

# **Jeb fears dike will break Hurricane would force evacuations from the Lake Okeechobee area**

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With hurricane season a month away, Gov. Jeb Bush and emergency planners said Tuesday the dike around Lake Okeechobee is in such bad shape that mass evacuations of the area will be necessary for any hurricane from any direction.

"It's going to create a significant hardship for people, but it is the only option we have," Bush said at a media briefing in Tallahassee with state and federal disaster officials.

A study funded by the South Florida Water Management District warns that dikes, especially older ones on the south side of the lake, are likely to fail under the pressure of even a mild hurricane.

Bush talked about the dike Tuesday with federal Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff and Federal Emergency Management Agency head R. David Paulison, who were in Tallahassee to discuss hurricane preparedness.

At the meeting, the governor said he has "been probing politely." He has asked the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which oversees the dikes, to conduct daily inspections of the eroded earthen dam.

"We want them to recognize vigilance is really important," Bush said.

He described a return letter from Corps Assistant Secretary John Paul Woodley as positive.

"Woodley responded in 24 hours, saying they're on it," Bush said.

The report from the water district's study states that the Herbert Hoover Dike has a "50/50 chance of failure within the next four years" and that "certain formations that underlie the dike, and portions of the material that comprise it, bear a striking resemblance to Swiss cheese."

Bush said he has sent his own disaster preparedness chief to communities around the lake to update them on the situation and evacuation procedures.

## **Emergency Response**

Director Craig Fugate said FEMA has agreed to help Florida develop computer models to better predict hurricane threats to the dike.

Because emergency officials don't know what kind of hurricane might breach the dam, the state is preparing to evacuate many rural communities around the lake. Residents would be sent as far north as Orlando to steer clear of simultaneous coastal evacuations.

Bush said the water district hired engineers to examine the dike after it was damaged during Hurricane Wilma last October.

If the dike were to break in a hurricane, engineers said, the breach would trigger massive floods that would hurt Big Cypress and the Everglades.

The flooding also would contaminate southern Florida's drinking water supply and flood thousands of acres of farmland.

The cost of such damage would be in the tens of billions of dollars.

The dike was built to prevent a recurrence of 1928 when about 2,500 people died when Lake Okeechobee flooded surrounding communities after a hurricane.

But Corps officials said the dike is in better shape than that.

"Everybody's entitled to their opinions," said Steve Duba, chief of the Corps' Jacksonville engineering division. "We're going to look at their conclusions, some of the language in them. I'd not have chosen some of the words they used.

"There is risk. There is a hazard under certain conditions. We've never tried to hide that. And we've tried hard to make sure it doesn't become a hazard."

The Corps has made repairs to the dike over the years to keep it from failing, Duba said.

The study prompted Bush to ask the Corps to pursue nine measures, including "daily inspections of the dike to ensure potential problems are identified early."

Because threats to the dike come with high water levels, when levels are low, daily inspections are not necessary, Duba said.

When lake levels are 14.5 feet or less, inspections are made every 90 days - the lake was 13.41 feet Tuesday. Daily inspections begin when the lake is at least 17 feet.

Most of the information in the report was supplied by the Corps, Duba said.

"There are no big revelations in the report," he said. "It's tough to surprise us in a big way. We plan to analyze and take into consideration their recommendations."

At 13.41 feet, the lake is in good shape going into the hurricane season, Duba said. Hurricane season begins June 1.

"At this time of year, I feel pretty good about that," he said. "It's better than it has been the past couple of years."

Federal officials said they would offer limited assistance.

"Our role is not to repair the dikes," Chertoff said. "Our role is to step in if something happens."