

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
Before the
SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION

SECURITIES EXCHANGE ACT OF 1934

Release No. 55416 / March 7, 2007

ACCOUNTING AND AUDITING ENFORCEMENT

Release No. 2573 / March 7, 2007

ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEEDING

File No. 3-12585

In the Matter of

**NORTHWESTERN
CORPORATION,**

Respondent.

**ORDER INSTITUTING CEASE-AND-
DESIST PROCEEDINGS, MAKING
FINDINGS AND IMPOSING A CEASE-
AND-DESIST ORDER PURSUANT TO
SECTION 21C OF THE SECURITIES
EXCHANGE ACT OF 1934**

I.

The Securities and Exchange Commission (“Commission”) deems it appropriate that public cease-and-desist proceedings be, and hereby are, instituted pursuant to Section 21C of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 (“Exchange Act”) against NorthWestern Corporation (“NorthWestern” or “Respondent”).

II.

In anticipation of the institution of these proceedings, Respondent has submitted an Offer of Settlement (the “Offer”) which the Commission has determined to accept. Solely for the purpose of these proceedings and any other proceedings brought by or on behalf of the Commission, or to which the Commission is a party, and without admitting or denying the findings herein, except as to the Commission’s jurisdiction over it and the subject matter of these proceedings, which are admitted, Respondent consents to the entry of this Order Instituting Cease-and-Desist Proceedings, Making Findings and Imposing a Cease-and-Desist Order Pursuant to Section 21C of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 (“Order”), as set forth below.

III.

On the basis of this Order and Respondent's Offer, the Commission finds¹ that:

Summary

During the first three quarters of 2002, NorthWestern filed quarterly and current reports with the Commission that materially misstated NorthWestern's financial position and misrepresented or did not disclose required information about its non-utility businesses, Expanets, Inc. ("Expanets") and Blue Dot Services, Inc. ("Blue Dot"). In its filings, after the effect of taxes, NorthWestern overstated its income from continuing operations for the first three quarters of 2002 by approximately 176%, 618%, and 109%, respectively, due to the company's improper accounting for accounts receivable, adjustments to customers' bills, and allocation of losses to minority interests. NorthWestern also misrepresented or did not disclose, among other things, the effects of significant problems with Expanets' new information technology system, the material impact of Expanets' reserve reductions and its receipt of non-compete payments on Expanets' income, large intercompany advances NorthWestern made to support Expanets and Blue Dot, and the timing of anticipated payments from the sale of certain utility assets. Through its financial misstatements, misrepresentations, and omissions, NorthWestern obscured the continuing poor performance of its subsidiaries at a time when it was publicly relying on these subsidiaries' operations to strengthen its financial condition.

Respondent

1. NorthWestern, a Delaware corporation with its principal executive offices in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, operates a regulated utility business in South Dakota, Nebraska, and Montana. During the period of conduct discussed herein, NorthWestern consolidated the financial results of two non-utility entities, Expanets and Blue Dot. NorthWestern's common stock was registered with the Commission under Section 12(b) of the Exchange Act and traded on the New York Stock Exchange until it was delisted shortly before NorthWestern declared bankruptcy in September 2003. In November 2004, NorthWestern emerged from bankruptcy. Its common stock is now registered with the Commission pursuant to Section 12(b) of the Exchange Act and trades on the NASDAQ Global Select Market.

Other Relevant Entities

2. Expanets, formerly headquartered in Englewood, Colorado, was formed by NorthWestern in 1997 and provided networked telecommunications equipment and services to medium-sized businesses nationwide. NorthWestern wrote off substantially all of its investment in Expanets during the fourth quarter of 2002 as disclosed in the company's 2002 Form 10-K and announced its intention to sell Expanets in April 2003. In the second quarter of 2003, Expanets'

¹ The findings herein are made pursuant to Respondent's Offer of Settlement and are not binding on any other person or entity in this or any other proceeding.

operations were discontinued, and in May 2004, Expanets (n/k/a Netexit) filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. Proceeds from the sale of Expanets' assets were distributed in bankruptcy.

