

Santa Fe Dam deemed potentially unsafe by Army Corps

Ben Baeder, San Gabriel Valley Tribune, 1-22-11

The Santa Fe Dam has been given the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' second-worst designation after a team of engineers found it was potentially dangerous.

The earthen barrier protects hundreds of thousands of people in El Monte, Baldwin Park, South El Monte, La Puente, Bassett and unincorporated Whittier from catastrophic floods that deluged communities along the San Gabriel River until the Santa Fe and Whittier Narrows dams were built in the 1940s and '50s.

The Santa Fe Dam in 2009 was given the Dam Safety Action Class II rating, which means "the combination of life or economic consequences with probability of failure is very high," according to Army Corps guidelines.

The Whittier Narrows Dam a few miles to the south - which protects 500,000 people - earned the same designation in 2006, Army Corps officials revealed in November.

Engineers said they found no major flaws in the Santa Fe Dam, but a major earthquake or massive flood could damage the earth-and-stone barrier, said Rick Leifield, dam safety officer of the Army Corps' Los Angeles District.

While the chances of failure are remote, a break in the 62-year-old, 4-mile-long dam could affect thousands of people.

"There are two parts of the equation we consider, the probability of failure and the consequences of failure," Leifield said. "With so many people living near the dam, the consequences part of the equation, by definition, is a big factor."

While some designs used in the dam are outdated, the 2009 inspection team during a one-day visit found nothing to cause alarm, officials said. But they had questions whether the dam would withstand a huge storm. They also said it could allow water seepage and may have other design issues.

A new team is expected to conduct a thorough inspection of the dam in September.

The DSAC II designation means the Santa Fe Dam will be among the first dams to receive funding for a follow-up study, Army Corps spokesman Jay Field said.

The inspection of the Santa Fe and Whittier Narrows dams was part of a nationwide survey of Army Corps structures triggered by failures of levees after Hurricane Katrina.

The Whittier Narrows Dam had verified issues with seepage and with piping, a process where water tunnels under or through a dam. Engineers are following up to address concerns raised by a pair of studies.

Unlike Army Corps districts in other parts of the country, engineers in Los Angeles have not conducted any public outreach campaigns to explain the problems with the Whittier Narrows and Santa Fe dams.

Field said engineers were waiting until they more fully understood exactly what was wrong with the earthen structures before reaching out to the public.

While floods in the 1930s deluged El Monte and surrounding cities, the flood control system has held fast, including a problem-free performance during December's record rains.

"I guess we completely take it for granted," said El Monte Mayor Andre Quintero. "I guess we're more worried about the big one, an earthquake, than a big flood."

Still, he thought the Army Corps should have been more forthcoming about potential problems with the dam.

"It is troubling," he said. "We've got legislators that should be apprised of that. At the very least it could instigate a conversation."