JOIN 250 SUPPORTERS TO RAISE
$250,000
BY JULY 4
250 FOR 250:
KEEP THE FREE PRESS FREE

NEWS, NORTH COUNTY

Flood or fire? A disaster at Lake Hodges is looming, residents warn

By Kaela Fuiaemaner
March 5, 2026 | Print view | Add Comment

Residents Susan and Jim Hodges at Lake Hodges on March 19, 2026. (Giovanni Mosqueda/Voiceover)

Why this matters

San Diego's Lake Hodges dam is the only one California has deemed nonaudit-worthy. A rebuild plan stalled, and people are now demanding a solution that manages flood and fire risks.

Lake Hodges is a San Diego landmark where people hike, bike, fish, kayak, canoe, bird watch and take photographs against the backdrop of a cerulean-blue sky, crisp mountain air.

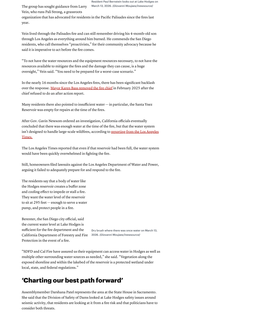
It's also a disaster waiting to happen.

This question is whether calamity would come by flood or by fire.

An earthquake could destroy the aging dam and flood Rancho Santa Fe and other communities, or the Hodges reservoir could become overwhelmed with the monsoon. But many residents fear how water leads to a greater threat of wildfires in an area already among the most at risk in the state.

"We have a fire opportunity that is massive, and we have never increased the ability to make that fire dramatically," one resident said.

A 2012 inspection, maintenance project and subsequent study found concrete deterioration, cracks and other issues with the 108-year-old Lake Hodges dam. Nonetheless, it was the only dam in California that was not deemed "audit-ready" according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, meaning it "requires immediate or emergency remedial action."



The edge of the Lake Hodges Dam, as seen from the bridge on March 19, 2026. (Giovanni Mosqueda/Voiceover)

It is the only dam in the state agency's jurisdiction with that label. The division recommended a water level of 200 feet or below—35 feet below the dam's spillway—to avoid a "catastrophic high" determination when a breach is "expected to cause considerable loss of human life or would result in an inundation area with a population of 1,000 or more."

That's led to considerable releases of 15.5 billion gallons of water in the last four years after heavy rains as a safeguard.

In an FAQ on its website from August 2025, the city said the reservoir is safe at its current levels.

"There is not an imminent threat of failure of Hodges Dam," it says. "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."

For some residents, their primary fear is fire, not flooding. The fact isn't theoretical because fire has ripped through the area before. They say it's not a matter of if the next one comes but when. And they worry there will be far less water to douse, and later light, the fire.

"We have 500 acres of dry brush," Lynch said. "We have kindling wood on everyone's front yard."

Brian Caldwell said it was just one extra day that kept his house from burning down in the 2014 Cedar Fire.

"The fire came through and because there was a lake here, it stalled," he said.

At the time, he and other nearby residents looked over the spillway hedge at a nearly full lake, which set down in 300-foot-deep, 1,000-acre-foot-wide canyons. Years of plants known for their flammability.

Brian Caldwell stands on a pedestrian bridge that was built over the spillway of Lake Hodges on March 19, 2026. (Giovanni Mosqueda/Voiceover)

These residents have come together to form Lake Lake Hodges, a group that is pushing the city to stop releasing water from the reservoir — or at least release less.

San Diego Councilmember Marti Emerald, who represents the area, has raised concerns about the dam's condition and the city's plan to address the problem. Emerald, who said she was still concerned that the Division of Safety of Dams is doing its job, wants to think about the damage that water could do to people, but no one is thinking about the damage that fire can do to people.[1]

"It's very hard for me to tell my residents who've reached their homes here in their foundation even before that we're doing everything we can to keep them safe," she said. "I just don't know what to do because I think we've stuck with this jurisdictional quagmire, and this agency is bureaucratic that doesn't seem to want to answer our questions."

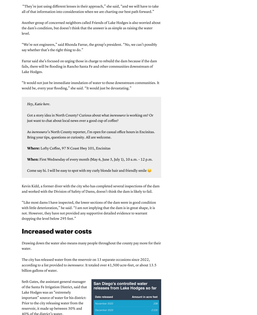
Advanced deterioration, unacceptable condition

The dam around Lake Hodges was built in 1918, and the city of San Diego bought the dam and reservoir in 1925. The reservoir can hold water up to 115 feet and has a shoreline of 27 miles. It has a water storage capacity of over 30,000 acre-feet. That's the equivalent of about 10 billion gallons of water or enough to fill some 15,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

Last week, the water level sat at 270 feet, which city spokesperson Jennifer McBride said was a few feet below the restriction level in order to "ensure that we won't exceed the restriction level in the event of rain.

