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DWR Requests Changes to US Army Corps Snake Creek Embankment Dam Safety Modification Study

BISMARCK - The North Dakota Department of Water Resources (DWR) has provided comments to the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) regarding the USACE's Dam Safety Modification Study for the Snake Creek Embankment.

The Snake Creek Embankment divides Lake Sakakawea and Lake Audubon, which are both man-made reservoirs. Highway 83 sits atop the embankment. The USACE owns and manages the structure. The Snake Creek Embankment is part of the Garrison Diversion Unit project that was authorized by Congress in 1965 – which was preceded by completion of Garrison Dam in 1956.

Water levels on Lake Sakakawea can fluctuate with different climate conditions while Lake Audubon levels are maintained in a two-foot range by pumping water from Lake Sakakawea. A large water level difference can develop between the lakes when significant droughts lower Lake Sakakawea. This water level difference can lead to excess pressure on the embankment, which could compromise the embankment's stability if there is no intervention.

In its most recent Dam Safety Modification Study, the USACE proposed solving this problem through an operational measure that would limit the water level difference between the two lakes. The USACE's draft report and recommended plan are based on the perspective of potential embankment or dam failure that could result in a low-potential loss of life - rather than the breadth of economic and ecosystem impacts associated with the entire Garrison Diversion Unit and Snake Creek Embankment – Lake Audubon Project. This solution is being proposed in place of a structural repair of problem areas in the embankment.

DWR stated in its comments that the USACE's operational-only measure causes another problem. The USACE is obligated to keep Lake Audubon at levels that allow water to be diverted from Lake Audubon for multiple beneficial purposes. The diverted water is used to support the state's largest industry, agriculture, by providing water to the McClusky Canal. The diverted water also supports municipal, rural and industrial water supplies; fish and wildlife; recreation; and other project purposes. A Lake Audubon water level that is unreliable and could be drawn down during droughts is a serious economic risk to the state of North Dakota.

DWR Director, Andrea Travnicek, testified on May 16, 2023, at the United States Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works' subcommittee on transportation and infrastructure.

"Sound, reliable, infrastructure is a top priority for the state and local project sponsors," Travnicek said. "It is imperative that the Corps look at water management from a holistic approach—

especially as it relates to all project purposes and directives that have been authorized by Congress.”

Travnicek’s testimony and the full hearing can be viewed [here](#).

As of May 2023, federal, state and local partners have already committed over \$500 million to projects dependent on the embankment’s stability to put Missouri River system water to beneficial use. These projects will eventually supply 60 percent of North Dakota’s citizens with potable water.

DWR is urging the USACE to take into consideration all authorized purposes in their analysis and to choose a structural fix of the Snake Creek Embankment to ensure its reliability in all climate conditions. DWR’s full statement to the USACE can be found [here](#).

For More Information Contact:

Lee Greuel at imgreuel@nd.gov | (701) 328-2782

Doug Burgum, *Governor*

Andrea Travnicek, Ph.D., Water Resources Director

1200 Memorial Hwy. | Bismarck, ND 58504
PHONE: (701) 328-2750 | FAX: (701) 328-3696 | E-MAIL: dwr@nd.gov

www.dwr.nd.gov