

Many of Oregon's dams in dangerous condition

By SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN
Capital Press

NEWPORT — People in blazers and strapped-on boots waded through the dark intake tunnel of a dam, flashlights in hand, stirring rust-colored silt into the water. Spiders and large black crickets scurried across the wet walls. And water trickled from seepage holes — vulnerable breakage points inside the tunnel.

“This is the stuff nightmares are made of,” said Jenny Dresler, grassroots director of the Public Affairs Council.

The city of Newport's engineer was leading about a dozen politicians, community leaders and water experts underground into the intake of Oregon's second most dangerous dam — Big Creek Dam No. 2 — last week in Newport.

Gov. Kate Brown approved \$4 million for Newport's dam project Aug. 9, but the money won't be available until 2021 and the danger is far from over.

Across Oregon, water infrastructure is crumbling, funding is scarce and the disconnect between bureaucrats and communities has exacerbated tensions over water. But small Oregon communities like Newport are showing that citizen activism can make a difference.

The two Newport reservoirs, behind Big Creek Dam No. 1 (Lower) and Big Creek Dam No. 2 (Upper), are the



Racquel Rancier of the Oregon Water Resources Department, left, takes a photo of a seepage hole inside the Big Creek dam intake while Rep. David Gomberg, D-Neotsu, right, shines his flashlight on the vulnerable area.

city's sole water supply, and the secondary water source for surrounding areas.

According to Tim Gross, the city of Newport's public works director and city engineer, when these dams collapse, they'll kill everyone and destroy everything in their path. Imagine rushing water at a rate of 285 average-sized swimming pools per second — and that's just from the upper dam.

The Oregon Coast lies near the Cascadia Subduction Zone, but Gross said it wouldn't require the Big One for these dams to collapse. To fail, the dams need an earth-

quake of only 3.0 or greater on the Richter Scale.

Constructed in 1951 and 1968, respectively, the lower and upper dams are crumbling, and the soil underneath is at risk of liquefying.

Although Gross has been pushing for a decade for removal of the old dams and construction of a new one, the soils under the dams reached dangerous levels this year.

Oregon has 75 high-hazard dams, which means if the dams fail, they will result in significant damage and loss of life. Of that number, nine are in poor condition and seven in unsatisfactory con-

dition, according to Stephanie Prybyl, water policy analyst at Oregon Water Resources Department.

Funding is scarce. Getting a federal dam grant is highly competitive, and the pool of money is meager. According to Tia Cavender, Newport's grants consultant of record, the dam project in Newport alone will cost up to \$80 million. But for the current fiscal year, FEMA's National Dam Rehabilitation Program has a grant pool of only \$10 million — for the entire U.S.

Cavender said dam owners must apply for small grants — local, state and federal — to

raise the money that's needed, and even then, it won't be enough.

To build the dams in Newport, said Gross, the city will ultimately have to tax its residents to make up for whatever portion isn't funded.

“This small community can't afford much,” said Gross. “If the tax is too high, they'll leave.”

The timeline, said Cavender, also poses a challenge. Grant money often comes with strings attached and specific timeline requirements, and the grants can conflict with one another.

Funding is even more limited for private dam owners, such as farmers who own small reservoirs, according to April Snell, executive director of the Water Resources Congress.

But communities are rallying together to make change happen.

After the 2019 legislative session, Brown said Aug. 4 she might veto the \$4 million appropriation in House Bill 5050 to pay for the Big Creek Dams project.

Newport rallied to fight for its water supply.

“Coastal Oregonians are tough people,” said Sen. Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay. “They usually get ignored in the legislature, and it's their resilience that's made the difference. It's the rural folks, the fishermen's wives and the local groups that have banded together to fight

for this dam project.”

Community members flooded Brown's office with calls, emails and letters. Roblan, Rep. David Gonberg, D-Neotsu, and others met with the governor, attempting to change her mind.

On Aug. 9, Brown did an about-face and decided not to veto the funding.

Mike Harryman, resiliency officer for Brown's office, was on the tour at Big Creek Dam No. 2 on Tuesday.

“It's a good thing the governor didn't veto the funding,” said Harryman, “or else you'd all be stringing me upside-down by my boots inside the dam.”

Racquel Rancier, water policy analyst at the Oregon Water Resources Department, said the funding is a victory for Newport, but Oregon's water infrastructure still has a long way to go.

“We've got to celebrate the little victories,” she said.

As the group slogged out of the wet dam intake tunnel, they joked about which of them should get left behind to cover up the constantly flowing seepage holes, like the fable of the little Dutch boy who put his finger in a dike to save Holland.

