

Santa Fe Irrigation District setting aside funds for new Lake Hodges Dam



The Santa Fe Irrigation District offices. (Karen Billing)



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The Santa Fe Irrigation District board is taking action to plan for the future of Lake Hodges Dam, setting aside \$10.4 million for its share in the cost of a replacement dam.

At the board's Nov. 13 meeting, the board approved putting an additional \$6.7 million into its Hodges Dam Fund, the fund created last year to pay for current needs and prepare for the construction of the future. The city's proposed timeframe is for design of the new dam to be completed in 2028 with a four-year construction beginning in 2030.

SFID Director of Administrative Services Seth Gates said due to the district's positive position they have some flexibility to set aside these funds to offset the costs without an immediate ratepayer impact.

"This is one of the biggest pieces in the future that will impact ratepayers," Gates said. "Hopefully we will get relief by restoration of local water prior to a new dam being in place, however, we do have potential obligations associated with the current Lake Hodges Dam and the construction of a new dam."

Santa Fe Irrigation District is liable for reimbursement to the city of San Diego for repairs on the current 106-year-old Lake Hodges Dam for flood control purposes, as well as for the planning, design and capital costs for the new dam. Gates said that there are a lot of unknowns and uncertainty about the dam due to a lack of communication from the city.

"The city of San Diego is being obstinate, they are not sharing information, they are not being a good partner in any of this process associated with the current Lake Hodges Dam or the new Lake Hodges Dam," Gates said.

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To date, they have been invoiced \$1.7 million for the emergency repairs on the dam, only to maintain flood control. Upcoming repairs in 2025 required by the California Division of Safety of Dams (DSOD) to repair the spillway could total \$1.5 million, which the district's share would equal about \$215,000.

The DSOD rated the condition of the dam as "unsatisfactory" and ordered a height restriction until a new dam was completed.

The lowered lake level has impacted water rates for customers in both the Santa Fe Irrigation and San Dieguito Water Districts. Over the last two years, the city has released over an estimated 17,000 acre-feet, or 5.5 billion gallons, of the districts' water into the ocean, equaling an approximate loss of \$21 million or the equivalent of two years of water supply. With the loss of local water, SFID had to develop a new rate structure with some customers experiencing up to a 40% rate increase on their bi-monthly bills.

"We have filed suit, we are going to be potentially in litigation on this matter for years to come with no resolution," Gates said of the lawsuit filed this summer against the city of San Diego over the "negligent" maintenance of the dam.

A new dam further downstream was estimated to cost \$300 million in 2022 dollars. Gates said the total cost for replacement is now anticipated to be over \$500 million based on the city's timeline and a 5% inflationary rate per year.

The district's share of the planning and design expenditures for the new dam is 14.3% of the total cost or \$8.6 million, through 2028.

Gates said the repairs to the dam that have been done to date are "just a bandaid" and there are a multitude of risks that the district faces. Even with the timeline, the existing dam is going to be around for at least another 10 years, he said.

The dam failure inundation study and the threat of flooding issues downstream has become a focus in the community. Lake Hodges-area residents have also raised concern on upstream threats about the fire risks of the now dry lake bed and increased vegetation growth in a wildfire corridor.

Based on the current draft financial statements, the district's reserves are \$27 million. SFID Director Sandy Johnson said due to the staff's analysis, she believed it was prudent to set aside the additional funds.

"There's so many uncertainties going forward," agreed Vice President Dana Frieauf. "Because we have the monies now, I think we should put them in the fund because we just don't know what's coming down in the next five or some years."

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