DAM OWNERSHIP







RESPONSIBILITY AND LIABILITY

"Common law holds that the storage of water is a hazardous activity."



ASSOCIATION OF STATE DAM SAFETY OFFICIALS

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INTRODUCTION

ams are owned and operated by individuals, private and public organizations, and the government. The responsibility for maintaining a safe dam rests with the owner. A dam failure resulting in an uncontrolled release of the reservoir can have a devastating effect on persons and property downstream. 🔺 Tens of thousands of public and private dam owners in the United States have exposure to liability for the water stored behind their dams. A For many owners, the proper operation and maintenance of a dam is only one aspect of their organization's activities. But, safely maintaining a dam is a key element in preventing a failure and limiting the liability that an owner could face. >

DAM FAILURE AND OWNER LIABILITY

re of a dam

has the potential for

catastrophic impact >
on communities, private
property, and public works
downstream. The record of
dam performance suggests
that there are approximately 10 to 20 failures per
year involving uncontrolled
release of the reservoir.
Experience reveals that
the failure of even small
dams can result in serious
injuries, fatalities, and
extensive property damage.

LOSS FROM FAILURE

The cost of a dam failare is difficult to assess
because flooding can affect
large areas. The dam
owner loses a valuable
asset, and faces reconstruction costs and possible liability for downstream dambility for downstream damages. Local communities
may be directly impacted
due to building damage,
injuries, fatalities, lost water



supply, damaged transportation and infrastructure, and lost recreational assets.

STRICT LIABILITY AND NEGLIGENCE

▲ The extent of an owner's liability will vary from state to state, depending on the

statutes and case law precedents. The concept of strict in constructing, operating, liability imposes liability on and maintaining a dam. a dam owner for damages that occur regardless of the cause of failure. The alteransive theory of negligence tree, A When assessing liaconsiders the degree of bility, the standard of care

a dam regulated by the federal government or a state dam safety program must be designed to withstand an unprecedented flood or earthquake.

COMPLIANCE

▲ Compliance with government or professional standards does not absolve an owner from liability, but it does establish a minimum standard of care to be used by owners. The extent of liability in any situation depends on the facts of the case and how those facts are interpreted by a judge or jury.

▲ Consequently, actions that result in owner liabi-

lity in one state may not result in liability in different states. In general, a dam owner is required to use "reasonable care" in the operation and maintenance of a dam and reservoir.

in proportion to the downstream hazards involved. exercised by an owner will be closely examined. The standard of care should be

Where the risk is great, owners must be especially cautious. A In many cases,

RISK MANAGEMENT

n today's litigious society it is safe to assume that in the case of a catastrophic dam failure, extensive litigation will ensue. Any competent lawyer, representing the victims will sue all possible wrongdoers in seeking redress ... including ... the owners and operators of the facility, and ... architects, engineers, contractors, subcontractors, and consultants involved in the original construction and any sub-

Denis Binder, Professor of Law, Western New England College of Law

sequent modifications ... "

▲ An essential and logical part of an organization's management program is the control of potential losses that may arise. To manage risks, an owner can utilize a combination of standard operating procedures, employee training, regular maintenance, emergency preparedness and liability insurance.

▲ A dam owner can take several actions to protect against financial loss. Technical guidance and information is available from your state's Dam Safety office. ▲ Each dam should have:

- A state dam safety permit (if applicable)
- An operation plan, documented regular maintenance plan and emergency action plan
- Documented periodic inspections
- Warning signs and controlled access

MORE INFORMATION

For information on state dam safety statutes and administrative rules, contact:

- · State Dam Safety Office
- Association of State Dam Safety Officials
- State Attorney General's
 Office

Additional information and technical assistance can be obtained from the following federal, state, and local agencies:

- Office of Emergency Services
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation
- U.S. Department of Agriculture — Soil Conservation Service

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