

New timeline for Martis Dam project

Jason Shueh, Grass Valley Union, 12-15-10

TRUCKEE — With a rating that includes terms such as “critical,” “near failure” and “extremely high risk,” the Martis Creek Dam poses a significant flood threat to residents both locally and in the Washoe Valley.

And with a new timeline recently unveiled by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, it's possible corrective work may not begin until 2017 — roughly 45 years after structural problems were first detected.

Martis Creek feeds Martis Lake, east of downtown Truckee; the lake is south of Interstate 80 and east of Highway 267.

A permanent solution to the dam's weaknesses won't happen until 2015 to 2017, project manager Adam Riley, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said at a workshop earlier this month

Temporary preventive measures are already in place to monitor the dam — rated among the nation's worst — and to allow the lowest amount of reservoir build-up possible, Riley said.

However, procedures including an environmental impact statement are required before any permanent solution and subsequent construction can be done.

“There are laws and regulations that we have to follow, but trying to move through that process as fast as we can is essential because of the dam's rating,” Riley said.

Riley estimated an EIS to be completed by 2012, with engineering design and construction to occur three to five years later.

Environmental and potential financial impacts of an eventual re-build will not be clear until then, Riley said.

Current threats, complications

Riley said the corps is constantly on watch should high rains and melted snow fill the 113-foot dam located three miles east of town.

At the moment, the dam is not in operation, Riley pointed out, and only about 800 acre-feet of water flows behind the dam, out of its 20,400 acre-feet capacity, so as not to create any potential reservoir build-up.

However, the problem lies in the fact the dam's spillway, at present, is too narrow for a large rain storm and could cause flooding, Riley said.

Furthermore, two years ago the corps found an earthquake fault beneath the left side of the dam; Riley said seismic activity could present a real problem for the structure.

Another urgent threat lies inside the dam's subsurface, composed of loose rock and boulders. The subsurface — which has transported groundwater through the region for centuries — has also prevented attempts to fill in the backside of the reservoir.

Riley said each time a fill has been attempted, water seeps through the dam's base. If the dam were to store water in its current state, underground water containing millions of pounds of water pressure could wash out the entire structure from its base — a severe flood likely to ensue.