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Lake Hodges advocates want 13-foot water level increase for fire protection



The Lake Hodges Dam in North County. (John Gastaldo / For the U-T)



By **ELIZABETH MARIE HIMCHAK** |

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Advocates for raising the water level in Lake Hodges by 13 feet say doing so is critical to protecting thousands of homes in Rancho Bernardo and other communities from wildfires.

Representatives from Raise Lake Hodges Citizens Advisory Committee asked for the Rancho Bernardo Community Council's endorsement of raising the water level during the council's Aug. 7 meeting.

They want the dam's water level raised from the current 280 feet maximum to 293 feet above sea level.

"The issue is what to do until the dam is rebuilt," said Paul Bernstein, a Raise Lake Hodges member. "We can say one simple fact ... that raising the level of the lake by only 13 feet, a little more than a basketball hoop, is the number one thing we can do to prevent a wildfire from totally demolishing you guys in Rancho Bernardo."

The group's members, many of whom have homes near Lake Hodges, have been reaching out to various organizations in recent years to gain support for their position. The group states its executive advisory board includes structural engineers and diving inspectors who have worked with the City of San Diego on dam safety and fire aviation leaders who have coordinated with Cal Fire.

Their request is based on a 2022 Division of Safety of Dams review that the group said "found the dam structurally sound at 293 feet."

The water level has been limited because of a state order from the division in early 2023, which deemed the Lake Hodges Dam to be “unsatisfactory.” Over the last four years, around 12 billion gallons of water has been released.

The limit will remain until the dam, built in 1918, can be replaced. City of San Diego officials have estimated it could be complete by 2034.

The city has stated there is no imminent threat of the dam’s failure.

“The number one priority for the city is maintaining the water level in the reservoir at a safe elevation in accordance with the state regulator to reduce downstream risk in the event of a catastrophic failure caused by a major earthquake,” the city said on its website. “Monitoring of the dam structure is being done consistently along with ongoing coordination with DSOD.”

Until a new dam is built, the city says it is making repairs to address deteriorated concrete. Other near-term risk reduction measures it has begun include installing additional measurement devices to improve seepage monitoring, repairing concrete on the downstream face of the dam and deteriorated spillway apron, evaluating additional monitoring instrumentation needs, improving and refining the emergency action plan and conducting ongoing monitoring and inspections to maintain the dam’s safety and reliability.



The view of Lake Hodges looking south, toward Casa de las Campanas and West Bernardo Drive from the David Kreitzer Lake Hodges Bicycle/Pedestrian Bridge on Aug. 11, 2025. Years earlier the area now covered by trees and grass was filled with lake water, such as when the bridge was dedicated in May 2009. (Elizabeth Marie Himchak)

The city has not removed the vegetation, including trees and grasses, that have grown in the lake in the absence of water. In the Rancho Bernardo portion of Lake Hodges, adjacent to West Bernardo Drive and spanned by the David Kreitzer Lake Hodges Bicycle/Pedestrian Bridge, the lake was filled with water in years of sufficient rainfall.

During years of drought, when the water level dropped, trees grew in the lake bed, but when water returned following heavy rainfalls, the trees lost their leaves and were just bare trunks and branches. With the lake now being kept low, the area is once again filled with trees and grasses that the group says presents a wildfire hazard.

When the bridge was dedicated in 2009, the RB portion of the lake had water. Firefighting helicopters on various occasions scooped up water from the lake when fighting wildfires instead of flying farther away.

Kevin Kidd, president of the Del Dios Town Council and another member of the group, said history shows there is a very small likelihood that the dam will fail due to a 7.0 or higher earthquake in the next decade, but a high likelihood of fire.

“The chance of a devastating fire coming through the area is about 35% to 50% over the next 10 years,” said Kidd, who was a commercial diver with the City of San Diego. “The chance of an earthquake coming through the area is less than 1%.”

Kidd’s work included conducting underwater inspections that were critical to dam evaluation and public safety, according to his bio.

He said the Lake Hodges Dam has surface cracks and water is being kept 35 feet below the spillway. While his group has requested an in-depth structural analysis justifying the 280-foot limit, that has not been done, he said.

According to Kidd, when concrete is below water its integrity is very good, but when above water it degrades.

“If the dam were to break it would unlikely be ... a catastrophic failure. ... If a fire comes through we have a nutrient rich bottom that is created ... a super dense fuel source,” he said.



A sign on the gate for the David Kreitzer Lake Hodges Bicycle/Pedestrian Bridge in Rancho Bernardo gives visitor instructions such as “no swimming,” reflecting a time when lake water used to flow under the bridge. (Elizabeth Marie Himchak)

The RB council also heard from Rhonda Farrar, the Friends of Lake Hodges president and founder. Her group's mission is to support local government efforts to improve Lake Hodges dam safety and capacity, water quality, wildlife habitat and public access for the benefit of the community, she said.

The group formed before the dam replacement project came to the forefront, which Farrar said officials have estimated to cost \$474 million. With only \$260 million available, she said plans are being redesigned since a state mandate says construction must begin by 2028. The original plan was to make an exact-size replacement. But due to cost, the dam might have to be smaller, which would impact the lake's size, she said.

When full, at 315 feet above sea level at the spillway, Lake Hodges has 1,234 surface acres, a maximum water depth of 115 feet and 27 shoreline miles. The Hodges Reservoir has a water storage capacity of 30,251 acre-feet. As of July 21, the lake was 15% full, according to the city's website.

"Friends wants the dam to be replaced. The ideal is the same size, but that might not be possible," Farrar said.

Bernstein said a fire hazard has been created by keeping the water level below 280 feet.

"Because of keeping the water level of the lake ... there is 500 acres of exposed lake bed," Bernstein said. "This is dry, flammable, filled with invasive grasses and brush with moisture levels below 5%.

"CalFire says anything less than 15% is a severe fire hazard," he said.

According to Bernstein, if the lake is allowed to go up to 293 feet, not only would the fire threat be minimized but it would also become a natural fire break.

John Anshus, another Raise Lake Hodges member, said the pipeline from Olivenhain to Lake Hodges is not functional because the lake is too low. In addition, boats cannot access the ramps and "insurance rates have gone through the roof ... (or been) canceled."

He added that endangered wildlife are also impacted. This includes grebes, an aquatic diving bird.

“(Their) nesting has gone down from hundreds to teens because of a change in the water level,” Anshus said.

In the past, those living near Lake Hodges could take shelter on its shores if they were unable to evacuate safely during a fire, Kidd said. That option no longer exists. He added that firefighters have also lost access to a water source for aviation fire suppression.

After listening to the request from the group members, RB Community Council President Robin Kaufman said the issue needs to be discussed at the subcommittee level before the council can vote on whether it will endorse raising the lake’s water level.

For more information or to sign a petition in favor of raising Lake Hodges, visit RaiseLakeHodges.org. For details on the lake’s dam replacement, visit FriendsOfLakeHodges.org.

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