

Actions Watershed Project Sponsors Should Take When a NRCS-Assisted Flood Control Dam is Reclassified as High Hazard

Background:

Many of the 11,000 NRCS-assisted dams in the nation were designed and constructed with a low or significant hazard classification. Most of these dams were constructed to protect rural agricultural areas from flooding.

Some low and significant hazard dams are being reclassified to high hazard because development has occurred downstream in areas that would flood if the dam failed. This could mean increased risk and liability for project sponsors. It is important that sponsors understand the implications of this hazard classification change and take appropriate actions.

NRCS Classification Definitions*

- High Hazard - Dam failure may cause loss of life and serious damage to homes, industrial or commercial buildings, important public utilities, main highways or railroads.
- Significant Hazard - Dam failure may cause significant damage to isolated homes, main highways or minor railroads, or cause interruption of use or service of relatively important public utilities.
- Low Hazard - Dam failure may cause damage to farm buildings, agricultural land, or township and county roads.

*State Dam Safety Agencies may have different definitions.

Who Determines Hazard Classification

NRCS can update their classification of a dam if downstream conditions warrant. **State dam safety agencies can also change a dam's hazard classification and may have different definitions for classifications than NRCS.** NRCS and the Association of State Dam Safety Officials are working through a Memorandum of Understanding to move the two entities closer to the same guidelines for hazard classification of dams.

Hazard classification changes can occur when a home, business or highway is constructed or a mobile home is placed downstream in the breach area of a dam.

Emergency Action Plans

Project sponsors should develop Emergency Action Plans (EAP) for high hazard dams. EAP's are important for three reasons: (1) Being prepared for a potential dam failure through development of an EAP could save lives; (2) A current and implemented EAP in the event of a dam failure may reduce sponsor liability; (3) EAPS are often required by state dam safety agencies.



A low hazard dam is reclassified to high hazard when downstream development creates the risk for loss of lives if the dam were to fail.

Actions That Project Sponsors Should Take When a Dam is Reclassified to High Hazard

- Review the reason the dam was reclassified
- Verify actual conditions with an onsite investigation
- Request a breach map or survey from NRCS or a professional engineering firm to identify the affected structures and roads in the breach area and depths of water if the dam failed
- Request NRCS assistance in the development of an Emergency Action Plan (EAP)
- Develop the EAP in coordination with local and state agencies
- Provide copies of the EAP to the county emergency management director, NRCS local and state offices, state dam safety agency, state conservation agency and others
- Provide training on the EAP
- Review and update the EAP at least annually
- Consider working with local authorities to limit development downstream from dams
- Consider requesting NRCS assistance in rehabilitating the dam

O&M and Inspections:

- Inspect high hazard dams at least annually
- Monitor dams during heavy rainfall events and inspect dams for any damage following such events
- Place high priority on operation and maintenance of high hazard dams and make needed repairs in a timely manner

For more information about watershed projects visit the National Watershed Coalition website: www.watershedcoalition.org or the NRCS website, at www.nrcs.usda.gov, click on Programs & Services, scroll down to water resources in center of page, then click on watershed rehabilitation.