3. Blue Dot, formerly headquartered in Sunrise, Florida, and Sioux Falls, South Dakota, was formed by NorthWestern in 1997 and provided heating, ventilation and air conditioning ("HVAC") services nationwide. NorthWestern wrote off substantially all of its investment in Blue Dot during the fourth quarter of 2002 as disclosed in the company's 2002 Form 10-K and announced its intention to sell Blue Dot in April 2003. In the second quarter of 2003, Blue Dot's operations were discontinued, and NorthWestern thereafter sold or closed each of Blue Dot's HVAC businesses.

Background

4. For more than seventy years, NorthWestern operated a public utility business, providing electricity and natural gas to customers in South Dakota and Nebraska. In the late 1990s, NorthWestern formed Expanets and Blue Dot (the "non-utility businesses") to diversify into the telecommunications and HVAC sectors. NorthWestern's business plan was to acquire small telecommunications and HVAC companies and make them more profitable through central management, national branding and other economies of scale.

5. From 1998 through the end of 2001, Expanets acquired twenty-six small telecommunications companies and a sales division of a large competitor. From 1997 through the end of 2001, Blue Dot acquired over ninety different HVAC and plumbing companies. By the end of 2001, NorthWestern had invested hundreds of millions of dollars in Expanets and Blue Dot to make these acquisitions and build those subsidiaries' central management. However, Expanets and Blue Dot incurred losses during most years and posted only small profits in other years. Because of their performance, Expanets and Blue Dot required investments of substantial amounts of cash by NorthWestern.

6. In February 2002, NorthWestern effectively quadrupled its utility customer base by acquiring Montana Power Company ("Montana Power") for approximately \$1.1 billion. NorthWestern originally financed its acquisition of Montana Power by utilizing, among other things, a \$720 million acquisition loan. In March 2002, as part of a debt offering to retire the acquisition loan, NorthWestern issued \$720 million in the form of senior notes.

7. The magnitude of NorthWestern's increased debt as a result of the Montana Power acquisition threatened the company's credit ratings. As a result, NorthWestern announced its intention to conduct an equity offering during 2002 to raise approximately \$200 million to pay down its debt and improve its debt/equity ratios.

8. NorthWestern recognized that improvement in the performance of both Expanets and Blue Dot was critical to its planned equity offering. NorthWestern made public statements that both Expanets and Blue Dot would achieve 2002 targeted earnings and begin providing cash to the NorthWestern consolidated entity in 2002.

9. NorthWestern conducted its equity offering during the third quarter of 2002, and raised approximately \$87 million. Also during the third quarter of 2002, NorthWestern completed its registration and exchange of new notes for \$720 million of debt it incurred to purchase Montana Power.

10. In December 2002, NorthWestern disclosed that significant operational problems at Expanets and Blue Dot would materially impact the company's consolidated year-end financial results. In April 2003, NorthWestern filed its 2002 Form 10-K and simultaneously restated each of its Forms 10-Q for the first three quarters of 2002. NorthWestern's restated Forms 10-Q corrected material misstatements of previously reported financial results relating to Expanets and Blue Dot, and disclosed various operational difficulties these subsidiaries experienced throughout 2002. NorthWestern's 2002 Form 10-K further disclosed that the company did not anticipate recovering its past investments of hundreds of millions of dollars in Expanets and Blue Dot, and that neither entity would generate cash flows in sufficient amounts to provide meaningful contributions to service NorthWestern's debt load. NorthWestern's liquidity situation continued to deteriorate until the company filed for bankruptcy in September 2003. NorthWestern stock, which had traded for more than \$20 per share in early 2002, was trading for less than a dollar by the time NorthWestern filed bankruptcy.

Problems Relating to Expanets' Computer System

Functionality of the EXPERT System

11. During 2000 and 2001, Expanets developed an information technology system, called the "EXPERT" system, to serve as a platform for virtually all of its operations, including sales, inventory, project management, billing, collections and financial statement preparation. Because of its planned scope and impact across operations, the functionality of the EXPERT system was critical to Expanets.

