

MRV, Lake Agassiz Water Authority
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Lake Agassiz Water Authority focuses on water supply

At the end of the glacial period in present-day North America, a vast lake stretched from the southern end of what is now the Red River Valley north to the Saskatchewan and Nelson Rivers. This ancient freshwater lake, known today as Lake Agassiz, was several times larger than Lake Superior and provided more drinking water than the early inhabitants needed.

What is left of Lake Agassiz is now a simple stream-bed, known as the Red River of the North. Because North Dakota is semi-arid, and the Red River has run dry several times in the past, it only provides a limited supply of reliable, high-quality water to the area's cities, rural communities and industries. The state and its citizens are searching for an answer to meet current and future water delivery demands of the region. Recognizing a need to have a water supply-focused entity, the 2003 North Dakota State Legislature formed the Lake Agassiz Water Authority (LAWA).

"We have been fortunate in the past years to have a dependable water supply in the Red River Valley area," says Fargo Mayor and LAWA Chairman Bruce Furness. "North Dakota is a state with frequent drought periods. We use our water conservation practices when needed, but if you look into the future or even to our neighbors today, you can see that our current water supplies won't meet the demands of the future. We want to continue growing, but without a high-quality, affordable and reliable water supply, we could be limited in our growth potential"

With water supply for the entire Red River Valley becoming a more pressing issue, LAWA was created to ensure that a dependable, long-term water supply will be available for economic security and the protection of health and general welfare of all the people of this state.

The LAWA board of directors is made up of representatives from cities and rural water districts from the 13 counties within the Red River Valley. These board members are charged with

providing a supply and distribution of water to the people of eastern North Dakota for a variety of purposes. Before the water can be distributed, a Red River Valley Water Supply Project (RRVWSP) Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) needs to be completed. Because the LAWA represents key users in the region, it is a cooperating agency in the study.

“The Red River Valley has a limited supply of reliable, high-quality water sources,” says Dave Koland, Garrison Diversion manager. “The purpose of the RRVWSP EIS is to evaluate options for providing water to the Red River Valley. The Dakota Water Resources Act requires that an EIS be prepared ‘concerning all feasible options to meet the comprehensive water quality and quantity needs of the Red River Valley, including the delivery of Missouri River water to the Red River Valley.’”

Garrison Diversion was authorized by Gov. Hoeven to represent the state as the co-lead on the EIS. Koland sees Garrison Diversion’s role reaching out to the direct interests in the state, including LAWA, and making sure the needs of the local entities are being served.

“The LAWA board and members are our link to the needs of the water users,” Koland says.

The LAWA board held its inaugural meeting in February, and has already been active in the discussions on water supply options for the Valley.

“Beginning with our first meeting, we set out to educate the board on the importance of its role in the Red River Valley Water Supply Project,” says Furness. “Our role, as ultimate users of the project, is extremely important to the future of our region and the state. The decisions we make today will determine the economic future of the Red River Valley and the state.”

The LAWA board’s biggest long-range task is to be the contractor for a supply of water for beneficial use to persons or entities within or outside the Authority. But, in the immediate future, it is using its resources to assist with the RRVWSP EIS by providing local input and timely information.

“In order to support a preferred water supply alternative and completion of the draft EIS, the study needs to have a variety of reports and analyses completed,” Furness says. “LAWA and the users are available to help provide the needed information. The schedule to complete the draft

EIS is very aggressive, but in order to make informed decisions that are best for our region, we are prepared to help by providing reports that are complete and on time.”

The LAWA board and members represent the users of the project, so they are the primary contacts to determine the advantages and disadvantages of the different alternatives proposed for the RRVWSP.

“Since the LAWA board is such an important part of the outcome of the study, it will provide detailed information and input into the study process as it moves forward. Garrison Diversion and the state welcome input from the users, and we will provide them with the information that will enable them to make informed decisions throughout the process,” Koland says.

Because the impacts of the RRVWSP will be far-reaching, the study process requires a great deal of analysis by a wide group of interests. The LAWA board will be contracting with a variety of interests to ensure the information it is issuing, is factual and objective.

The LAWA meets monthly and its agenda for the next year includes reviewing products of the EIS, and education on issues that will play a major role in the decision making process, including water needs, environmental concerns and comparison of alternative costs.

“Once all the analyses are done on the alternatives, the process to identify a preferred alternative can begin,” says Furness. “Although the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) doesn’t require the selection of a preferred alternative, we see advantages to selecting an alternative, including initiating the decision-making process, fully disclosing the state’s intentions and focusing the comments on the alternative that is considered the most likely to proceed.”

Throughout the upcoming years, the LAWA board and its members will continue to gain a better understanding of the issues that will affect water development in the region.

Furness stresses the importance of working together and creating a solution to the water needs quickly and accurately. “Water is a high priority for every community in our region,” he says. “Drought conditions would have devastating social and economic effects on the livelihood of the region, therefore, we need to work together to provide a reliable, high-quality and affordable water supply for North Dakota’s future.”