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State High-Risk Program

Poorly Maintained Dams and Levees Continue to Pose a Risk to Public Safety

Background

In our December 2025 biennial State High-Risk Assessment, we concluded that the condition of the State's dams and levees remains a high-risk issue. Although the public and private entities that own dams in the State are responsible for their construction, operation, and maintenance, the Department of Water Resources (Water Resources) has primary oversight authority to ensure Californians' safety. The Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) is responsible for approving Emergency Action Plans that dam owners must create when a dam poses a significant hazard to residents. The State delegates maintenance of levees to local maintaining agencies (LMAs), which include levee districts, reclamation districts, cities, counties, private landowners, and other public agencies and municipalities. Nonetheless, Water Resources is responsible for inspecting the levees on a regular basis to ensure that LMAs are performing their statutory responsibilities.

Key Findings

- Water Resources and Cal OES have not ensured that dam owners adhered to state requirements that protect lives and property.
 - As of May 2026, of the State's 1,222 dams, 57 are in *poor or unsatisfactory* condition, including 40 that have hazard classifications of *high* or *extremely high*.
 - Failure of just one of these 40 dams could pose harm to as many as hundreds of thousands of people and cause billions of dollars in property damage.
 - The most common factors contributing to these dams' ratings are their age, the less comprehensive safety standards that were in place at the time of their construction, and their owners' inability to pay for repairs.
- LMAs' lack of maintenance of their levees and Water Resources' reluctance to intervene could increase risks to surrounding communities.
 - In the State Plan of Flood Control, Water Resources rated nearly one-third of the 102 LMAs in 2025 as performing *unacceptable* routine maintenance of levees.
 - According to Water Resources and the LMAs we spoke with, the LMAs could not afford to perform the necessary maintenance; however, Water Resources has not exercised its full authority to address the risks the chronically underperforming LMAs pose.

Key Recommendations

- To ensure that dam owners are prepared to address needed repairs for their dams, the Legislature should amend state law to require that dam owners with *high* and *extremely high* hazard classifications create ongoing maintenance and repair plans for their dams and submit those plans to Water Resources for review and approval as part of their annual inspections.
- To ensure that it exercises its full enforcement authority over the safety of dams, Water Resources should develop processes by January 2027 to issue a Notice of Violation to dam owners, issue an Administrative Complaint to each dam owner that does not take corrective action according to the Notice of Violation, and ensure that it has allocated sufficient funding to cover the costs associated with these enforcement actions.
- To ensure that levees are maintained properly and to comply with state law, Water Resources should immediately initiate the process to form a maintenance area when it determines that an LMA does not meet its federal requirements.

Levees With Unacceptable Maintenance Ratings in Fall 2025 Place Hundreds of Thousands of Lives at Risk and Threaten Billions of Dollars in Damages

YEARS IN UNACCEPTABLE CONDITION	NUMBER OF LMAS	POPULATION AT RISK	NUMBER OF BUILDINGS AT RISK	VALUE OF BUILDINGS AT RISK	ACRES OF FARMLAND AT RISK
5 years or more	23	161,421	101,621	\$14,013,810,000	250,614
Less than 5 years	9	106,141	31,409	24,930,560,000	50,178
TOTAL	32	267,562	133,030	\$38,944,370,000	300,792