

Oroville Dam crisis highlights deteriorating state of US infrastructure

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16 February 2017

While the immediate danger to residents living around Oroville Dam in California's Central Valley seemed to subside Tuesday, the threat from damaged infrastructure there will continue to persist, as will that stemming from the breakdown of the nation's infrastructure in general.

With rain and snow expected to drench the area for another week beginning Wednesday night, President Donald Trump approved the use of federal emergency aid for California Monday evening.

Even with the evacuation order rescinded on Tuesday, an evacuation warning remains in effect, meaning there is still a clear danger that one of the dam's two spillways could collapse. Butte County Sheriff Kory Honea stated at a press conference, "People who have special needs or require extended time to evacuate should consider remaining evacuated."

Many evacuees remained in the shelters that had been rapidly set up over the weekend. For workers and residents living in or near poverty--the majority of the population around Oroville Dam--the ability to simply get in a vehicle and uproot their lives at a moment's notice is not possible without great hardship. Lack of access to transportation to and from shelters highlights the struggle to meet daily needs, since things like medical care are out of reach when a family cannot afford a car or gas to go to a doctor's office or hospital.

Lake Oroville continues to be drained in the hopes of bringing it down to 850 feet in preparation for the coming storms. It is hoped that water levels can be dropped an additional 10 feet by next week, down to the normal level for flood management. From a peak of 901 feet when water began to flow over the emergency spillway last weekend, the lake was at 878 feet by Wednesday afternoon.

Officials claimed that they did not expect the

impending storms to represent a threat, but still went on to question the integrity of the dam's main spillway, in which a 250-foot by 45-foot deep hole was discovered last week. Bill Croyle, acting director of California's Department of Water Resources (DWR), which owns the dam, claimed the spillway was holding up, but raised the possibility that water being released could be causing additional unseen damage.

Despite the hole in the primary spillway, it is still being used to lower water levels; the emergency spillway, which is unpaved, began to erode when it was put into use for the first time in the dam's 48-year history on Sunday, generating fears it would collapse and flood nearby cities and towns with a 30-foot-tall wave of water.

Workers continued overnight and into Wednesday to work to repair the emergency spillway before the next storms arrive. Bags of rocks were dropped from helicopters to fill in the hole generated by erosion, while crews on the ground filled it in with 1,200 tons of rock and slurry each hour.

The storms which began Wednesday night are predicted to drop 5 to 12 inches of rain, potentially adding billions of gallons of water to Lake Oroville. Looking to the future, the spring thaw will add more water through runoff from the nearby Sierra Nevada Mountains, where the current snowpack level is 183 percent above normal.

Officials are doing their best to deflect blame for the present crisis. Despite a clear warning from environmental groups twelve years ago pointing out the need to pave the emergency spillway, Croyle of the DWR stated on Monday "I'm not sure anything went wrong [with the emergency spillway]," claiming that the situation was an unforeseen event.

In reality, the crumbling state of dams around the

country, not just at Oroville, is a looming and predictable danger. The average age of dams in the United States exceeds 50 years, while much of the material used to build them has a life span of that same period, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Oroville Dam, 48 years old, is one of nearly 90,000 dams around the United States. In total, approximately 3,000 dams in the US were built before 1900.

In California, an earthquake-prone state, 17 dams are listed as being in poor condition by the National Inventory of Dams kept by the Army Corps of Engineers. In Michigan, all but six of the 88 dams in the state are approaching the 50-year mark and received a D grade in 2009 for the conditions of the dams overall from the American Society of Civil Engineers. By 2020, more than 90 percent of the state's dams will exceed their lifespan. Dams around the country received the same D grade in 2013.

In Minnesota, repairs on the 107-year-old Byllesby Dam have been put off for lack of funding. This dam is one of 15,000 around the country that have been classified as “high hazard potential,” a term used to describe a structure whose collapse could cost human life.

The Association of State Dam Safety Officials (ASDSO) reported in 2014 that 1,627 high hazard potential dams in the US were in need of repairs. In 2008, that number stood as high as 2,047. Only 186 and 140 dams were repaired in those years, respectively. The ASDSO also stated in 2015 that \$54 billion was needed for all dam repairs in the country, a drop in the bucket compared to the \$619 billion annual military budget Congress approved in December. ASDSO also noted that 65 percent of dams are privately owned by companies unwilling to take on the costs of repair.

While there are no genuine plans to address dam safety, the Trump administration on Tuesday highlighted the crumbling Oroville Dam in order to push its phony infrastructure plans.

“The situation is a textbook example of why we need to pursue a major infrastructure package in Congress. Dams, bridges, roads in all parts around the country have fallen into disrepair,” White House spokesman Sean Spicer stated. “In order to prevent the next disaster we’ll pursue the President’s vision for an overhaul of our nation’s crumbling infrastructure.”

Not yet spelled out, Trump’s so-called infrastructure plan is designed to further privatize public infrastructure and utilities while slashing existing safety regulations, claiming this would streamline the construction and repair process. Private companies would invest in rebuilding and maintenance projects, receive government subsidies, and then take over operations in order to make significant profits.

The threat to the nearly 200,000 people living under the Oroville Dam has not been generated by incompetence or mere stupidity. It stems from the subordination of safety and lives to the interests of the capitalist system. In this regard, the working class in Northern California has far more in common with workers internationally, such as those in China who are regularly employed and forced to live in unsafe conditions in the drive for profit.



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