

MPRnews

Opposition to Red River diversion project growing

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A \$1.4 billion Red River diversion plan to ease flooding in Fargo-Moorhead is on a fast track, with a schedule that is one of the most aggressive ever undertaken by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

But there is growing opposition to the project, with critics lining up to submit comments to the Corps of Engineers by Monday's deadline.

"For a Corps project with a \$1.4 billion pricetag, it sure seems to us like it's moving pretty quick," said Kit Fischer, an outreach coordinator for the National Wildlife Federation. "A lot of us are sort of left scratching our heads, wondering 'how can this thing go through?'"

Fischer said the project should include wetland restoration and upstream water storage to reduce flows on the river.

The National Wildlife Federation also has concerns about how the diversion will affect downstream areas where flooding will worsen because of the diversion. Fischer said other than a 36-mile diversion channel, the Corps of Engineers did not adequately study options.

"There are solutions that will protect Fargo and Moorhead, but also protect downstream impacts and upstream impacts and have a positive impact on wildlife," he said.

Several national and regional environmental groups also are raising questions about the diversion project.

Figure 16 - North Dakota East diversion alignment



The purple line shows the proposed route of a diversion around Fargo-Moorhead. The diversion would be 35 miles long and cross five streams, 18 roads and four rail lines.

Graphic courtesy of US Army Corps of Engineers

Henry Van Offelen, a natural resource scientist for the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, said the Red River has one of the longest stretches without barriers to migrating fish anywhere in the country. He worries the diversion and gate structures built in the river will affect the movement of species like sturgeon and catfish.

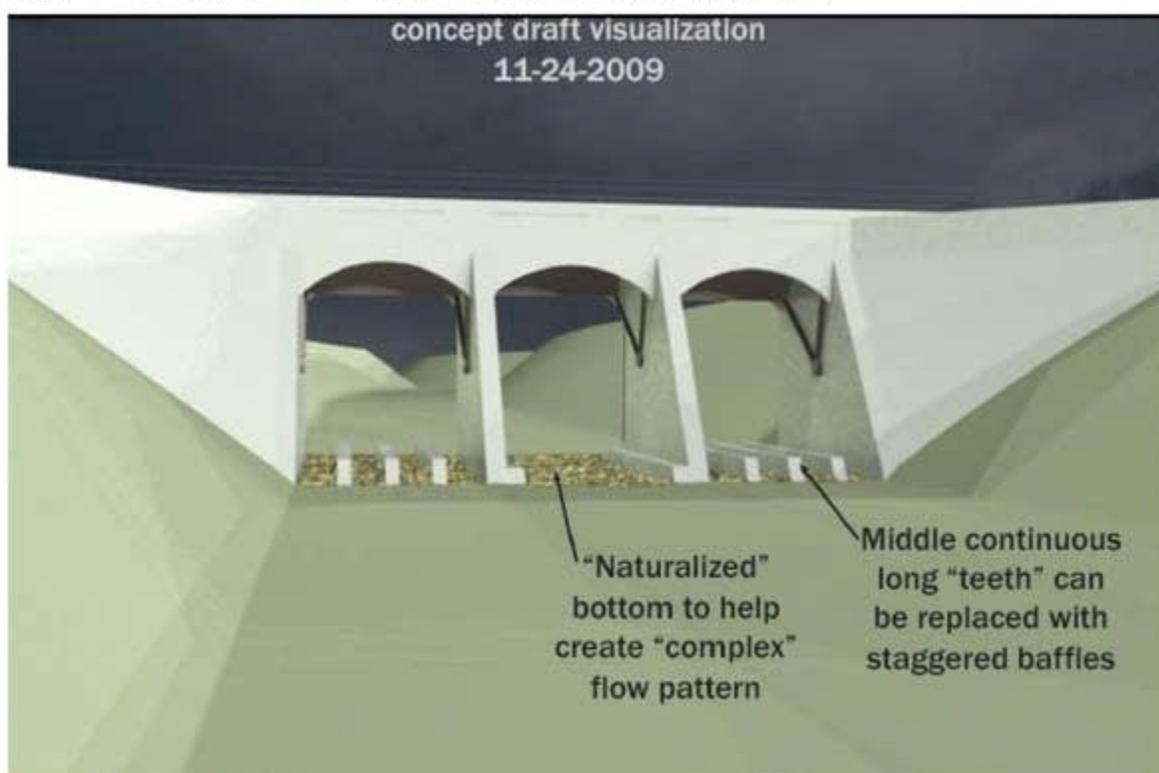
But Van Offelen said the greatest concern with the project is that it simply moves the flooding problem downstream.

"We're trying to move water faster downstream to get rid of the problem," he said. "We need to start looking at mitigating the effects downstream, and the environmental effects also."

Van Offelen said increased flows downstream will worsen erosion and damage the river channel and adjacent farmland.

The likely downstream effects of the diversion are causing fear and anger for people living downstream. An analysis released just last week by the Corps of Engineers show the diversion will worsen flooding as far as 50 or 60 miles downstream.

Figure 15 – Conceptual Red River control structure, looking upstream



This structure would be built across the Red River south of Fargo-Moorhead. During a flood, gates would lower from the top, partially blocking the river and forcing water into the nearby diversion channel.
Graphic courtesy of US Army Corps of Engineers

Flood levels downstream will increase by as little as a few inches to as much as two feet after the diversion is built.

Hendrum Mayor Curt Johannsen said the late release of that downstream data gives people little time to prepare comments.

The Corps rejected a request to extend the comment period.

Johannsen said a downstream impact working group he helped create is growing every day, as opposition to the Fargo-Moorhead diversion increases. The group has hired an attorney and an engineer.

A handful of counties and cities have passed resolutions to slow the project and allow more time for study. Johannsen said they want the diversion project to include the cost of mitigating increased flooding downstream.

"If mitigation isn't included with the pricetag of the project, who says we're going to get it?" Johannsen said. "If it's considered an add on, how many years down the road until we get it? The hazard mitigation needs to be included in the funding of the diversion, because I honestly feel if it isn't we won't see it."

Johannsen said he doubts the concerns raised in public comments about the project will derail the diversion from its fast track.

"I personally feel that if they see any comments that get in the way of building their diversion, they're going to throw them out. It's not fair to these people," he said. "They have a right to comment."

"The comment period should be extended until all downstream impacts have been studied, all the way to Lake Winnipeg," Johannsen said.

The Corps of Engineers is required by law to respond to any comments received by the Monday deadline.

Project Manager Craig Evans said valid concerns will be considered and included in the final project proposal.

"We feel like we have a pretty good plan, so I'm not expecting any drastic changes," Evans said. "But we do consider people's views, and if there are things we can improve in the project we're very open to doing that."

The project schedule calls for a final plan to be sent to Congress by the end of the year.

Downstream residents say they are considering all options to slow the project, including legal action.