

Group that issued 2005 warning still wants full emergency spillway at Oroville Dam



Five drill rigs work Sept. 6 to construct the cutoff wall downslope of Lake Oroville's emergency spillway weir. The wall is designed prevent head-cutting erosion at the base of the concrete weir. The group that warned the emergency spillway could fail thinks the plan isn't sufficient and a full concrete emergency spillway should be built. Ken James — Department of Water Resources

By **Steve Schoonover**, *Chico Enterprise-Record*

Oroville >> The group that 12 years ago warned the Oroville Dam emergency spillway could fail, Tuesday released a new set of recommendations for operation of the dam and the Feather River flood control system.

“It’s not enough to be right in the rearview mirror,” said Eric Wesselman, executive director of Friends of the River in a media call Tuesday morning. “Existing infrastructure needs to be fixed now.”

In 2005, Friends of the River, along with the Sierra Club and the South Yuba Citizens League, asked the Federal Emergency Regulatory Commission to require the Department of Water Resources to build a full concrete emergency spillway to replace the existing concrete weir with a bare hillside below it.

The request was rejected, and when the emergency spillway was first used in February, rapid erosion of the hillside threatened the weir’s collapse, and prompted evacuation orders for 188,000 people, the largest evacuation in California history.

Now the Friends of the River have produced “The Oroville Dam 2017 Spillway Incident and Lessons from the Feather River Basin,” in concert with the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, the South Yuba River Citizens League, and American Whitewater.

The [report](http://www.friendsoftheriver.org) is available at the Friends of the River website, www.friendsoftheriver.org. It includes a full history of the dam, this year’s spillway emergency and actions taken since then.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The group still calls for a “real” full concrete emergency spillway, instead of the cutoff wall and concrete splash pad DWR has planned.

Failing that, it said the lake level should be kept even lower to accommodate huge inflows such as those that happened in February and overwhelmed DWR’s efforts to manage the lake level with the damaged main spillway.

In an email, DWR spokeswoman Erin Mellon said, “DWR is exploring all long-term options at Oroville Dam including a fully lined emergency spillway or another flood control spillway. Current construction at the emergency spillway includes building an underground secant pile cut-off wall, which will prevent the kind of uphill erosion that occurred in February.”

The report also called for DWR to review and upgrade the “dam complex’s physical deficiencies.”

It listed changes to ensure the Hyatt Powerhouse could release water, and remediation of cracking concrete and settlement of the main spillway headworks.



Picture taken Aug. 9 from the emergency spillway weir at Oroville Dam shows the cutoff wall being constructed in the distance. The Department of Water Resources plans to sill the area between the wall and weir with concrete, but the group that warned in 2015 that the spillway could fail thinks a full concrete emergency spillway is necessary.

Florence Low — Department of Water Resources

Investigation of seepage through the dam — the green spot — was included, and a warning system was called for.

Operational changes were also urged. The report noted the operational manual for the dam prepared by the Corps of Engineers decades ago assumed another dam would be operating on the Yuba River, but it was never built.



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DWR agrees, according to Mellon. “DWR has been in consultation with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, FERC, and DSOD (Division of Safety of Dams) to develop an interim and long-term Lake Oroville operations. We agree whole-heartedly that they need to be updated.”

The report promotes setback levees to handle additional floodwater and improve habitat.

And finally, it calls for more public involvement in water system operations and policy making. There’s too much secrecy where it isn’t needed, said Chris

Shutes, the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance’s FERC projects director.

“We have to stop defaulting to the people who say ‘We have it covered,’” he said, “when clearly they don’t have it covered.”

The recommended changes — investment in infrastructure, review of operations, “multi-benefit” floodplains, and increased transparency — also need to happen statewide.

WILL IT HAPPEN?

Most of the questions during the media call concerned the cost of the changes proposed. The report authors didn’t have a total cost but agreed it would be expensive.

As for the Oroville repairs, State Water Project contractors are required by law to pay for those, said Ron Stork, senior policy director for Friends of the River.

The contractors can be expected to make pressure to keep prices down, he added.

“DWR has to have the spine to say, ‘look we have to operate this system safely. It’s going to cost money and your rates are going to go up,’” Stock said.

Shutes added that water managers “need to become aware of the enormity of the problem,” before funds would be directed to the improvements the group sees as necessary.

“It’s going to take a combination of regulatory action, cooperation, and unfortunately, more crises.”

Reach City Editor Steve Schoonover at 896-7750.