12. However, following its implementation in November 2001, the EXPERT system was unable to perform many of the basic tasks for which it had been designed. For example, for approximately a month after it was implemented, EXPERT could not generate any customer bills. From January through May 2002, many customer bills EXPERT generated were incomplete and inaccurate. Until approximately September 2002, the EXPERT system also could not properly apply cash collected to customer accounts or track the aging of accounts receivable balances. These problems materially affected Expanets' results from operations throughout 2002.

13. NorthWestern's Forms 10-Q for the first and second quarters of 2002 and associated press releases attached to Forms 8-K mischaracterized EXPERT's billing activities as "fully operational" or "operational" and failed to adequately disclose the magnitude of the system's problems and the material impact of those problems on Expanets' operations. In its Form 10-Q for the third quarter of 2002, NorthWestern disclosed that EXPERT had encountered some problems, particularly as to billings and collections, but did not disclose the extent to which these system problems had impacted Expanets' operations. NorthWestern did not fully and adequately disclose the severity of the problems with the EXPERT system and the impact of those problems on

Expanets' operations until April 2003 when it filed its 2002 Form 10-K and restated its Forms 10-Q for the first three quarters of 2002.

Aged Accounts Receivable

14. In anticipation that some customer accounts might prove uncollectible, Expanets maintained a "bad debt" reserve, which had the effect of reducing Expanets' operating income. Prior to its implementation of EXPERT, Expanets calculated its bad debt reserve based on the age of uncollected receivables outstanding in a given period. However, during the first and second quarters of 2002, the EXPERT system could not properly apply cash collected from customers to their accounts or accurately track the aging of Expanets' accounts receivable. As a result, rather than considering the age of all of its receivables, Expanets estimated its bad debt reserve based on the percentage of revenue that had typically resulted in uncollectible accounts receivable.

15. Expanets' bad debt reserve in 2002 was inadequate. As an initial matter, Expanets did not make appropriate adjustments for known aged receivables that pre-dated implementation of the EXPERT system.

16. Expanets also failed to increase its bad debt reserve despite the markedly increased difficulties with collections that resulted from the EXPERT system's problems. For example, since EXPERT could not apply cash collected to the proper accounts, Expanets could not determine from which customers to seek payment, causing uncollected receivables to age further.

17. Beginning in the third quarter of 2002, for the first time, the EXPERT system was able to generate accurate accounts receivable aging reports. These reports demonstrated that Expanets' uncollectible accounts receivable exceeded its existing bad debt reserve by tens of millions of dollars. Despite such data, Expanets did not increase its bad debt reserve or directly write off uncollectible accounts receivable.

18. In its first and second quarter Forms 10-Q, NorthWestern did not disclose information indicating that a loss as a result of its uncollectible accounts receivable was probable or reasonably possible. In its third quarter Form 10-Q, NorthWestern disclosed that the EXPERT system's problems might lead to an increase in Expanets' bad debt reserve. However, this disclosure was inadequate since NorthWestern knew at that time that Expanets' bad debt reserve was materially insufficient.

19. In December 2002, NorthWestern announced that it anticipated that Expanets would take substantial charges in the fourth quarter relating to Expanets' uncollectible accounts receivable. In April 2003, NorthWestern restated its Forms 10-Q for the first three quarters of 2002 and increased Expanets' bad debt reserve for each of these periods by approximately \$5.2 million, \$5.1 million, and \$6.3 million, respectively.

20. As a result of its improper accounting for uncollectible accounts receivable, NorthWestern overstated its income from continuing operations by approximately 16%, 19%, and 39% for the first three quarters of 2002, respectively, as reported in its Forms 10-Q and press

releases attached to Forms 8-K. Moreover, in its segment reporting for Expanets, NorthWestern understated Expanets' operating loss by approximately 66% for the first quarter of 2002, and overstated Expanets' operating income by approximately 86% and 270%, respectively, for the second and third quarters of 2002.

Adjustments to Customer Bills

21. As a result of the inaccurate customer bills generated by the EXPERT system, Expanets issued partial credits to affected customers. Expanets recorded these credits as "billing adjustments," which reduced both its revenue and income in the current period. Since Expanets credited customer accounts in periods after it initially recognized revenue from a transaction, Expanets maintained a "billing adjustment reserve" for anticipated credits to customer accounts. Expanets calculated its billing adjustment reserve based on the revenue it billed, its actual billing adjustments during the reporting period, and its evaluation of the aggregate accuracy of its customer bills.

