

Analysis: Red River diversion fails test

By [Helmut Schmidt](#) on May 28, 2009 at 12:00 a.m.



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Levee system on edge of passing cost-benefit

A \$909 million Red River diversion channel through Minnesota did not meet federal cost-benefit requirements in an early study, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officer said Wednesday in Fargo.

But a \$625 million levee plan for Fargo and Moorhead, which would include Fargo's Southside Flood Control Project, is right on the edge of passing the cost-benefit test, said Col. Jon Christensen, commander of the corps' St. Paul District.

Christensen was among several people invited by Sen. Byron Dorgan to testify at an official hearing of the Senate's Energy and Water Appropriations Subcommittee on Wednesday at the Fargodome.

Dorgan, chairman of the subcommittee, held the meeting to document the need for Congress to fund permanent flood protection for the Fargo-Moorhead metro area and Red River basin.

The North Dakota Democrat said after the meeting that the corps' analysis indicates that a plan may end up centered on a levee system.

People are "very impatient," Dorgan said, reminding those in the packed hearing room that getting funding is "a long, tough slog."

Also listening to testimony were Sen. Kent Conrad, D-N.D., Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., Rep. Earl Pomeroy, D-N.D., and Rep. Collin Peterson,

D-Minn.

Conrad cautioned officials from both sides of the Red that flood-control plans have "very little chance" of getting federal funding without consensus.

"We cannot rest until temporary protection is a thing of the past," Conrad said.

Christensen said the levee system was rated 1.0 in the corps' cost-benefit analysis. Under federal rules, anything scoring more than a 1.0 can be funded. The diversion was rated at .65, and a combination of the diversion and levees earned a .62 rating.

Pomeroy urged corps representatives to examine their figures closer.

Pomeroy pointed out that Christensen had testified that without corps help, the region could have had

\$3 billion in damage - \$2.5 billion of that in Fargo-Moorhead alone.

Potential damage should have more weight in the cost-benefit equation, Pomeroy said.

Without a freeze that held river levels down, "we might not have made it. That's tremendous risk," he said. "By the skin of our teeth avoiding a two and a half billion (dollar) hit."

Major flooding is now all too common, Fargo Mayor Dennis Walaker said.

"It seems like we're experiencing a record flood every five years," he said.

Fighting this year's flood, which crested at a record 40.8 feet, required building 48 miles of temporary levees using 800,000 cubic yards of clay hauled in 30,000 truckloads, he said.

"That should not be the norm," Walaker said.

Moorhead Mayor Mark Voxland joked that his city was "the East Coast of the Red River."

Annual flood fighting of the scale seen this spring "is not sustainable," he said, calling for interim measures until a permanent fix is found.

Voxland said more dialogue and communication is needed, but he predicted Fargo and Moorhead would be in sync by the end of the year.

Peterson, Klobuchar and others had expressed concerns Tuesday about the corps' proposal to build a 30-mile diversion through the rich farmland on the Minnesota side of the Red.

"Either state, with that much farmland taken out," would have had a concern, Klobuchar said. "I think we're getting closer and closer" to agreement.

"We've got to get people understanding what we're doing," Peterson said. "It's going to take a lot of education. It's going to take a lot of meetings. It's going to be hard."

North Dakota Gov. John Hoeven urged the corps and the congressional leaders to consider using Fargo's \$161 million Southside Flood Control Project as a first phase in a multiphase approach to bringing flood control to the valley.

"We're open to any and all options, but we are anxious to get going," Hoeven said.

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Helmut Schmidt was born in Germany, but grew up in the Twin Cities area, graduating from Park High School of Cottage Grove. After serving a tour in the U.S. Army, he attended the University of St. Thomas in St Paul, Minn., graduating in 1984 with a degree in journalism. He then worked at the Albert Lea (Minn.) Tribune and served as managing editor there for three years. He joined The Forum in October 1989, working as a copy editor until 2000. Since then, he has worked as a reporter on several beats, including education, Fargo city government, business and military affairs. He is currently The Forum's K-12 education reporter.

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