

Teton Dam Failure demands action

On June 11, 1976, Reclamation formed an Independent Review Panel to investigate the Teton Dam failure. The site was excavated to assess geological and engineering factors. Results from the panel concluded that changes in standards were needed for dam design and management of dam construction.



Independent Review



Major oversight in a tough location

While the design followed standard Reclamation practices, it didn't fully account for the difficult geology at Teton. The volcanic rock was highly fractured and allowed water to move unpredictably. The fill materials used were prone to erosion, especially when placed next to jointed rock. The grout curtain didn't seal the foundation effectively, and there wasn't enough instrumentation to monitor conditions. Construction delays and limited data didn't help. In the end, the dam couldn't handle the stresses—and better planning for the site's unique conditions might have made the difference.

In addition to the Teton Dam failure, three major non-Reclamation dams failed in the 1970s: Pittston Coal Company Dam in West Virginia, Laurel Run Dam in Pennsylvania, and the Kelly Barnes Dam in Georgia. All resulted in fatalities.

The series of dam failures prompted President Jimmy Carter in 1977 to direct a review of all Federal dam safety programs and create an interagency committee to improve the effectiveness of government programs.

Congress passed the Safety of Dams Act on Nov. 2, 1978.

The Reclamation Safety of Dams Act of 1978, as amended, authorized the Secretary of the Interior to construct, restore, operate, and maintain new or modified features at existing Reclamation dams for Safety of Dams purposes. It also authorized Reclamation dam safety oversight at specific non-Reclamation dams.

