

California and federal government ignored numerous warnings about Oroville Dam

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More than a week has passed since the Oroville Dam crisis began and 188,000 people from mostly impoverished towns and cities in Northern California were forced to evacuate. Since then, more information has been revealed detailing the depth of the government's knowledge regarding the improper and unsafe construction of the dam's spillways.

However, another storm began Sunday night and is expected to bring as much as 5 inches of rain by Tuesday. California's Department of Water Resources (DWR) stated it had lowered the water level in Lake Oroville to 852 feet from 901 feet last week at the height of the crisis. This will supposedly allow the lake to deal with the additional precipitation and runoff. DWR spokesman Chris Orrock stated they were expecting only a 5-foot increase in the water level.

Not everyone has left the evacuation centers. As of Monday, around 110 people were still staying at the Silver Dollar Fairgrounds in Chico. Conditions are less than optimal with reports that 20 people, including five Red Cross workers, had contracted norovirus. While the symptoms are generally mild, including diarrhea, nausea, and stomach pains, and last only a few days, it is an indication of the overall lack of access to health care and clean facilities, a fact that is also true on a daily basis for many workers living in the region.

California state officials are currently engaged in a campaign to cover up the criminal and conscious neglect over dam safety. While top officials like DWR acting director Bill Croyle, who stated on February 13 that "I'm not sure anything went wrong [with the emergency spillway]," remain at their positions, five workers from Syblon Reid, a contracting company, were fired after posting images of the Oroville Dam spillway to social media, exposing the danger publically. The DWR hired the company to work on the

dam. The agency is also seeking to slander workers, claiming they see a large turnover in general due to failed drug tests or that some are unqualified.

On February 11, the day before the evacuation order was given, Croyle stood before the media and claimed that the emergency spillway was "solid rock." This turned out to be false. While the top of the emergency spillway is concrete, the base is unpaved. After a hole was discovered in the primary spillway, the secondary one was put into use. Handling less than 5 percent the amount of water it was supposedly designed to release, the base of the spillway began to erode, threatening to collapse the structure and bring down a 30-foot wall of water on nearby towns.

While it became clear almost immediately that the DWR and federal government had been warned in the past that the Oroville Dam was unsafe, the extent of the warnings demonstrates the truly criminal character behind that neglect.

Built in 1968, the dam's emergency spillway was not anchored to the rock underneath. At the same time, the underlying hillside is soft and easily erodible. "There is no way to rationalize running water down a hillslope with deep soils and a forest on it and weak bedrock," stated Jeffrey Mount, a professor emeritus of geology from University of California Davis. He went on to state that the DWR was operating on an assumption the spillway was safe and did not conduct tests, such as lab analyses of rock corings, of the bedrock under the emergency spillway after it had been warned.

In 2005, three environmental groups—Friends of the River, the South Yuba River Citizens League and the Sierra Club—went to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) to request the dam and its spillways be brought up to code. They referred to a 2002 memo from the Yuba County Water Agency

stating use of the emergency spillway would cause extensive erosion.

However, the DWR claimed in 2006 that it had “recently reviewed the geologic conditions at the emergency spillway and concluded that the spillway is a safe and stable structure founded on solid bedrock that will not erode.”

The agency is continuing to avoid taking responsibility. Nancy Vogel, DWR spokeswoman, stated, “We don’t know the cause of the spillway erosion and we won’t know the cause until we get experts in there to do a full investigation and analysis.”

The conditions at Oroville Dam are not restricted to it or simply an isolated incident. Dams around the United States are in crumbling condition along with the rest of the country’s infrastructure. The American Society of Civil Engineers gave dams nationally a D grade for their conditions in 2013. While hundreds of billions of dollars are spent on the military, the basic needs of workers, even the right to live safely, are ignored.

At the same time, safety measures for evacuating people living under these dams are also inadequate. The DWR informed federal dam regulators in 2011 that local officials “do not believe there is enough time to perform evacuations in the communities immediately downstream of the dam during a sudden failure.” This referred to the Oroville Dam itself, not the spillways.

Despite this, measures to provide adequate warning, planning and escape routes have not been put in place. Annual safety briefings for the public have not been held. Oroville’s civil defense emergency sirens are no longer in place due to funding cuts. Just how serious this problem is became clear on February 12, when traffic jams occurred during the evacuation, preventing people from reaching safety. Others without access to transportation were forced to wait in their homes for buses that took hours to arrive. The federal and state governments claim that emergency response plans for dam failures cannot be made public due to the possibility they could be used by terrorists.

No steps will be taken by the federal or state governments around the country to address dam safety. Disaster after disaster around the country have demonstrated this fact. Under the capitalist system, money is squandered by the wealthy while the working class and those living in poverty are forced to live in situations that place their lives at risk.



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