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Red River Flooding Solution Is a Problem to Some

By [MONICA DAVEY](#)

FARGO, N.D. — Although the [Red River](#)'s swollen waters have long tormented this city and the region straddling North Dakota and Minnesota, the severity of flooding last spring galvanized leaders here to come up with a solution in a \$1 billion water diversion project. But as [memories of the floods of 2009](#) — the images of farmhouses surrounded by miles of water — begin to fade, there are signs that the consensus may be tested.

The project would create a large-scale diversion channel, essentially sending some part of the water off on a man-made path, around the neighbor cities of Fargo and Moorhead, Minn. The sensitive question, though, is where the water should go. Residents of the small, sugar beet farm towns near Fargo fear that any diversion would, in sparing the larger cities, send extra floodwaters straight for them.

"There's only one place for it to go — our way — and we can't take anymore, believe me," said Ann Manley, the mayor of Perley, Minn., population 111, one of the towns sprinkled along the river, some of which found themselves isolated for nearly two months last spring because of floodwaters.

"Fargo and Moorhead are the big guns," Ms. Manley said. "We don't have the people. We don't have the money. But this is going to affect all the little towns."

Leaders here say there is little time for disagreement. The United States Army Corps of Engineers expects to complete an analysis of the alternatives by February, and there is hope that federal approval — and 65 percent of the cost, in federal money — can be secured in 2010.

"If this is ever going to get done, ever in my lifetime, this is the opportunity," said Mayor [Dennis Walaker](#) of Fargo, who said he had watched for years as disputes and ambivalence meant that no permanent solution emerged. "This is it."

Last March, levels here along the Red River, which splits Minnesota from North Dakota on its journey north toward Winnipeg, Manitoba, reached their highest in [history](#). The regular spring snow and ice melt, often the cause of high waters here, was worsened thanks to ground that had been saturated the fall before.

As experts predicted ever-higher water levels, more sandbags were piled atop protective [levees](#), and some even urged the evacuation of Fargo, North Dakota's most populous city with 90,000 residents. In the end, the hearts of Fargo and Moorhead, home to nearly 35,000 people, were mostly protected, but farms and homes were swamped through the region.

In a series of meetings and [reports](#), the authorities have weighed all brands of long-term solutions —

dredging and widening the river, digging tunnels, turning an Interstate highway into an open viaduct during floods, creating areas to store water, or diversion.

For now, officials from the Corps of Engineers say they are studying the feasibility of several 30-foot-deep diversion paths. One would be a 25-mile-long ditch that would send water around the Fargo-Moorhead area through Minnesota; another 36-mile route would do the same through North Dakota. Many local leaders say they favor the North Dakota route, but the Minnesota path, less expensive, has fared better in federal cost-benefit analyses.

The paths are also where broader agreement about flood abatement grow complicated. At least one city, [Dilworth](#), Minn., which might find the diversion running near it, on land some there had envisioned developing, has complained. "Nobody likes seeing a plan with a line over their land," said Aaron Snyder, an official from the Corps of Engineers, who said about 7,000 acres would be needed.

But any path is worrisome to some among the towns just north of Fargo, along the river, beyond the proposed diversion. There, residents are already challenged by flooding, and a diversion, they say, would send the water toward them that much more rapidly. Federal authorities have estimated that in another flood, the water levels might rise only by a matter of inches, but some are unconvinced. Besides, they say, their own protective walls around their towns were already tested by last spring's floods.

"There's a lot of fear, a lot of volatility," said Diane Ista, a manager with the [Wild Rice Watershed District](#), representing rural communities in six counties. "We really want the cities to get their protection, and we're not trying to be confrontational, but we're worried and we need a seat at the table on this."

Back in the larger cities, officials say they believe their chances for a long-term solution are better than ever, though all acknowledge that any plan, once approved and paid for, will take years to construct.

"It's like anything else in life though," said Tim Mahoney, a Fargo commissioner. "The sooner you come to a plan, the sooner you get to a second set of hurdles."

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