

Published November 18, 2010, 06:38 PM

New details of Fargo-Moorhead diversion shifts more water upstream

Work group co-chairman calls impact 'game-changer'

Local leaders learned some "game-changing" new details of the proposed Fargo-Moorhead diversion during a meeting Thursday with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers:

By: [Heidi Shaffer](#), INFORUM

Local leaders learned some "game-changing" new details of the proposed Fargo-Moorhead diversion during a meeting Thursday with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers:

- Instead of the diversion pushing floodwater to the north – creating excess river levels downstream – the corps is working on plans for upstream storage cells that will instead cause the Red River to back up south of the channel.
- The diversion will likely follow a path about two miles farther east from where local leaders were hoping.

New impacts

The plan to create upstream storage means the downstream group that adamantly fought increased river levels will no longer see impacts from the diversion.

"At this point, it seems like it's all or nothing," Corps Project Manager Aaron Snyder said of preliminary findings that show the diversion will cause all upstream or all downstream impacts.

With the switch to concentrate impacts upstream come a new group of cities and landowners that will fight higher river levels in times of extreme flooding.

"It's a real game-changer," said Kevin Campbell, co-chairman of the Metro Flood Study Work Group. "It really changes where we have to concentrate on mitigating potential effects of the diversion."

Oxbow Mayor Jim Nyhoff said the decision will wipe out his town of about 250 people three miles south of Fargo.

On Nov. 2, Cass County voters approved a half-cent sales tax for projects related to the diversion.

"We were very supportive of our county tax," Nyhoff said. Now "that tax is going toward flooding us out."

He said Oxbow and other upstream communities will have to get organized the way downstream groups did.

The downstream group met Thursday night in Perley, Minn., with corps and local officials.

Diann Ista, manager of the Wild Rice Watershed District, said there were still plenty of questions at the meeting.

"I'm not dancing in the street," she said. "I don't want to dump ours on somebody else."

Ista said local work on water retention programs needs to continue to reach a basinwide solution.

"It doesn't reduce the efforts," she said. "We know this is just preliminary and it can turn around."

The focus on upstream storage cells contains higher river levels to a smaller area, Snyder said. For every foot of rise in the river, the impacts extend about a mile further south, he said.

Previously, downstream impacts reached more than 2 feet of extra water in some areas and extended all the way to the Canadian border.

In a 100-year flood, the corps estimated that about 4,500 downstream structures would be affected by impacts. Upstream, that number shrinks to about 800, Snyder said.

The corps and the local engineering team will work to determine what mitigation measures – including buyouts, levees and ring dikes – are needed upstream as a result in the rise. They will also determine what those efforts will add to the cost, Snyder said.

The corps previously estimated that the diversion carries a \$1.4 billion price tag and will take at least 10 years to complete.

New alignment

When local leaders chose the North Dakota diversion over a Minnesota-side channel, the exact alignment of the path remained fuzzy.

The corps presented a channel that ran along the eastern edge of West Fargo's Eagle Run and Sheyenne Diversion. Local backers asked for an alignment about two miles to the west.

During a May meeting with county officials about the diversion, West Fargo Mayor Rich Mattern said the project was more palatable when moved farther west, adding that the city would stand to gain much developable land for expansion and growth.

But future growth isn't a reason the corps is allowed to cite for choosing the path, Snyder said.

The eastern channel is less expensive and has less of an environmental footprint, Snyder said, adding that there must be a technical reason for shifting the path.

Cass County Engineer Keith Berndt argued that the two bodies that rule on the project's flood plain impact – the Environmental Protection Agency and Federal Emergency Management Agency – don't have all of the information they need to determine whether the western alignment is less environmentally friendly.

Cass County Commissioner Darrell Vanyo said he hopes the corps will continue to develop both North Dakota alignments.

"If you don't shut the door on something and you tell us what we have to come up with, we'll come up with something," Vanyo said.

The Metro Flood Study Work Group will meet again in January to discuss the diversion.

Corps begins project's water surveys

On Tuesday, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, along with local engineers, began surveying rivers related to the diversion project.

WEST Consultants and corps staff are conducting surveys along the Buffalo River, Wolverton Creek and the Red River and its tributaries.

The surveys include measurements of river width, depth, velocity and discharge of stream flows.

Corps employees will be requesting right-of-way entry access for specific points along each tributary. The surveys are expected to wrap up by Jan. 1.

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