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Safety Strategies, Preparedness Examined During New Exchequer Dam Exercise

Merced Area and State Agencies Team Up As Federal Energy Commission Checks Action Plan

MERCED, Calif. – Representatives of state, regional and Merced County agencies were put to the test Wednesday in a simulated New Exchequer Dam emergency -- all in the interest of putting safety first. They passed the test.

"This type of exercise enhances the disaster-response capability of the entire county," said Michael Nation, Merced County Office of Emergency Services Coordinator.

The "Emergency Action Plan Functional Exercise," held at the Sequoia Inn in Merced, is required every five years by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), which licenses and inspects private, municipal and state hydroelectric projects like New Exchequer Dam.

Merced Irrigation District, owner and operator of New Exchequer, was the lead agency involved. A total of about 40 people took part in the exercise, which ran from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Other participating agencies included the Merced County Office of Emergency Services; the Merced County Sheriff's Department; the Mariposa County Office of Emergency Services (Mariposa County is home to New Exchequer Dam and its reservoir, Lake McClure); MID and Mariposa County parks officials; the California Highway Patrol; Caltrans; PG&E; and other county support agencies.

Representatives of the California Department of Water Resources' Division of Dam Safety participated via telephone. FERC officials were on hand to critique the Emergency Action Plan for New Exchequer Dam and put the various agency representatives through a high-stress, fully simulated dam emergency, according to Bob Mooneyham, New Exchequer Dam Project Manager for MID.

"This really takes teamwork among the various agencies to succeed," said Mooneyham. "It requires a coordinated effort and good communication right down the line. The goal is

being prepared so we can protect residents in the remote possibility that there is an actual emergency."

Mooneyham said the exercise went well and Merced Irrigation District's Emergency Action Plan (EAP) has met the FERC licensing requirements. "Cooperation among all the agencies was outstanding," he said.

An EAP is a formal document that identifies potential emergency conditions at a dam and specifies preplanned actions to be followed to minimize loss of life and property damage, particularly to downstream areas, according to FERC.

By simulating an emergency, the exercise is designed to ensure the various agencies responsible for public safety below the dam are all on the same page. It tests their evacuation plan for residents, even though the chances of a real dam emergency and such an evacuation are slight.

Mooneyham said there are several factors that contribute to the safety of New Exchequer Dam, a rock and earth structure that can hold back more than a million acre-feet of water, built in 1966 just behind the old concrete Exchequer Dam. The old dam still rests below the waters of Lake McClure and forms part of the lower face of the new, larger dam.

One safety factor for New Exchequer is this "double dam" layout. If there were problems with New Exchequer, there's a very good chance the old dam would hold back significant amounts of Merced River water. Also, rock and earth dam construction has a good safety record. Another safety factor is that the low areas along the river below the dam are relatively lightly populated.

The dam safety exercise participants set up shop in several rooms of the Sequoia Inn. In a real emergency, the dam operator would make the call that launched the various county and state agencies into action. "The main priority is to get the initial word to them," said Mooneyham.

After a simulated emergency call was made to exercise participants, they began to simulate execution of the evacuation plan and set up a simulated Merced and Mariposa County Office of Emergency Services "Emergency Operations Center."

In an actual emergency, the various agencies would focus on evacuating the vicinity of Lakes McClure and McSwain, then immediately downstream of the dam, Merced Falls and Snelling, said Mooneyham. The basic drill for residents in an actual emergency would be to immediately evacuate to higher ground.

A table-top exercise was held about a month ago to prepare for Wednesday's test. The various agencies participate in annual drills in the years between the major, five-year exercises.