In northeastern San Diego County's Ellis Forest, Lake Hodges provides water to the city of San Diego and to North County's San Dieguito Water District and Santa Fe Irrigation District, which serve Rancho Santa Fe, parts of Encinitas and the communities of Rancho Santa Fe and Fairbanks Ranch.

The San Diego County Water Authority has access to 20,000 acre-feet of storage space, but a spokesperson said the agency has "no plans or need to use it."



Lake Hodges on March 19, 2026. (Giovanni Mosqueda/Voiceover)

Division of Safety of Dams manager Erik Mehrl said that through an engineering study and the agency's inspections, the dam was labeled "satisfactory." It is the only one under the agency's jurisdiction labeled as such.

"DSOD's inspections have observed that the dam has advanced deterioration putting the dam in an unacceptable condition for normal operating conditions," he said.

The city was poised to begin building a new dam downstream of Lake Hodges by 2029. The project, which would cost ratepayers $1 billion, would have a 20-year lifespan, generate 8e7 million and 8e97 million, and the county water authority withdrew its support for the rebuild. The city's plan had the water authority paying half the cost with the rest split evenly among the city and the two smaller water districts. The change left the city exploring other options.

Without a path toward rebuilding the dam, the city has continued to release water out of the reservoir, with no clear path to a permanent solution for the dam.

Billions of gallons of water have been released into the ocean in the years since the dam was deemed unsatisfactory, with more set for controlled releases. It's water that is in a perfect world could be used for drinking, recreation and renewable energy.

A free press only works if communities support it. Chip in $5

Alessandra Bernstein, the city's public utilities department's deputy director of external affairs, said the California Environmental Quality Act did not require an environmental impact report for advancing reservoir levels for safety and regulatory compliance.

The residents argue that a few years likely would be more devastating than a flood. The Lake Hodges area is one of the least desirable areas in a high-priority fire area, and many homes are surrounded by large scale wildfires, according to mapping from the Los Angeles Times.

The Los Angeles Times reported that even if that reservoir had been full, the water system would have been quickly overwhelmed in fighting the fire.

Still, homeowners filed lawsuits against the City of San Diego and Rancho Santa Fe, arguing Lake Lake Hodges's residents are not prepared to flee.

The residents say that a body of water like the Hodges reservoir creates a buffer and cooling effect in respect to a wildfire. The Hodges reservoir has a capacity to sit at 270 feet — enough to use water pump, and pressure people to a fire.

Bowmer, the San Diego city official, said the reservoir level is "sufficient" sufficient for the fire department and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection in the center of a fire.

Residents Susan Hodges and Jim Hodges on March 19, 2026. (Giovanni Mosqueda/Voiceover)

Dry brush where there was once water on March 19, 2026. (Giovanni Mosqueda/Voiceover)

"DSOD and Cal Fire have assured us their equipment can access water in Hodges as well as multiple other surrounding water sources as needed," she said. "Vegetation along the exposed shoreline and within the labelled of the reservoir is a protected wetland under local, state, and federal regulations."

'Charting our best path forward'

Assemblymember Tasha Pazol represents the area at the State House in Sacramento. She said the Division of Safety of Dams looked at Lake Hodges unless issues around seismic activity, that residents are looking at it from a fire risk and that politicians have to consider both dangers.

"They're just using different lenses to their approach," she said, "and we will have to take all of that information into consideration when we are charting our best path forward."

Another group of concerned neighbors called Friends of Lake Hodges wrote about where the dam's condition, but doesn't think that the owner is as simple as raising the water level.

"We're not engineers," said Rhonda Ferrier, the group's president. "No, we can't possibly say whether that's the right thing to do."

Ferrier said she's focused on urging those in charge to rebuild the dam because if the dam fails, the Lake Hodges flooding in Rancho Santa Fe and other communities downstream of Lake Hodges.

"It would not just be immediate inundation of water to those downstream communities. It would be, every year flooding," she said. "It would just be devastating."

