

No concerns about Lake O dike

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Originally posted on August 28, 2006

With Tropical Storm Ernesto still sitting on eastern Cuba Monday afternoon, water managers were not worried about the storm's impact to Lake Okeechobee and the Herbert Hoover Dike.

The latest National Hurricane Center forecast showed Ernesto passing just east of the lake, possibly as a Category 1 hurricane.

The forecast calls for the storm to pour up to 7.5 on South Florida.

With lake levels at 12 feet, that amount of rainfall would raise the lake to 14 feet; water managers begin worrying about damage to the dike when water levels reach 18 feet.

"There is little chance of this event causing any problems at all with the lake and dike," said Richard Bonner, Deputy District Engineer for Project Management, US Army Corps of Engineers. "But we'll keep watching it. The forecast has already changed four or five times.

"The worst thing that could happen is if it just comes and stalls and stays there, and rains and rains and rains."

At this point, Bonner didn't think any releases will need to be made from the lake down the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers.

In April, , a study by a panel of engineers stated that "the current condition of the Herbert Hoover Dike poses a grave and imminent danger to the people and environment of South Florida," and that the dike has a 50/50 chance of failure over the next four years.

Construction projects have the dike in good shape, Bonner said.

If Ernesto passes east of the lake, its counter-clockwise winds could cause some erosion to the south side of the dike.

"We can handle quite a bit of erosion," Bonner said.

Army Corps crews will be ready for any damage to the dike, said Jim Jeffords, chief of operations for the Jacksonville District.

"We've got 45,000 tons of breach rock, good-size rock, 4 feet across, scattered in the southeast corner of the dike to use in a breach situation," he said. "We also have 1,000 26,000-pound sandbags that we pick up with a helicopter. And we have dozers, front end loaders and back hoes ready."