

RANCHO SANTA FE REVIEW > RANCHO SANTA FE REVIEW NEWS

Grassroots group gathering support to raise Lake Hodges, help reduce wildfire risk



Lake Hodges Dam on Wednesday, Aug. 13, 2025. (Ana Ramirez / The San Diego Union-Tribune)



By **KAREN BILLING** | KarenB@rsfreview.com | The San Diego Union-Tribune

UPDATED: September 8, 2025 at 6:44 AM PDT

The Rancho Santa Fe Association board has added its voice to a growing coalition of North County neighbors seeking answers from the state about the future of Lake Hodges and its 106-year-old dam.

At the board's Sept. 4 meeting, they heard a presentation from Raise Lake Hodges, a grassroots group that would like to see the lake raised 13 feet, from the state-restricted 280 feet to 293 feet, to refill and cover what is now an exposed, dry lakebed and help keep the region safe from the risk of the wildfire.

The group first presented to the RSF Association's infrastructure committee, which recommended sharing the information with the full RSF Association board.

Over the last three years, the California Division of Safety of Dams (DSOD) has mandated the city of San Diego lower the level of Lake Hodges to 280 feet to protect the integrity of the dam and public safety. For many years, the lake level was maintained at 290 feet, which is about 40% capacity, 25 feet below the spillway level of 315 feet.

After damages to the dam were discovered in 2022, the lake level was lowered to 275 feet to complete emergency repairs. The initial plan was to raise the lake back to 290 feet, but further concrete deterioration was uncovered on the arch barrels of the dam during the repairs. As a result, DSOD rated the condition of the dam as "unsatisfactory" and ordered a height restriction until a new dam could be completed.

With the level restricted to 280 feet, the water level is currently about 270 feet, according to Raise Lake Hodges. The lake has now become narrow and short—where it used to go out over Interstate 15, the lake ends before ever reaching Rancho Bernardo.

[Read More](#)

00:00

02:00



Lake Hodges looking west from Rancho Bernardo in Aug. 2021.
(Karen Billing)



The Lake Hodges lakebed in Rancho Bernardo looking west in May 2025. (Karen Billing)

“Now we have hundreds and hundreds of acres of flammable brush where there used to be lake,” said Raise Lake Hodges member Dr. Paul Bernstein, who lived in Rancho Santa Fe for over 30 years. “The lake acted as a fire break from Del Dios, coming down the river valley into Rancho Santa Fe. Now there are huge trees with underlying brush with a humidity level of less than 5%. Because this natural fire break is gone at Lake Hodges, it’s created this basic blowtorch.”

During a Santa Ana wind event, Bernstein said the corridor could carry a fire all the way from Ramona to Rancho Santa Fe, much like the way one moved in 2007’s destructive Witch Creek Fire.

“It is 500 times more likely the chance of a wildfire taking out Rancho Santa Fe and surrounding areas than the actual dam rupturing and causing a problem,” Bernstein said. “DSOD has their blinders on. They’re looking at the downstream effect while ignoring the upstream impacts.”

Bernstein said DSOD’s “arbitrary” decision to keep Hodges 13 feet lower than the “safe and historic” norms has forced the release of 12 billion gallons of the cheapest water source.

Santa Fe Irrigation District (SFID) customers have seen their water bills rise with the lake levels lowered. Historically, SFID received 30% of its annual water supply from Lake Hodges. With the lowered lake level, the district lost access to its local water resource and now relies almost entirely on the more expensive imported water from the water authority. The water authority's rates went up 14% in 2025 and they have estimated that its rates will increase up to 30% over the next two years.

With the water at the low levels, the water authority is unable to use its \$200 million hydroelectric Cielo pump station that delivers renewable energy to 26,000 homes and transfers low-cost water to the Olivenhain Reservoir and SFID's RE Badger Filtration plant. Bernstein said the expensive investment now sits idle, costing the water authority \$3 million a year in lost operational value.

In 2022, the city commissioned a consequence modeling report to evaluate the dam's risk in the event of a major earthquake, registering 7.0 or higher on the Richter scale. The study found that at 280 feet, about 650 people would be inundated in the resulting flood from a dam failure 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.

That study recommended that the water level be restricted to 280 feet to minimize potential impacts to the surrounding community—after reviewing the study, DSOD directed the city to lower the water level.

