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Many S.C. Dams May Hold Hidden Dangers

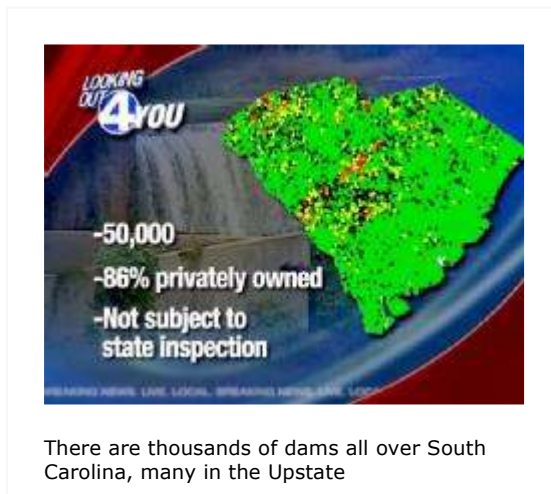
Many Dams Are Not Subject To Inspection

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POSTED: 5:54 pm EST November 17, 2009

UPDATED: 10:49 am EST November 18, 2009

GREENVILLE, S.C. -- It may be hard to believe, but there are more than 50,000 dams in South Carolina. Even harder to believe is the fact the many of these dams are not subject to state inspection.



"Most of these are privately-owned dams," said Adam Myrick of the South Carolina Department of Health & Environmental Control. "The responsibility (to inspect them) is on the property owner."

DHEC is the agency responsible for ensuring the safety of dams in South Carolina. Dams classified as "high hazard" are inspected by the agency on a yearly basis, while "significant hazard" dams are inspected every three years. But since most dams in South Carolina (86 percent) are privately-owned, many receive no inspection at all.

In 2005, the environmental group Upstate Forever commissioned a study on dams in the Saluda-Reedy Watershed. Group founder Brad Wyche was amazed by what the study found.

"We found over 3,000 dams in this one watershed, and we found that only about 160 of those dams are subject to the state inspection program," Wyche told News 4's Tim Waller.

The report by Pinnacle Consulting Group found most dams in the watershed "don't receive proper maintenance." Of the 2,700 "earthen" dams, it found 2,500 of those dams are unregulated, and "present substantial concerns to downstream waters and properties."

"Some of the dams are very small and probably pose no risk, some of the dams are more significant in size and probably pose some risk. But we really don't know what we're dealing with," Wyche added.

This is not to say that private dams in South Carolina never receive any inspection. inspected. The

Greenville County Soil and Water Conservation District monitors and maintains nine privately-owned watershed lakes and their dams in the Upstate.

"We come out several times a year and make sure things are as they should be," said Lynne Newton of the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

But because private dam owners are responsible for the safety and maintenance of their own dams, it is unlikely that all dam owners are doing what they're supposed to do.

"Especially people who have bought a farm, they didn't build the dam, they weren't there when the people built the dam, so they may not have learned how to maintain the dam that they have since acquired," said Dr. Rob Hanley of the Greenville County Soil and Water Conservation District.

Without proper maintenance, Hanley said it's possible these dams could fail.

"There are dam collapses every year," he said. "Some of them are old dams, and some of them believe it or not are new dams."

In 1990, the Kendall Lake Dam near Camden collapsed after 14 inches of rainfall. Four people died when their car became submerged.

That same year, seventeen other dams in South Carolina failed when tropical storms brought torrential rains to the state.

But none of those dam failures compare to what happened in Toccoa, Georgia in 1977. A private earthen dam high above Toccoa Falls Bible College collapsed after several days of heavy rainfall. More than 100-million gallons of water was unleashed, killing 39 people.

The Association of State Dam Safety Officials gives South Carolina low marks for dam safety. It ranks South Carolina 42nd in the nation for dollars spent on dam safety regulation, and 46th in the nation for the number of full-time employees dedicated to dam safety.

Currently, DHEC's Dams and Reservoirs Program is a one-man department, though officials say the number is misleading.

"The one person who you're referring to more or less manages the program, and provides support. We've got dam inspectors in all eight regions of the state," said DHEC spokesman Adam Myrick.

Old mill dams present another danger, since many are more than one-hundred years old.

"Those are very much a concern of ours, because they just aren't built to the engineering specifications that the new dams are," said Doug Bryson, the Emergency Management

Coordinator for Spartanburg County.

One mill dam that concerns Bryson is the Old Apalache Mill Dam on the outskirts of Greer. Built in 1904, the dam is still standing, but shows visible cracks in the mortar between the huge masonry stones.

"There's a tremendous amount of pressure as the water raises behind it, the pressure on that structure, where it could theoretically give way and breach, and have a dam failure," Bryson said.

Fortunately, some mill dams are being purchased by public utilities to generate hydroelectric power. Spartanburg Water System recently purchased the century-old Clifton Dam on the Pacolet River.

"We realized that this is an opportunity for us to not only to restore this dam back to a good functional use, but also take advantage of the water supply that's available there and the possibility of some green energy," said Rebecca West of the Spartanburg Water System.

But officials say many more dams across South Carolina pose safety concerns that are not being addressed. It's believed that over time, some of those dams could fail with possibly catastrophic consequences.

"Dams collapse, and every year, there's a dam or two in the United States that will collapse," Hanley said.

Private dam owners who are interested in learning how to maintain dams can attend a free workshop on Wednesday, December 9th at County Square in Greenville from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Experts from DHEC, the Greenville County Soil and Water Conservation District and the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service will be on hand to answer any questions. For more information, call 864-467-2756.

LINKS:

[List of dam failures in U.S. since 1874](#)

[DHEC Dams and Reservoirs Safety Program](#)

[Fact-sheet on dams in South Carolina](#)

[Report on dams in Saluda-Reedy Watershed](#)

[FEMA: What to Do Before a Dam Failure](#)

[Unseen Danger: Toccoa Falls Dam Failure](#)

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