22. Because EXPERT generated a significant number of inaccurate and incomplete customer bills in the first quarter of 2002, Expanets' billing adjustments in the first quarter of 2002 surpassed projected levels of approximately \$2 million per month and reached more than \$3 million for March 2002. During the first quarter of 2002, Expanets also internally forecasted that EXPERT's billing accuracy problems would continue for several months. Still, Expanets increased its billing adjustment reserve by a net of only approximately \$1.5 million in the first quarter of 2002.

23. As EXPERT billings problems persisted during the second quarter of 2002, Expanets' billing adjustments significantly exceeded originally-projected levels and reached approximately \$6 million for the month of June 2002. Expanets estimated that its billing adjustments would be \$13 million higher than it had originally forecasted for the remainder of the year. However, Expanets did not increase its billing adjustment reserve to comport with these internal forecasts. Instead, Expanets reduced its billing adjustment reserve by \$2.3 million during the second quarter, thereby increasing its operating income by the same amount.

24. For the third quarter of 2002, Expanets' billing adjustments totaled more than \$22 million, which again significantly exceeded its original and revised projections. Expanets further estimated that, due to a planned correction of a certain category of customer bills, its billing adjustments for the fourth quarter would exceed its revised estimates by an additional \$3.4 million. However, Expanets again did not increase its billing adjustment reserve. Instead, it reduced this reserve by \$4 million during the third quarter, which increased Expanets' operating income by the same amount.

25. In December 2002, NorthWestern announced that it anticipated that Expanets would take substantial charges in the fourth quarter relating to Expanets' billing adjustments. In its April 2003 restatements for the first three quarters of 2002, NorthWestern acknowledged that it had understated its billing adjustment reserve in each of these quarters, and as a result, the company

reduced reported revenues and income by approximately \$18.3 million, \$10.1 million, and \$5.4 million, respectively.

26. As a result of its improper accounting for billing adjustments, NorthWestern overstated its income from continuing operations by approximately 98%, 46%, and 31% for the first three quarters of 2002, respectively, as reported in its Forms 10-Q and press releases attached to Forms 8-K. In its segment reporting for Expanets, NorthWestern understated Expanets' operating loss by approximately 87% for the first quarter of 2002, and overstated Expanets' operating income by approximately 1094% and 164%, respectively, for the second and third quarters of 2002. NorthWestern also did not disclose in any of its filings for the first three quarters of 2002 that losses resulting from billing adjustments were probable or reasonably possible.

The Quality of Expanets' Income

Reserve Reductions

27. During the first three quarters of 2002, Expanets reduced amounts it had recorded in at least fourteen of the reserve accounts it maintained on its balance sheet, including the billing adjustments reserve account discussed above. These reductions materially increased Expanets' and NorthWestern's income.

28. In the first quarter of 2002, \$2.6 million of Expanets' income was derived from reserve reductions. This amount reduced by approximately 50% Expanets' reported segment operating loss of approximately \$2.7 million and represented approximately 7% of NorthWestern's reported income from continuing operations for that quarter.

29. In the second quarter of 2002, \$8.8 million of Expanets' income was derived from reserve reductions. This amount represented approximately 80% of Expanets' reported segment operating income of \$11 million and approximately 27% of NorthWestern's income from continuing operations for that quarter.

30. In the third quarter of 2002, \$27 million of Expanets' income was derived from reserve reductions. With this income, Expanets was able to report \$8.7 million of operating income rather than a substantial operating loss. In addition, with this income, NorthWestern was able to report \$14.6 million of income from continuing operations for that quarter rather than an operating loss.

31. NorthWestern's Forms 10-Q for the first three quarters of 2002 did not disclose the material impact that these reserve reductions had on the reported results of operations of Expanets and NorthWestern during these periods. NorthWestern did not disclose the material impact of these reserve reductions until April 2003 when it restated its Forms 10-Q for the first three quarters of 2002.