One member of the Raise Lake Hodges group is Kevin Kidd, the president of the Del Dios Town Council and a longtime commercial diver and underwater inspector who has worked with DSOD, the state and the city in the past on the Hodges Dam. Kidd told the RSF Association board that the risk of wildfire is much more probable than a dam failure.

"There's never been a multiple arch dam that has ever failed if it's over five years old," Kidd said, noting that most dams that collapse are rock and earthen dams like the Oroville Dam, which burst in 2017.

Kidd said the city's report showed that there aren't any seismic fault lines near the dam and therefore the potential hazard posed by surface fault rupture, including secondary displacement at the site, is very low, less than 1% probability. Even in the worst-case scenarios, a dam break would cause localized flooding, however, if a wildfire were to come through, it would be a threat to lives, homes and businesses in the entire region and it would take years to rebuild and recover.

The group believes that the justification to lower the lake level is only based on surface observations with no structural analysis, not taking into account the serious upstream public safety issues. Kidd said they have asked DSOD for a detailed analysis of the dam's structural issues but they have not gotten a response: "It's very frustrating for us."

Due to the pending lawsuit filed by Santa Fe Irrigation (SFID) against the city over its negligence in the dam's upkeep, Raise Lake Hodges has also been unable to get any information from SFID or from the city.

Bernstein believes the solution is simple—to raise the lake from 280 feet to 293 feet, a safe level still 20 feet below the top of the dam. To raise the lake level would come at no cost with no extra infrastructure, he said. It would cover 500 acres of flammable brush, create a natural fire break, restore local water security to Rancho Santa Fe as well as protect 26 endangered species like the grebes whose population is dwindling.

"This is a rare case where the science, the economics, the environment, and the public safety argument all point in the same direction," Bernstein said. "The cost is nothing. The benefit could be everything. Let's not wait until another firestorm like Palisades and Malibu makes us wish we had acted."

To plead their case, Raise Lake Hodges has met with SDG&E and elected representatives in the state assembly such as Darshana Patel and a candidate for state senate. They said they have found support from the San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy, the Citizens Committee for the San Dieguito River Valley, the Sierra Club, Del Dios Town Council, the majority of Whispering Palms and, most recently, the Rancho Bernardo Community Council.

RSF Association President David Gamboa acknowledged that the issue is very important to the Covenant for a lot of different reasons and, initially, he wanted the board to pause and take some time to digest the information before taking any action. Rather than outright supporting the request to raise the lake level to 293 feet, the board agreed to provide support via a letter for Raise Lake Hodges' efforts in pressing the state for information about the real factors driving their dam decisions.

Director Mark Simpson said that "Unless you produce documentation showing why it should not be at 293, we are going to support the fact that it should be at 293." The board backed the group's efforts to uncover whether the decision is political, financial, or if there is a structural problem with the dam.

While a new dam was initially planned to begin construction in 2029, it was recently reported that the city of San Diego has withdrawn support for the rebuild after the cost swelled from \$275 million to between \$474 million and \$697 million. The county water authority announced it was no longer willing to pay half the cost—the other half is meant to be split between the city, SFID and San Dieguito Water District.

San Diego city officials said they are now planning a comprehensive analysis of less costly solutions to the dam's structural problems.

SFID remains locked in the active lawsuit against the city, seeking \$21 million over the negligent maintenance, which has shrunk the local water supply. Following the news about the city's stance, SFID posted a statement on its website.

"The district continues to work with the city and other stakeholders to explore options for preserving water rights and maximizing local water supply at the lowest cost for our ratepayers," the statement read.

Originally Published: September 8, 2025 at 6:24 AM PDT

Around the Web

REVCONTENT

Here's The Estimated Cost of a 1-day Gutter Guards Installation

LeafFilter Partner

Here's What Gutter Guards Should Cost if You Qualify for Senior Rebates

LeafFilter Partner

Here's The Estimated Cost for a 1-day Walk-in Shower Upgrade

HomeBuddy

Mystery Solved: Dementia Linked to This Everyday Habit. Do You Do It?

BrainDefender

Amazon's Hottest Selling Hearing Aid is Back on Sale for \$99

Oricle Hearing

Top Cardiologist Begg: Stop Eating Blueberries Before This Happens

GundryMD

SPONSORED CONTENT

Seniors Born 1939-1969 Receive 11 Benefits This Month If They Ask

BY **SUPER SAVING ONLINE**

— Seniors at Los Angeles
Should Claim These Benefits

2025 > September > 8