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Proactive Measures Needed to Prevent Future Dam Disasters

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The recent failure of the dam impounding Big Bay Lake has directed attention to the need for a strong state dam safety program and stricter safety regulations over Mississippi's dams. It is lamentable that dams—a potentially hazardous yet critical element of the infrastructure—most often come into the spotlight following a disaster.

The Association of State Dam Safety Officials (ASDSO), a national non-profit organization dedicated to improving the safety of the nation's dams, has conducted numerous studies of state dam safety practices over the past twenty years. While many state dam safety programs are under-funded and under-staffed, Mississippi's program is far more stressed than most.

In comparison to recommended guidelines and to other states, support for Mississippi's dam safety program falls short in a number of ways:

- In budget dollars per dam Mississippi ranks 47th, just above Texas, Iowa, and Alabama (which has no dam safety program at all). Much of the Department of Environmental Quality's annual operating budget of \$425,000 is devoted to purposes other than dam safety, for which only \$137,800 (\$38 per dam) is allocated. By comparison, California spends \$6,367 per dam.
- Mississippi is 44th in the number of full-time-equivalent staff per dam (799 dams per FTE in Mississippi, 25/1 is the recommended ratio).
- In number of high-hazard-potential dams (the failure of which is expected to cause loss of human life), Mississippi ranks 11th, with 282. North Carolina has the most—close to 1,000.
- Mississippi currently inspects high-hazard-potential dams either annually, every three years, or every five years, depending on projected consequences of dam failure. ASDSO recommends yearly inspections of high-hazard-potentials dams, biennial inspections of significant-hazard-potential dams (failure would damage property, but would not likely cause loss of human life), and inspection of low-hazard-potential dams every 5 years.

In years past, dam failures across the country have caused the deaths of thousands of people and billions of dollars in property damage.

It is clear that strong regulatory programs can mitigate disasters from dam failures. Since 1977—when 75 deaths from dam breaks in Pennsylvania and Georgia galvanized state and federal lawmakers into establishing dam safety programs and policies—relatively few deaths have resulted from dam failures.

Nevertheless, death and destruction from dam failures continues. In the past two years, more than 50 dams in the U.S. have failed.

The nation's most recent death attributed to dam failure occurred last March in Harrison County, Mississippi, when a man drove into a ravine created by the 2002 failure of the Windy Hills Lake dam.

The May 2003 failure of Silver Lake Dam, in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, caused the failure of downstream Tourist Park Dam and the evacuation of more than 1,800 people in the city of Marquette. The failures resulted in more than \$100 million in damage, including about \$10 million damage to utility facilities, \$4 million in environmental damage, and \$3 million to roads and bridges. Twenty homes and three businesses were damaged or destroyed. The We Energies power plant, which generates half the electricity produced in the Upper Peninsula, was flooded, causing the closure of two nearby iron mines, and the layoff of about 1,100 mine workers for several weeks, until the power plant was repaired. The mine owner estimated that the shutdown cost the local economy about \$1 million a day.

The full economic repercussions of the Big Bay flood are not yet known. It is clear, however, that they will be felt for years to come, not only by those who lost homes and property in the flood, but also to lakeside homeowners whose property values plummeted on the afternoon of March 12th, and to all Lamar and Marion County residents now faced with the likelihood of increased taxes.

The proactive use of public funds for the prevention of dam disasters would not only save lives—it would also be cost-effective.

As far as dams are concerned, legislative complacency is one of the greatest threats to public safety and security. The dangerous combination of aging, neglected dams and rapid downstream population growth is a recipe for disaster. Without strong state support for dam safety programs, more dam failures, with greater human and economic consequences, are inevitable.

Thousands of Mississippians live below high- and significant-hazard-potential dams, which, without timely maintenance and inspection, become potentially lethal time bombs.

ASDSO urges Mississippi lawmakers to take a proactive approach to dam safety—to protect the welfare of downstream populations, to ensure the continuation of economic and life-sustaining benefits provided by dams, and to guard the integrity of the surrounding environment.

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The Association of State Dam Safety Officials (ASDSO) is a national, non-profit organization founded in 1984 and dedicated to improving dam safety through research, education and communication. For more information: www.damsafety.org.