary environmental studies.

Minot is expected to begin treating Missouri River water in 2007.