

Oklahoma Dam Safety Issues Rise

MORE AND MORE STATE COMMUNITIES LIE IN PATHS OF RISKY WATER BARRIERS
BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Some dams in [Oklahoma](#) do not have a state-required emergency plan that outlines possible dangers and steps to protect residents in a breach.

And dozens of dams have not been inspected within the state-mandated one-year period, according to a study.

Most of Oklahoma's dams are low-hazard dams and would cause no deaths and few economic problems if they failed. But increasingly communities are springing up downstream from some of them, placing people and property in their paths.

Oklahoma, like many other states, is struggling to keep up with inspections and maintenance because its dam safety program is understaffed, said [Brad Iarossi](#), chairman of the legislative committee for the [Association of State Dam Safety Officials](#).

"Oklahoma has always been one of the poster children for 'you need to do better,'" Iarossi said. It's up to a dam's owners, most of whom are private citizens, to have the structures inspected by an engineer, officials said.

In all, 934 of the state's 4,477 dams — about 21 percent — had not been checked during their most recent inspection cycle, December data from the [Oklahoma Water Resources Board](#) and the [Oklahoma Conservation Commission](#) show. Most were low-hazard dams that need to be checked once every five years.

In 2006, Oklahoma had three dam safety employees and had a budget of \$395,336, according to the Association of State Dam Safety Officials.

[North Carolina](#) and [Georgia](#), on the other hand, have a similar number of dams but have three to five times the number of employees and more than twice Oklahoma's budget.

"Oklahoma, in general, does not support infrastructure improvements," said [Dan Keithline](#) of the [Tulsa](#) engineering firm Craig and Keithline, which has inspected local dams.

How do we compare?

According to the [Association of State Dam Safety Officials](#), Oklahoma has the nation's second highest percentage of deficient high-hazard dams. Fifty-two percent of the state's potentially deadly dams need repair. Only [Delaware](#) has a higher percentage.

High-hazard dams are required to have emergency action plans. Forty-four of them do not.

A 64-foot-tall high-hazard dam on [Bellcow Lake](#) in [Lincoln County](#) stores some 41,300 acre feet of water but has no emergency plan. Neither does the 54-foot-tall high-hazard dam on the [North Canadian River](#) in [Pottawatomie County](#).