Dam Seepage Models - Tool, Rules & Guidance (From a Regulatory Perspective)

Michele Lemieux, P.E., Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation

Engineers often propose a seepage model as part of a dam evaluation. After all, they are fun to work on and the colorful output looks great in a report. However, the goal of a seepage model is often not well-defined, and the model output is nothing more than an expensive, pretty picture in an appendix without much insight into the dam. Often, the information needed can be determined by a careful review of the piezometric data. Often, the dam owners don't know what questions to ask of their engineers when a seepage model is proposed. Often, the regulatory agency can't afford the software required to provide careful review and evaluation of a submitted model. Often, a 2-dimensional model just flat out wont work for the situation at hand. Often, there is simply not enough information to justify the expense of developing a model. Often, the modeler underestimates the billable hours it takes. Oftenâ€¦. Oftenâ€¦. Nonetheless, seepage modeling can be the secret to understanding gradients and flow through a dam and often provide key information needed to plot a path forward. So, what things should regulators and dam owners consider when reviewing an engineering proposal that involves a seepage model? What should engineers consider when proposing a seepage model to a dam owner/regulator? What options do regulatory agencies have when they believe a seepage model will assist them with a regulatory decision? This presentation and associated paper will discuss the following: 1.Rules of thumb and guidance to help with the decision of whether to pursue a seepage model. 2. Cautions and advice to avoid the modelling effort from becoming an expensive time sink. 3. A basic seepage modeling software program produced by GeoSlope International, Ltd. that the Montana Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation has found to be an excellent cost-effective aid for the state dam safety regulator. Several case studies will be presented as supporting documentation.