

Nekoma deployment takes another hit

■ Clinton wants to postpone deployment 2 more years

By Philip Brasher
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Clinton administration wants to postpone deployment of a national anti-missile defense system in North Dakota to at least the year 2004 and cut its research money by 30 percent next year.

The deployment date already had been put off from this decade until 2002.

The administration has relegated the project to its "second priority" in the Strategic Defense Initiative, said Major Gen. Malcolm O'Neill, the acting director of SDI.

The administration wants to put more money into "theater" missile defenses that are designed to protect the military in regional conflicts like the Persian Gulf War, O'Neill told a Senate Appropriations subcommittee Tuesday.

The national defense system to be based near Nekoma, N.D., is supposed to guard against accidental launches of nuclear missiles from the old Soviet Union or terrorist strikes from Third World nations, such as Iraq.

The president's budget ear-

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marks \$1.2 billion next year for its development, down from \$1.7 billion this year. Spending on theater defenses would rise from \$1.1 billion to \$1.7 billion.

President Clinton recognizes that congressional support for the national defense system is weak, but doesn't want to pick a fight with the project's backers by trying to kill it, said John Pike, space policy director with the Federation of American Scientists.

"What they're doing . . . I don't think represents a significant departure from what (former President) Bush was doing," Pike said

Tuesday. "They have a more realistic recognition of the level of congressional enthusiasm for it, which is not as high as Bush would have hoped."

Sen. Byron Dorgan, who has criticized the project from its inception, said it is doomed despite an effort by defense contractors to keep it alive.

"The Department of Defense is trying to breathe life into a cadaver," the North Dakota Democrat said.

"The belt is drawing tighter here on economic decisions. Eventually that project has to be seen for it is — a wasteful, bloated remainder of the Cold War."