Unusual Transactions

32. In conjunction with Expanets' acquisition of certain assets of a competitor, Expanets agreed that, in exchange for payments from the competitor, Expanets would not solicit specific business of the competitor's customers. Expanets' competitor was obligated to make these "non-compete" type of payments to Expanets until March 2005. These payments were not characteristic of Expanets' regular operations and therefore represented unusual transactions.

33. In the first quarter of 2002, NorthWestern reported in its segment disclosures that Expanets had an operating loss of approximately \$2.7 million. Approximately \$9.3 million of Expanets' income came from the non-compete payments. The \$9.3 million also represented approximately 25% of NorthWestern's consolidated income from continuing operations for the quarter.

34. In the second quarter of 2002, NorthWestern reported in its segment disclosures that Expanets had operating income of approximately \$11 million. Approximately \$10 million of Expanets' income came from the non-compete payments. The \$10 million also represented approximately 31% of NorthWestern's consolidated income from continuing operations for the quarter.

35. In the third quarter of 2002, NorthWestern reported in its segment disclosures that Expanets had operating income of approximately \$8.7 million. Approximately \$15.3 million of Expanets' income came from the non-compete payments. The \$15.3 million also represented approximately 68% of NorthWestern's consolidated income from continuing operations for the quarter.

36. NorthWestern's Forms 10-Q for the first three quarters of 2002 did not disclose Expanets' receipt of these unusual non-compete payments and their material effects on Expanets' and NorthWestern's income. NorthWestern did not disclose the existence of these non-compete payments or their effect until it filed its 2002 Form 10-K and restated its 2002 Forms 10-Q in April 2003.

NorthWestern's Intercompany Advances to Expanets and Blue Dot

37. EXPERT's inability to generate any customer bills in late 2001 and early 2002 and other billing problems that followed caused Expanets' cash flow from operations during the first quarter of 2002 to be a deficit of approximately \$68.7 million. As a result, NorthWestern provided Expanets with significant intercompany advances during the first quarter of 2002 to enable Expanets to pay operating and other expenses, including a scheduled amount on a third-party credit facility. By the end of the first quarter of 2002, NorthWestern's intercompany advances to Expanets totaled \$63.3 million.

38. During the second quarter of 2002, EXPERT's continuing billing and collections problems caused Expanets' cash collections to lag significantly behind expected levels. NorthWestern therefore provided Expanets with additional intercompany advances of

approximately \$50 million to help Expanets pay operating expenses and another scheduled amount on a third-party credit facility. By the end of the second quarter, NorthWestern's intercompany advances to Expanets totaled \$113.4 million.

39. Similarly, during the first quarter of 2002, NorthWestern provided Blue Dot with approximately \$21 million in intercompany advances so that Blue Dot could pay off a large credit facility and operating expenses when due. NorthWestern's outstanding intercompany advances to Blue Dot totaled approximately \$37.1 million at the end of the first quarter of 2002.

40. In the second quarter of 2002, Blue Dot paid back some of the cash advanced by NorthWestern with proceeds from a one-time sale and leaseback transaction. Nevertheless, NorthWestern's outstanding intercompany advances to Blue Dot still totaled approximately \$22.8 million at the end of that quarter.

41. NorthWestern's intercompany advances to Expanets and Blue Dot demonstrated that these businesses were continuing to require further investments from the parent company, rather than providing cash to the consolidated entity. NorthWestern's need to advance funds to Expanets and Blue Dot was information that was necessary to understand NorthWestern's financial condition and was reasonably likely to impact NorthWestern's liquidity.

42. NorthWestern's Form 10-Q for the first quarter of 2002 did not disclose NorthWestern's intercompany advances to Expanets or Blue Dot, or the significance of those advances. NorthWestern disclosed in its Form 10-Q for the second quarter of 2002 that it made intercompany advances to Expanets. However, NorthWestern still did not disclose its intercompany advances to Blue Dot or any information about the significance of the intercompany advances to either subsidiary. NorthWestern did not disclose the existence and amount of its intercompany advances until September 2002.

Allocation of Losses to Blue Dot Minority Interests

43. When Blue Dot acquired other businesses, it paid the former owners in part with Blue Dot common stock. As a result of these transactions, the former owners held minority interests in Blue Dot. NorthWestern allocated a portion of Blue Dot's losses to these minority interests, which had the effect of increasing NorthWestern's consolidated income from continuing operations. This accounting treatment was proper only to the extent that the losses applicable to the Blue Dot minority interest did not exceed the minority interest in the equity capital of Blue Dot.

