

# Florida lawmakers push for Lake Okeechobee fixes

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WASHINGTON - The most important thing Congress can do to address the weakened levee surrounding Lake Okeechobee is to reclassify it as a dam, two Florida congressmen said Wednesday.

That one step would make the 140-mile-long barrier, now known as the Herbert Hoover Dike, immediately eligible for federal funds. The money would be used to strengthen portions of the barrier that are so compromised they could fail in a moderate hurricane.

"This isn't going to be a little break," said Rep. Mark Foley, a Republican whose congressional district encircles Lake Okeechobee to the north and west.

Foley described as "startling and frightening" a recently released report from the South Florida Water Management District that characterized the earth berm around the 730-square-mile lake as fragile.

On Tuesday, Gov. Jeb Bush and Florida emergency officials acknowledged the dike is in such bad shape that nearby communities should begin preparing for mass evacuations this hurricane season.

The developments prompted Foley and Rep. Alcee Hastings, a Democrat whose congressional district includes Lake Okeechobee's eastern and southern flanks, to urge Congress to get moving on a fix.

"We have a problem," Hastings said. "Every study suggests it's likely the dike can and will fail in a major storm."

For now, the solution rests in the Senate, the two congressmen said.

A \$4.1 billion water-resources bill awaiting action there could be amended to reclassify Lake Okeechobee's levee as a dam. Such legislation contains money for hundreds of flood control, navigation and other projects carried out by the Army Corps of Engineers.

The bill already contains \$39.5 million for Florida dam rehabilitation. To release those funds, it is critical that the Herbert Hoover Dike be re-classified as a dam, Foley and Hastings said.

Such a change is now in the hands of Sens. Mel Martinez and Bill Nelson. Neither could immediately be reached for comment.

Any money released to buttress the Herbert Hoover Dike wouldn't become available until well after the 2006 hurricane season ends.

The dike was constructed in stages to provide flood protection for surrounding agricultural and residential areas. Because it was intended to serve as a levee, retaining water during high rainfall periods, it was built to standards below those required of a dam.