

Dam Safety in the (Somewhat) United States

DEL SHANNON, ASI Constructors, Pueblo, Colorado, USA

SYNOPSIS. Dam safety laws for the more than 82,000 dams within the United States are as varied as the states and regions and people of our country. The individual autonomy of states, and their desire to establish their own rule of law, is the driving force behind nearly every aspect of life in the US, including dam safety. Currently, there is no federal law requiring individual states to have dam safety laws. One state, Alabama, has rebuffed efforts to establish these laws and currently has no formal dam safety laws. Even within the federal government there is disagreement with adopting standard dam safety laws. The US Army Corps of Engineers, National Resource Conservation Service, Bureau of Reclamation, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and Federal Energy Regulatory Commission all have their own unique dam safety standards. Determining regulation for an individual dam is a question of ownership, location, and use.

Dam safety regulation can create many conflicting issues. For example, a dam that provides both raw water supply and generates hydropower is regulated by both the individual state and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. With 49 states having individual dam safety laws, and the FERC having its own rules, there are 49 different scenarios that must be met for these types of dams. This can be a daunting challenge for any owner or consulting engineer.

This paper will look back at the history of dam safety rules and regulations within the US, discuss its current state, and provide recommendations for its continued improvement.