

NEWS

## **NEW DIVERSION FOES: MinnDak Upstream Coalition forms to try to stop project**

COLFAX, N.D.

Written By: Patrick Springer | Apr 4th 2011 - 12am.



Scott Hendrickson and June Kopp of Richland County helped form the MinnDak Upstream Coalition in Colfax. Carrie Snyder / The Forum

**COLFAX, N.D.** - A new group has surfaced to fight the proposed Fargo-Moorhead diversion and seeks to unite downstream and upstream opponents of the flood-control project.

More than 100 people gathered Sunday afternoon in the school gymnasium in this northern Richland County farming town to form the MinnDak Upstream Coalition.

The group's aim: Stop the diversion project, which would include a temporary water storage pool covering more than 21,000 acres in water more than 3 feet deep during a 100-year flood.

Scott Hendrickson, a farmer who lives along the Wild Rice River near Walcott, N.D., is one of the organizers of the new group, which plans to join forces with an opposition group of landowners downstream of the diversion, spearheaded by Hendrum, Minn.

"They just want to stop it, period, and they want us to put a group together to do the same," Hendrickson said. "They simply want us to put a group together to oppose the dam and diversion."

Ironically, the proposed diversion project was modified to include the upstream storage pool to minimize flooding impacts downstream of the diversion, north of Fargo-Moorhead.

Landowners south of Fargo-Moorhead, upstream along the Red River, must organize as one voice to have a seat at the table as plans for the diversion unfold, said Wayne Ulven, superintendent of Richland School District 44.

"We want to be players," he told the audience. "If you are a player you have to make a response, and this response has to go to the Corps of Engineers," which is leading the project.

Land representing about 26 percent of the district's taxable evaluation, or \$1.836 million could be affected by the retention pond, he said.

Hendrickson and Ulven spoke of the strategic value of uniting with downstream opponents, as well as other communities on both sides of the Red River.

"It's going to take all of us to get this stopped," Hendrickson said.

Hendrickson, who has spoken with the downstream opponents, said the MinnDak Upstream Coalition could use the same Twin Cities legal team hired by downstream opponents to try to delay and ultimately halt the project.

"If we're going to share their attorneys we're going to have to pretty much oppose it," he said.

Nobody attending the meeting spoke against organizing to oppose the diversion.

Many were farmers concerned their farmland would be submerged and they would be unable to plant in the spring or would lose crops in the event of a summer flood.

Federal crop insurance will not cover a man-made disaster, said Larry Bakko, who lives in Oxbow and farms near Kindred, Walcott and Wolverton, Minn.

Officials backing the diversion project want to compensate farmers by paying for flowage easements in the event crops are impacted.

Several including Hendrickson spoke in support of retention projects that collectively could reduce Red River flows by 20 percent.

But Jon Evert, a Clay County commissioner who attended the meeting, said retention projects capable of holding that much water would take 10 to 20 years to complete.

After the meeting, in an interview, Evert said he is a proponent of the diversion, and said retention projects alone will not protect Fargo-Moorhead from severe flooding.

But, he added, "we need to find ways to do it without destroying the communities." Evert, who also is chairman of the Red River Basin Commission, which is working to find consensus in flood mitigation for the valley, said he attended the meeting as an observer.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has not done an environmental impact study of the proposed upstream storage area, Ulven said.

"They're going to do an impact study and that doesn't happen overnight," he said.

Someone in the audience asked the coalition organizers if they had a backup plan in the event the downstream opponents, already well organized, won't accept upstream opponents as partners.

Hendrickson answered that there wasn't an alternative strategy, adding, "I'm quite confident they'll let us work with them."

The downstream advisers apparently had specific recommendations for their potential upstream allies, including the wording of the new coalition's vision statement.

"They want us to use the word upstream in our vision statement," Hendrickson said. "They made that pretty clear."

Ulven said the coalition could organize as a joint powers agreement if litigation becomes necessary. In that event, a governmental entity would be helpful as a coalition partner.

Litigation is premature right now, Ulven added, saying the diversion has not yet been formalized. "Right now it's a moving target," he said. "How do you litigate against a moving target? You don't."

The corps needs confirmation by April 11 that local sponsors want to proceed with the plan they intend to include in an April 27 feasibility report.

Fargo, Moorhead, West Fargo and Cass County boards will vote today on whether they support the diversion channel alignment the corps is studying. Clay County plans to vote Tuesday.

The MinnDak Upstream Coalition plans to appear today before the Richland County Commission to plead their case.

"We're going to ask," Hendrickson said, "for their support."

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Readers can reach Forum reporter Patrick Springer at (701) 241-5522



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