

Congressional support for Nekoma eroding

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WASHINGTON — Congressional support is eroding for a proposed antimissile program in North Dakota even as the Pentagon considers shelving plans to deploy the system, the state's senators say.

"I think this will ultimately be a victim of the budget wars," Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., said Thursday.

As part of a long-range "bottom-up" review of the nation's military needs, the Defense Department is considering several options for the ground-based missile defense system, a Senate committee was told

this week. One option is to kill the deployment plans and limit the program to research.

The Clinton administration already had proposed delaying deployment of the system until at least 2004.

"If they're doing a bottom-up review they're going to have to have a pretty powerful telescope to find the merits of this program," said Dorgan, who thinks the program should be killed.

Sen. Kent Conrad, the lone member of the state's congressional delegation who supports the system, is more optimistic about its future.

"I'd say there has been some erosion as budget pressures mount and the cost estimates increase, but there is still substantial support," he said.

The Pentagon review is expected to be finished by July 4.

"I really do not know how serious an option that is" to shelve the deployment plans, Conrad said. "My information is that they are still very much in the evaluation stage."

The antimissile system, known as the National Missile Defense program, is designed to protect the continental United States from long-range nuclear missiles.

Plans call for installing 100 interceptors at the antimissile site near Nekoma, N.D., that was abandoned during the 1970s.

The Central Intelligence Agency says some countries hostile to the United States could have intercontinental missiles within eight to 15 years.

However, the administration decided to make a higher priority of developing "theater" nuclear missile systems to protect troops in war zones.

The administration has requested \$1.2 billion next year for the land-based system and \$1.8 billion for the theater defense program.