

Coalition supports Red River diversion

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Former North Dakota Gov. Ed Schafer and several Fargo businessmen and politicians kicked off a lobbying effort Monday for a Red River diversion through North Dakota to protect the Fargo-Moorhead area.

Schafer, the spokesman for the Flood Protection Coalition for the F-M Community, said a western diversion would face fewer political problems, and could be cheaper than the \$909 million Minnesota diversion, due to lower land costs and because the channel would not have to be as deep.

The goal is protection for the metro area to a 500-year flood level that could last 100 years, he said.

"For politics, for expediency, for cost, we think that the way to go is this," Schafer said.

The coalition last week presented the plan to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and to the North Dakota congressional delegation, Schafer said.

One of two corps' managers for metro flood control planning said Monday that two variations of the western diversion are being studied, one of which includes the Sheyenne Diversion.

Aaron Snyder said it's too early to speculate on the cost of a western diversion, but the corps anticipates it will be higher than the Minnesota diversion because it would cut across four river watersheds - the Sheyenne, Wild Rice, Maple and Rush rivers - and the Sheyenne Diversion.

But the number of road crossings is about the same, and a western diversion might fix a wider set of flooding problems.

"There definitely could be more benefits from a west side diversion and that would be from picking up those other rivers. That would add some benefits," Snyder said. "We'll know by September."

Other members of the coalition include Ron Offutt, Steve D. Scheel, Doug Burgum, Dick Solberg, Ron Bergan, and former Fargo Mayor Bruce Furness.

"It's fairly simple and just about foolproof," Scheel said of the diversion plan. "This is the only means of protecting the community in a foolproof fashion."

Burgum said the cost of a diversion may look high, but in the long term be the cheapest solution.

"We don't want to look ahead 10 years or 20 years, we want to look at 100 years" or beyond, he said.

Burgum added that high levees along the Red would ruin views of the river, force the removal of homes, and act as a barrier between the cities of Fargo and Moorhead.

The coalition proposes the diversion could start at the Wild Rice River west of Interstate 29 and end north of Argusville, N.D.

Schafer, a former U.S. secretary of agriculture, said that as a bonus, the channel could follow the Winnipeg diversion model, with alfalfa grown in the dry channel to keep rich farmland in use and provide feed and biomass for fuel.

"We can maintain all but about 600 acres" of the land needed as productive farmland, Schafer said.

About 4,000 acres would be switched from row crops to alfalfa, as well, coalition materials said.

The coalition has launched a Web site, www.fmfloodcontrol.com (<http://www.fmfloodcontrol.com>) .

The site contains a form letter arguing for a western diversion as the best flood protection option.

Visitors to the Web site can choose to send the letter to North Dakota or Minnesota officials and corps officials.

Fargo Mayor Dennis Walaker said he was asked by coalition members to support the diversion.

Walaker said that while "all of us would love a diversion," he doesn't believe it will be the corps' preferred alternative.

"The land costs alone are going to be enormous," he said.

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