



The Forum of Fargo-Moorhead

OPINION

Forum editorial: Surviving a 'big one' is the goal

An afternoon talk-radio host, who has been an uncompromising supporter of a Fargo-Moorhead flood diversion, put the project in the right context during his Wednesday broadcast. Reminding listeners that the cost of North Dakota floods this year is...

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An afternoon talk-radio host, who has been an uncompromising supporter of a Fargo-Moorhead flood diversion, put the project in the right context during his Wednesday broadcast. Reminding listeners that the cost of North Dakota floods this year is an estimated \$1 billion, and climbing rapidly, he said a catastrophic flood on the Red River at Fargo would result in damage costs that would total a lot more. He's got it right.

And that's the value of a diversion that would be permanent protection for the state's largest urban area. Every credible study of flood protection for Fargo and its immediate environs has concluded a diversion and associated retention are the only means to manage a big flood. And by "big," they mean river elevations that would surpass the 42-foot mark. Given the floods of 1997, 2009 and 2011, a river crest at or above 42 feet is a realistic fear.

The lessons of damaging floods this summer on the Missouri River at Bismarck-Mandan and on the Souris River at Minot, N.D., could not be clearer - at least to observers whose vision is not affected by parochial blinders. Dams and impoundments might provide temporary protection, but in the long pull, no system of dams, however sophisticated, can handle extreme rainfall and record snowpack. The same calculation applies to the Red River Valley, where topography works against dams and reservoirs of the size and capacity as those on the Missouri. The near-record flooding along nearly the entire length of the Missouri, from Montana to the state of Missouri, confirms that dams can manage the river to some extent but cannot prevent flooding when there simply is too much water in the river system.

The same lesson is evident in the catastrophe at Minot, where incredible rains soaked the watershed in Canada. The Souris River was so bloated that three "flood control" dams north of Minot could not hold back enough runoff to prevent devastating flooding, not only in Minot but also in Canada and along the length of the river in North Dakota.

Those who believe the estimated \$1.5 billion for a Fargo diversion is not justified because the city thus far has been able to avoid major flooding are thinking short term. Bismarck lived blissfully below the Garrison Dam for more than 50 years without a flood. Minot's post-1969 flood levees were inadequate in 2011. Effective flood protection must consider the worst-case scenario, otherwise it's a sham. The "big one" need only happen once to cause untold emotional trauma and pile up billions of dollars in damage and recovery expenses.

That's why the F-M diversion - incorporating practical modifications to minimize impact on the neighbors - must stay on track.

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