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Homeowners raise awareness about the wildfire risk of low Lake Hodges



Residents say Lake Hodges is now narrow and short. (Paul Bernstein)



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A group of Lake Hodges homeowners is advocating to raise the water level at Lake Hodges Dam back up to 290 feet.

The lake level has been lowered due to a state-mandated 280 feet following the emergency repairs on the 106-year-old dam. In addition to the environmental impacts of the lowered lake, its impact on the grebe population and overall lake health, the group of residents has focused its appeal on what they believe to be a significant wildfire risk for the surrounding communities.

The group of Hodges homeowners made their case at the San Dieguito River Park Citizens Advisory Committee's meeting on Aug. 2 in Rancho Bernardo.

"Fire is one of the biggest hazards that we face from a safety standpoint," said Bob Dudley, a CAC member and 40-year Lake Hodges resident. "It's our duty to protect the park and that's really the most important thing."

The CAC, a standing committee of the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority (JPA), includes representatives from community planning groups and homeowners associations in the area, as well as organizations such as San Diego Mountain Biking Association and Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley.

At the meeting, the CAC heard the homeowners' appeal and reiterated a motion made to the JPA in May that the upstream consequences including wildfire risk should be considered in decisions about the lake level. The issue was on the agenda for the full JPA board meeting on Aug.16 where the San Diego City Public Utilities Department was expected to present. The meeting has since been canceled and the item postponed to October.

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Currently at a level of 280 feet, the lake is at 16% capacity. In his comments, CAC Vice Chair Chris Khoury explained that for many years the lake level was maintained at 290 feet, which is 40% capacity, 25 feet below the spillway level of 315 feet. At that level the dam still allowed for a transfer of water to the Olivenhain Reservoir with the benefit of hydroelectric power storage, to generate electricity during peak demand.

After the dam damages were discovered in 2022, the lake level was lowered to 275 feet to complete the emergency repairs. The initial plan was to raise it back to 290 feet but further damage was uncovered during the repairs. The California Division of Safety of Dams (DSOD) rated the condition of the dam as "unsatisfactory" and ordered a height restriction until a new dam was completed. The city's public utilities department has told the San Dieguito River Park that it is moving ahead quickly on a replacement dam and hopes to start construction on the dam by 2029.

With the level restricted to 280 feet, the lake is now narrow and short—where it used to go out over Interstate 15, the lake now ends before ever reaching Rancho Bernardo. The lake bed has been replaced by all new brush growth.

“By keeping the dam low, we’ve created fire fuel, we’ve created a significant hazard in the entire river park for a wildfire to happen,” said Lake Hodges resident Paul Bernstein.

The group estimated over 250 acres of fuel has been added, highly flammable brush and Riparian vegetation. The wildfire risk increases due to the added fuel load and the potential for fire spread, Bernstein said.

Remembering how the Witch Creek Fire burned the river park in 2007, resulting in a loss of homes in Rancho Bernardo, Rancho Santa Fe and Del Dios, the group has done calculations to show that there is a much higher probability for a major wildfire than a Richter 7 earthquake event. The homeowners believe that raising the lake level could mitigate the risk of wildfire by 25 to 50% and have attempted to contact all of the local North County fire chiefs to rally support for their cause.

The state mandated a consequence report to evaluate the dam’s risk in the event of a catastrophic failure, a 7.0 earthquake. Khoury said that the study found that at 280 feet, about 650 people would be inundated and at a level of 290, that number would be closer to 5,000 people, with a lot of potential for impact in the Whispering Palms area.

Rather than the downstream effects, Bernstein said the state really needs to be aware of the more probable, upstream risks of the dam’s water level.

“We’re worried about the upstream effects that haven’t been considered: the real risk of having another wildfire in our area,” Bernstein said.

The group hopes the JPA meeting will be an opportunity for people to express their concerns. The decision on the lake level ultimately must be made at the state level.