

# Forum editorial: Flood diversion will save lives

Posted on Feb 21, 2017 at 3:44 p.m.



The run of unseasonably mild weather has allowed construction to start early on a \$46 million inlet that is part of the Fargo-Moorhead flood diversion project. That's a significant milestone in the history of the diversion, which quickly emerged after the 2009 flood as the solution the metro area needs to protect against catastrophic floods. The project has made impressive progress, quickly earning congressional authorization and positioning itself as a pilot for an innovative public-private partnership approach that will help hold down costs and accelerate progress.

But a lawsuit by upstream opponents and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources casts a shadow over the diversion, even as it moves ahead. The DNR has refused to grant a permit for the dam, classified as a high-hazard dam, that will temporarily pool water to control the downstream discharge. To bolster its case, the DNR uses some very dubious claims to make what is a sound, well-designed project look scary in order to justify its denial.

The dam, which will be 21 feet tall at its deepest point, low ground just west of the Red River, has been designed by the Army Corps of Engineers to withstand a monster flood with a probability of occurring once every 100,000 years—far beyond its intended use, to protect against a flood likely to occur once every 100 years. By comparison, the corps considers the 2009 flood of a magnitude apt to occur once every 50 years.

As the corps points out, the dam will be more secure than the serpentine permanent levees running through Fargo-Moorhead, some of them as tall or taller than the dam—and infinitely more stable than the miles of emergency levees and sandbag walls that have been necessary in severe floods.

A levee breach therefore poses a much greater risk to the populace. In a corps analysis, a catastrophic breach of the dam in the event of a 100-year flood would kill at least 2 and at most 31 people in a population at 19,000 at risk of inundation in what would be a very shallow pool.

The DNR rejects that analysis, arguing more would die during evacuation in icy floodwater, and claims it would be less risky to keep fighting floods with emergency levees and sandbags. The DNR ignores the potential loss of life if Fargo-Moorhead isn't protected by a diversion channel. In a 2010 corps analysis, a 10-year flood could claim one life during evacuation, and 12 people could die during an evacuation in a 500-year flood. But an unexpected levee failure could kill 32 in a 10-year flood and claim 594 lives in a 500-year flood.

The diversion will save lives and property; an extreme flood could cause damage exceeding \$10 billion. The start of construction on the inlet is cause for celebration—and the DNR and upstream opponents must not be allowed to thwart the project.

Editorials represent the views of Forum management and the Editorial Board.