44. Before it filed its financial statements for the second quarter of 2002, NorthWestern received a third-party appraisal of Blue Dot for the purpose of assessing Blue Dot's enterprise value. Based on the total value of the Blue Dot entity as reflected in the appraisal, Blue Dot's common stock was worthless.

45. Despite this information, in its financial statements for the second quarter of 2002, NorthWestern allocated \$8.1 million of Blue Dot's losses to minority interests based on stock issued for acquisitions Blue Dot made that quarter. In addition, NorthWestern failed to disclose in

its second quarter Form 10-Q the material effects of the decrease in value of Blue Dot common stock, or any uncertainties about NorthWestern's ability to allocate losses to Blue Dot minority interests.

46. Because of its improper allocation of losses to minority interests, NorthWestern reported income from continuing operations of approximately \$20.9 million rather than \$12.8 million, an overstatement of approximately 63%, in its Form 10-Q for the second quarter of 2002 and a press release attached to a Form 8-K. NorthWestern reversed its allocation of losses to Blue Dot's minority interests when it restated its second quarter 2002 Form 10-Q in April 2003.

The Colstrip Utility Asset Sale

47. In February 2002, when NorthWestern purchased Montana Power, NorthWestern became the successor-in-interest to a contract for the sale of certain assets known as the "Colstrip" transmission assets ("Colstrip assets"). The contract called for a payment of approximately \$97 million to NorthWestern upon the satisfaction of certain conditions. During the second quarter of 2002, NorthWestern announced that it expected to collect the proceeds from the sale of the Colstrip assets by June or July 2002.

48. Throughout 2002, the sale of the Colstrip assets was significant to NorthWestern because it would have generated significant cash for the company and enhanced its liquidity position. Accordingly, analysts and rating agencies tracked the status of the sale.

49. Between May and July 2002, the other party to the Colstrip assets sale contract repeatedly informed NorthWestern that it would not close the sale until the parties were able to resolve other claims. On August 5, 2002, NorthWestern filed but did not serve a complaint against this party in a Montana State court.

50. NorthWestern's Form 10-Q for the second quarter of 2002 did not disclose the Colstrip asset sale dispute and its potential impact on NorthWestern's financial condition, including its impact on NorthWestern's liquidity. On September 4, 2002, NorthWestern served its complaint on the other party to the Colstrip sale and subsequently disclosed the existence of its lawsuit in its third quarter Form 10-Q. In May 2005, NorthWestern settled the lawsuit by agreeing to retain the Colstrip assets in exchange for, among other things, a \$9 million payment from the other party.

Violations

51. Sections 13(a) and 13(b)(2)(A) of the Exchange Act and Rules 12b-20, 13a-11, and 13a-13 require issuers to make and keep accurate books, records, and accounts, to file quarterly and current reports with the Commission, and to keep reported information current and not misleading. As a result of the conduct described above, NorthWestern violated Sections 13(a) and 13(b)(2)(A) of the Exchange Act and Rules 12b-20, 13a-11, and 13a-13 thereunder.

52. Section 13(b)(2)(B) of the Exchange Act requires issuers to devise and maintain a system of internal accounting controls sufficient to provide reasonable assurances that transactions are recorded as necessary to permit preparation of financial statements in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles. As a result of the conduct described above, NorthWestern violated Section 13(b)(2)(B) of the Exchange Act.

IV.

In determining to accept the Offer, the Commission considered remedial acts promptly undertaken by Respondent and cooperation afforded the Commission staff.

V.

In view of the foregoing, the Commission deems it appropriate to impose the sanctions agreed to in Respondent NorthWestern's Offer.

Accordingly, it is hereby ORDERED that Respondent cease and desist from committing or causing any violations and any future violations of Sections 13(a), 13(b)(2)(A) and 13(b)(2)(B) of the Exchange Act and Rules 12b-20, 13a-11, and 13a-13 thereunder.

By the Commission.

Nancy M. Morris
Secretary