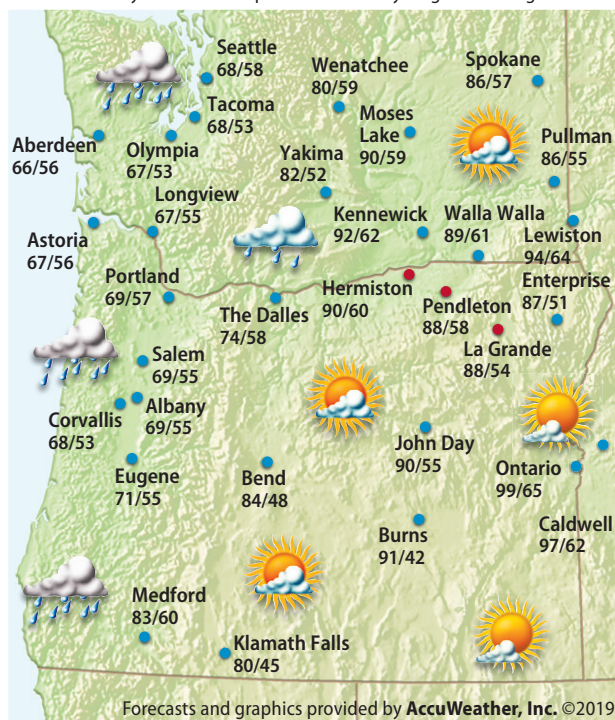
“It's too bad it's not that simple,” said Roblan. He glanced sideways at the dam, an uneasy expression on his face. “Let's get out of here.”

Forecast for Pendleton Area

TODAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
Partly sunny	Beautiful with clouds and sun	Mostly sunny and pleasant	Mostly sunny and pleasant	Nice with plenty of sunshine
88° 58°	80° 53°	86° 63°	84° 58°	82° 53°
PENDLETON TEMPERATURE FORECAST				
90° 60°	83° 53°	88° 65°	87° 59°	86° 56°
HERMISTON TEMPERATURE FORECAST				

OREGON FORECAST

Shown is today's weather. Temperatures are today's highs and tonight's lows.



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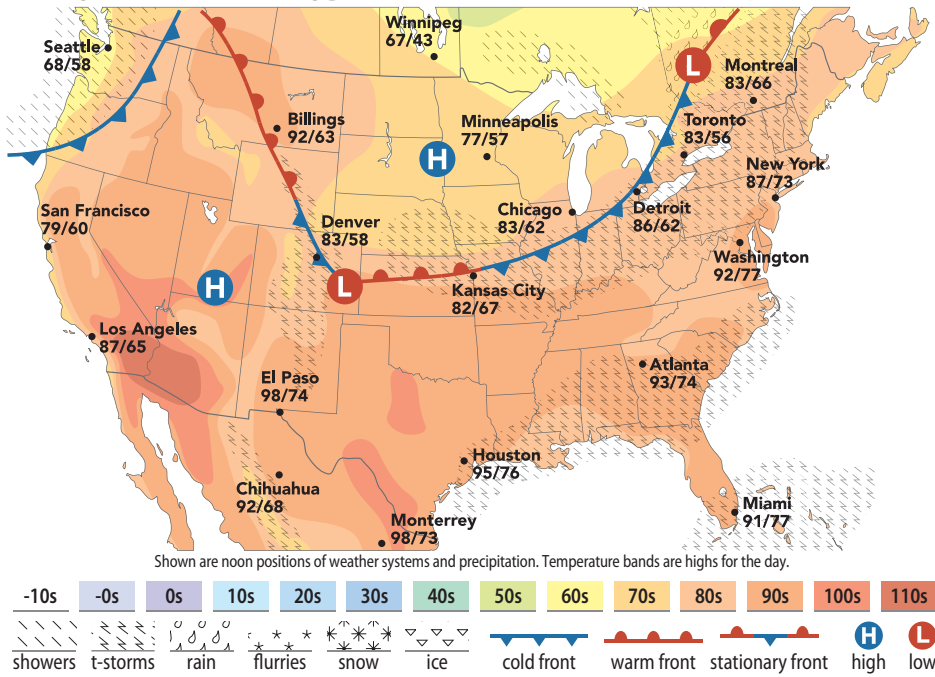
PENDLETON through 3 p.m. yest.		
TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	94°	56°
Normals	86°	57°
Records	106° (1897)	38° (1916)
PRECIPITATION		
24 hours ending 3 p.m.	0.00"	
Month to date	0.10"	
Normal month to date	0.27"	
Year to date	9.71"	
Last year to date	6.49"	
Normal year to date	8.22"	
HERMISTON through 3 p.m. yest.		
TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	93°	55°
Normals	87°	57°
Records	105° (2009)	38° (1929)
PRECIPITATION		
24 hours ending 3 p.m.	0.00"	
Month to date	0.05"	
Normal month to date	0.13"	
Year to date	4.61"	
Last year to date	5.13"	
Normal year to date	6.05"	
WINDS (in mph)		
Today	Thu.	
Boardman WSW 8-16	SW 6-12	
Pendleton W 8-16	W 7-14	
SUN AND MOON		
Sunrise today	6:02 a.m.	
Sunset tonight	7:54 p.m.	
Moonrise today	10:55 p.m.	
Moonset today	12:00 p.m.	
Last	New	First
Aug 23	Aug 30	Sep 5
		Full
		Sep 13

NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)

High 114° in Thermal, Calif. Low 30° in Stanley, Idaho

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



County pays more than \$18K for five-month administrative leave

By SEAN HART
EO Media Group

JOHN DAY — A Grant County employee has been getting paid not to go to work for five months now.

Grant County Sheriff's Office Deputy Abigail Mobley is still employed and being paid by the county, but her last day in the office was Feb. 4, according to records obtained by the *Eagle*.

From Feb. 5 through March 15, she used a combination of vacation, sick and comp hours she had accrued.

After two scheduled days off, she was placed on paid administrative leave March 18 and has remained on it through July, the last time card available.

From mid-March through July, Grant County has paid her \$16,416 in wages. During that time, she also accrued 10 hours of vacation and eight hours of sick leave per month, costing an additional \$1,768.

Each additional month she is on administrative leave will

cost county taxpayers about \$4,200.

These figures only include wages and accruals, not other benefits such as health care.

Her husband, Undersheriff Zach Mobley, was also placed on paid administrative leave March 18 after two scheduled days off.

His March time card shows six days of administrative leave until the time card ends March 25.

On his April time card, however, nothing is filled in indicating whether the time was actually worked or administrative leave.

According to Dominic Carollo, an attorney representing Grant County and the sheriff's office in response to a public records request by the *Blue Mountain Eagle*, Zach Mobley was back “actively employed” as of April 25, though Carollo refused to provide the actual dates Zach Mobley was on leave.

Zach Mobley earns a salary of \$5,123 per month, so each day of leave cost

about \$170.

In response to the *Eagle's* initial records request April 5, Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer said the records may be exempt from disclosure under state statutes that shield information about a “personnel investigation of a public safety employee” and “investigatory information compiled for criminal law purposes.”

However, neither exemption applies if “the public interest requires disclosure in the particular instance.”

Palmer announced his intention to resign as sheriff Aug. 14.

The *Eagle* continues to pursue its records request for other public documents to explain the situation.

In April, county officials declined to comment because it was a personnel issue.

Abigail Mobley, Zach Mobley, Palmer and the members of the Grant County Court did not respond to emailed requests for comment on Friday afternoon.

BRIEFLY

Portland Public Schools nearly scammed out of \$2.9M

PORTLAND — District officials say Portland Public Schools was bilked for \$2.9 million when a fraudster posing as one of the district's construction contractors hoodwinked employees into green-lighting the payment.

The *Oregonian/OregonLive* reported Deputy Superintendent for Business Operations Claire Hertz says the swindle was caught while the millions were still in the fraudster's bank account, and the money should be returned to the district's Wells Fargo account in the next few days.

A letter to district parents from Superintendent Guadalupe Guerrero says two employees who approved the payment were put on paid administrative leave.

The fraudulent transfer was discovered Friday, and Hertz said the district's money managers must now attend a mandatory training on fraud prevention scheduled for Tuesday.

She also said no one at the district will be allowed to authorize payments until after the training.

Man drowns at Crater Lake

CRATER LAKE — Authorities say a man drowned after jumping off a rock cliff into Crater Lake.

The National Park Service says the unidentified 27-year-old jumped at Cleetwood Cove around 4:40 p.m. Sunday, and did not resurface.

Crater Lake National Park spokeswoman Marsha McCabe says the cliff the man had jumped from was about 25 feet high.

McCabe says the cliff known as “Jumping Rock” is a popular recreation spot and was not a prohibited area for jumping.

She says officials have not yet determined exactly why the man drowned.

During the summer, the surface of the lake warms up to about 60 degrees Fahrenheit, but the average temperature of the lake is around 38 degrees Fahrenheit.

Swimming is only allowed in the area around Cleetwood Cove and along the shore of Wizard Island.

— Associated Press

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