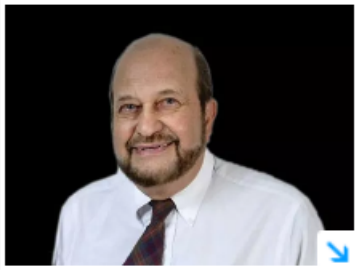


Ignored Oroville warning raises quake questions

Thomas Elias 9:36 a.m. PT March 6, 2017



(Photo: Record Searchlight)



Just because nature allows a delay of many years while officials dither over a catastrophe in the making doesn't make that disaster any easier to handle when it finally strikes.

This is one major lesson of the Oroville Dam spillway crisis that saw the sudden evacuation of almost 200,000 persons from their homes when the dam's emergency spillway crumbled under the force of millions of gallons of fast-moving water.

Warnings of precisely this sort of crisis at Lake Oroville were submitted to the Federal Energy Regulation Commission during a 2005 relicensing process, almost 12 years before those predictions came true.

"A loss of crest control (which has now occurred) could not only cause additional damage to ... lands and facilities, but also cause damages and threaten lives ... downstream," environmental groups (Friends of the River, the South Yuba River Citizens League and the Sierra Club) cautioned, recommending relicensing of the dam only if repairs were made.

Their claim drew scorn from officials of the state Water Project, which runs the vintage-1968 Oroville Dam. "Our facilities, including the spillway, are safe during any conceivable flood event," said Raphael Torres, then acting deputy director of the Water Project. Plus, some of California's most powerful water districts, including the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, didn't want to fund a fix. They'll have to pay now, as much as \$600 million, by some estimates.

FERC, loaded with power industry advocates by then-President George W. Bush, disdained the environmental groups, as it usually does.

So the background of today's crisis bears warnings, both about preparation for likely future natural disasters and about what can happen when industry advocates control powerful federal agencies, now the case for several cabinet-level departments in the Trump administration.

For California, alarm should be strongest about earthquakes, and the related issue of levees in the Delta of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers. After the 1971 Sylmar Earthquake hit on a previously unknown fault and destroyed a veterans hospital, among other buildings, mapping of earthquake faults became a high state priority.

Over the next 20 years, 534 maps of faults and their possible damage were published. But in the following 20 years, no new maps appeared because of budget cuts, leaving the project about 300 maps shy of where it needs to be for all residents of known potential damage areas to be properly warned.

Some areas have used the maps drawn between 1971 and 1991 to pinpoint buildings that need retrofitting, with many projects completed.

But most of the other 300-odd known faults have yet to be mapped.

At the same time, California still lacks a significant quake warning system, and probably can't complete one without the remaining maps even if it suddenly became a priority. It's tough to warn people at risk in a major quake if you don't know what buildings they're in.

This issue was no priority at all for Gov. Jerry Brown through most of his current go-round in office. Yes, Brown long supported an early warning system that might give a minute's notice before shaking from a Big One hits urban areas. But through most of his current tenure, he proposed no state funding for this, saying the money should come from private or federal sources. It did not.

Brown shifted in last year's state budget, providing \$10 million to create such a system, now in the works from the U.S. Geological Survey and academic researchers, who hope to begin putting their system to limited use next year.

The dithering put California behind other quake-prone places like Japan and Taiwan.

Why is this important? The original legislative sponsor of the warning system, Democrat Alex Padilla, now California secretary of state, said in 2013 people need a system giving them "critical seconds to take cover, assist loved ones or pull safely to the side of the road."

Even when that system comes online, much more mapping will be needed. For the biggest quakes of the last 40 years came in unexpected places.

The upshot: California's water system is not the only area needing better preparation for coming disasters. The problem, though, is the same as it was at Oroville before this year's massive storms created a crisis: Until an urgent problem occurs, few believe it ever will. Once it happens, it may be too late to act.

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