

Tide turning on water deal: Two of three parties reach agreement on Brady proposal

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Written by
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A major breakthrough has been reached in the effort to bring clean drinking water to the small agricultural town of Brady.

A new agreement signed by representative of the city of Conrad and the Pondera County Canal and Reservoir Co. (PCCRC) virtually ensures Brady will have a secure and reliable source of water before the end of 2014.

The agreement will eventually provide up to 67,000 gallons of water per day to Brady's 250 residents, who now get their water through a network of open irrigation ditches leading to a small water treatment plant. The Montana Department of Environmental Quality has given Brady until 2014 to rectify chronic water quality problems that include high concentrations of organic solids, pesticides and chlorine residues.

PCCRC owns the rights to water stored in Lake Frances, the source of the city of Conrad's municipal water supply. According to the secretary/treasurer of the PCCRC, Gary Arnst, the PCCRC and the city of Conrad signed an agreement Tuesday night to temporarily transfer 18 percent of Conrad's shares in the PCCRC to the North Central Montana Regional Water Authority. The NCMRWA is building a water pipeline between Conrad and Brady as part of a much larger \$361 regional water project.

The agreement has yet to be signed by the NCMRWA; however NCMRWA President Larry Bonderud said Friday: "I have authority from the executive committee to sign the agreement anytime it gets to me with the signatures of the canal company and the city of Conrad. We've just been waiting for the parties to agree. I will sign it the minute it gets laid before me with the signatures of the canal company and the city of Conrad on it."

That Conrad/Brady pipeline project has been stalled in recent months by a dispute between Conrad, the PCCRC and the NCMRWA over the share transfer issue. During

an interview July 11, Bonderud said the PCCRC had a “vendetta” against the city of Conrad based upon a lawsuit filed by the mayor’s parents to limit the PCCRC’s authority to adjudicate water usage disputes.

However, on Friday, Arnst told the Tribune that the real source of the holdup has been Conrad Mayor Wendy Judisch and the NCMRWA.

“The biggest stumbling block in my opinion was Mayor Judisch,” Arnst said of the share transfer negotiations. “Brady and the canal company have no problem with each other. We attended a City Council meeting down in Conrad on Tuesday, and over Wendy Judisch’s strong objections the council did approve it unanimously. For the four City Council members to de facto overrule their mayor takes some doing. We got past the biggest stumbling block.”

According to a July 11 letter from PCCRC President Monty Johnson, the PCCRC had previously proposed Conrad transfer 269 shares to the NCMRWA of the 1,239 it currently holds. According to a PCCRC water engineer’s calculations, that would be the minimum transfer necessary to guarantee 80,000 gallons of water a day during a period of summer drought. Those figures were watered down a bit to 225 shares and a minimum of 67,000 gallons per day — a 16 percent drop in both shares transferred and water delivered.

Judisch was unavailable for comment Friday but said during a previous interview that she did not feel signing the PCCRC’s original proposal was in the best interests of the city of Conrad.

“It tied our hands in so many different ways that we just felt we couldn’t,” Judisch said of signing PCCRC’s original proposal. “The discomfort comes from, we don’t know if the completion of the regional water project is five years away or 50. It’s hard as a community to have your hands tied when you don’t know for how long. I just can’t do that to Conrad.”

Judisch said under the terms of the previous agreement, the NCMRWA will return the transferred shares back to the city of Conrad once the regional water project is completed. That project was authorized by the U.S. Congress in 2002, and will likely require many more years before it is completed.

Arnst's criticism was not reserved solely for Judisch. He said Bonderud had not acted as an honest broker during the negotiation process, and repeatedly ignored the PCCRC's concerns regarding both the amount of water Brady required and the company's limitations as dictated by PCCRC's bylaws.

"We feel that he's tried to put road blocks up," Arnst said of Bonderud. "I think he is missing some major points of water law, and he does not understand or does not care about the canal company's bylaws that we have to follow."

Bonderud replied that his occasionally confrontational stance was necessary to get all parties to the negotiating table.

"It helped to bring people together and get this issue solved," he said. "The personalities were not going to let it happen."

Despite the sometimes acrimoniously nature of the negotiations, all the individuals interviewed for this story said they were pleased an agreement had finally been reached. None more so than Laurie Campbell, president of the Brady County Water and Sewer District — though she admitted she would not be entirely at ease until she saw all three of the participating organizations' signatures on the agreement.

"There are two right now (Conrad and the PCCRC) — we need a third (NCMRWA)," Campbell said of the signatures necessary to ratify the Brady water agreement. "When I see that third one I'll breathe a little easier,"

"I might even start drinking the water," she added.

Update: Brady water emergency could last week or more

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greatfallstribune.com



Zoom

Medy Leitheiser, water operator at the Brady water treatment plant, holds a water sample Friday. Sludge from holding ponds where Brady gets its water has contaminated the drinking water. TRIBUNE PHOTO/LARRY BECKNER

People in Brady are being advised to avoid all contact with town water as officials from Montana Rural Water Systems and the State Department of Environmental Quality work to isolate the source of septic contamination in the community's municipal water system.

Pondera County Disaster and Emergency Services (DES)

issued an emergency public health declaration Thursday morning after high concentrations of biological contaminants were detected in Brady's water. DES has now opened an emergency coordination center (ECC) at the Brady Fire Hall to respond to the immediate sanitation and drinking water needs of more than 200 residents.

Initial reports suggested the source of contamination was an in-town waterline break. Officials are now focusing their attention on Brady's water treatment plant. According to Brady County Water and Sewer District President Laurie Campbell, the town's entire water system has been depressurized, meaning all 107 households and businesses that rely on Brady municipal system water hookups are now completely without water.

Campbell said engineers inspecting the town's water system have indicated it will take at least a week to repair the system. Until then, DES is supplying bottled drinking water to Brady's municipal water system customers, and six sanitation centers with portable toilets and hand washing facilities have been set up around the community.

Pondera County DES Coordinator LeAnn Hermance is advising municipal water users in Brady to turn off their water heaters, and to be extremely cautious with fire, since the Brady fire district is currently without a local source of water.

The Tribune will provide updates of the situation as more information becomes available

Pondera County declared a public health emergency after a waterline in Brady broke and contaminated water to 107 hook-ups. The break has affected around 200 residents.

Issues to the water district began over the weekend, but the Pondera County Commission declared the emergency Thursday, said LeAnn Hermance, the Pondera County Disaster and Emergency Service coordinator.

“At this point things are calm, and we’re dealing with it as best we can,” Hermance said after spending the day at the scene.

She said that crews are currently digging out the areas of concern, and the problem has been identified.

Today Pondera County will be rolling out a five-day plan to figure out how much drinking water residents will need. Bottled water was being distributed out to Brady on Thursday, but larger containers will hit the streets Friday.

Five stations of porta-potties have also been scattered around the town in strategic locations to best serve residents, Hermance said.

Residents can receive the free water at the Brady Fire Hall.

Water will be available Friday from 8 a.m. until 10 p.m.

Businesses will need to acquire their own source of water for customers and staff since only immediate water needs will be provided for residents. Bottled water will be provided for home pets but not livestock.