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Engineers differ over safety of Lake O's dike

BY TYLER TREADWAY, Special to the Daily News

Thursday, May 11, 2006

FORT PIERCE - Is the dike surrounding Lake Okeechobee safe and sound or a disaster waiting to happen?

Members of the South Florida Water Management District's governing board heard both views at their meeting Wednesday at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Horticultural Research Laboratory in Fort Pierce.

Les Bromwell of Jupiter, principal engineer of Lakeland-based BCI Engineers & Scientists, which studied the dike at the board's request, said the earthen structure has serious flaws that make it a "grave and imminent danger." But Col. Robert Carpenter, commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers unit in charge of the dike, called language in BCI's report, released earlier this month, "cavalier and downright irresponsible."

Bromwell noted that the Herbert Hoover Dike was built in the 1930s with dredged material - "muck, silt, sand, soil and rock" - that's prone to seepage and internal erosion that "can cause collapse and release (lake) water."

The dikes, Bromwell said, are also susceptible to wave erosion during high winds and hurricanes.

Bromwell said the concrete "cut-off wall" the corps is building within the 143-mile-long dike, although an improvement, is not tall enough, deep enough or being built quickly enough. The \$302 million project is scheduled to be completed in 2020.

Bromwell recommended that the lake's level, currently a little higher than 13 feet, be dropped 2 feet and that communities around the lake update emergency action plans to "be prepared for (the dike's) failure."

Carpenter countered that the dike "is not in imminent threat of breaking. There are problems to deal with in the short term and in the future, problems that are being managed and solved."

Obviously upset, Carpenter said the report's comparison of the potential failure of the Okeechobee dike to the collapse of the New Orleans levees after Hurricane Katrina was "like comparing a Cessna to a 747."

Carpenter said the BCI report's "inflammatory" language only caused undue worry among people living near the dike.

"You can rest in your beds tonight," Carpenter said, apparently to both the board and the residents around Lake Okeechobee. "The dike has performed for 70 years, and the Corps of Engineers will ensure that it lasts for the next 70 years. We've got you covered; you have my word on it."

Despite the assurance, Clarence Anthony, mayor of South Bay on Lake Okeechobee's south shore, said his constituents aren't sleeping any easier.

"The (BCI) report is clear," Anthony said. "We have problems with the lake and the dike."

Anthony said that after Katrina, "my people asked if that could happen to us. The corps said not to be concerned; but ... we're afraid that it could happen to us, and over 8,000 homes would be destroyed if there was a catastrophe."

And Anthony didn't buy Carpenter's argument that money matters are slowing improvements to the dike, or that the \$10 billion price tag to bring the dike up to federal safety standard for dams was prohibitive.

"If these were \$10 (million) to \$50 million homes on the ocean facing erosion, we wouldn't be having this conversation," said Anthony, whose town is mostly black and low-income.

The board took no action on the matter, but Carol Wehle, the district executive director, said the staff would report next month on efforts to lobby Congress for money to speed up the dike rehab project and work with the corps and local emergency management agencies on updating evacuation criteria for areas around he lake.