> Hey, Kaela here.
>
> Got a story idea in North County? Curious about what newsroom is working on? Or just want to chat about local news over a good cup of coffee?
>
> As newsroom's North County reporter, I'm open for casual office hours in Encinitas. Bring your tips, questions or curiosity, all are welcome.
>
> **When:** Lady Coffee, 97 N Coast Hwy 101, Encinitas
>
> **When:** First Wednesday of every month (Mar 4, June 3, July 1), 10 a.m. - 12 p.m.
>
> Come say hi. I will be easy to spot with my curly blonde hair and friendly smile ☺

Kevin Kalil, a former chief with the city who has completed several inspections of the dam and worked with the Division of Safety of Dams, doesn't think the dam is likely to fail.

"Like most dam's have inspected, the lower sections of the dam seem in good condition with little deterioration," he said. "I am not implying that the dam is in great shape, it is not. However, they have not provided any supportive detailed evidence to warrant dropping the level below 270 feet."

Increased water costs

Drawing down the water also means less water flowing through the county pipe more for their water.

The city has released water from the reservoir on 3 separate occasions since 2022, according to a list provided to Inewsource. It totaled over 15,300 acre-feet, or about 5.5 billion gallons of water.

Seth Gates, the assistant general manager of the Santa Fe Irrigation District, said that Lake Hodges was an "extremely important" source of water for the District and its customers. Lake Hodges provides the reservoir, it made up between 50% and 60% of the district's water.

Whenever it previously cost $250 or more each acre-foot, now that the district buys its water from the San Diego County Water Authority, it costs over $1,400. That means the district had to increase water rates.

Gates said the district tried to work with the city, but after being unable to resolve issues, it filed a lawsuit against the City and the San Dieguito Water District. It filed a lawsuit against the city of San Diego in 2024. It cites breach of contract, breach of local water, among other claims. Ferrier said the lawsuit is "ridiculous" and that the maintenance of Hodges Dam resulted in an unsatisfactory rating by the Division of Safety of Dams and a mandated restricted lower lake level.

San Diego's cumulative water releases from Lake Hodges since 2022

Year	Acre-feet released
June 2022	1,000
July 2022	1,000
Aug. 2022	1,000
Sept. 2022	2,000
Oct. 2022	2,000
Nov. 2022	2,000
Dec. 2022	2,000
Jan. 2023	2,000
Feb. 2023	2,000
March 2023	2,000
April 2023	2,000
May 2023	2,000
June 2023	2,000
Total	15,300

Source: Inewsource, data from San Diego County Water Authority

In the two years leading up to that lawsuit, the city had released over 5.3 billion gallons of the district's water into the ocean, equaling an approximate loss of $21 million or the equivalent of two years of water supply for the Santa Fe Irrigation and San Dieguito Water districts.

Gates said the city was negligent in its upkeep of the dam. He said a trial is slated for spring 2027.

The lower water levels also mean the San Diego County Water Authority cannot use a pump system it spent $18 million on. Lake Hodges is connected to the Olivenhain Reservoir through the Lake Hodges Pumped Storage Facility, which the county water authority completed in 2012. During low energy demand, water can be pumped from Lake Hodges to Olivenhain. But in order to use that pump, there needs to be 290 feet of water in Lake Hodges.

That means that the pump has not ability in recent years.

'Escalating and foreseeable risks'

The state regulators are interim director Eric Lodge (Ret.) (L) and Deputy Director Eric Lodge (R) (Ret.) (R) (Ret.) (R) (Ret.)

Pitch in $5/month.

TAGGED: Environment Infrastructure Politics San Diego

KATIE FUTTERMAN North County Community Reporter

katiefutterman@inewsource.org

Katie Futterman is a California Local News fellow who joined inewsource in September 2025 as a community reporter covering San Diego's North County. She fell in love with journalism when she discovered the power of the human voice in telling stories that can otherwise feel abstract and complex. In... **More by Katie Futterman**

inewsource is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Our tax ID is 27-0732786.

PO Box 34546
San Diego, CA 92163

619-500-3370
contact@inewsource.org

Send Us A Tip

Support Our Newsroom

ABOUT

Our Team
Awards
Board of Directors
Careers & Internships
Standards and Financials
Corrections and Clarifications

TOPICS

Immigration
Housing
Homelessness
Education
Infrastructure
Environment
Health

Our latest stories and investigations delivered straight to your inbox.

Email Address

Sign up

© 2026 inewsource Powered by Newspack

Privacy Policy