Recent Advancements in California’s Dam Safety Program

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The California Division of Safety of Dams (DSOD) has been safeguarding life and protecting properties from dam failures for more than 90 years. The California Dam Safety Program has continually evolved and expanded to meet and exceed industry best practices for public safety. Since 2017, the California Dam Safety Program (Program) has undergone major transformations in its organizational management in order to meet expanded responsibilities under short timeframes that were directed by California’s Governor to bolster dam safety and increase transparency. These directives led to numerous legislative actions that have been adopted in law. As a result, there has been heightened awareness of California’s Dam Safety Program by stakeholders and the public. Beginning in 2017, through governor-directed initiatives and legislative actions enacted into law, DSOD has rapidly initiated major efforts to advance dam safety in California through the comprehensive review of large spillways, independent review and approval of inundation map for higher hazard dams and their critical appurtenant structures, formalization of the frequency of annual dam inspections and gate/value operations, and implementation of risk informed decision making. To support these and other programmatic activities under DSOD’s authority for dam safety, methods used to allocate annual dam fees paid by owners and additional enforcement authority were enacted into law. In alignment with the public’s heightened awareness of dam safety, DSOD increased its data sharing efforts with the public with respect to the condition and hazard potential of dams, inundated areas that may result from a sunny day dam failure, and dam owners’ plans to remediate dams with reservoir restrictions. This paper provides an overview of DSOD’s implementation of these newly initiated dam safety enhancements for public safety as well as the challenges and successes faced by DSOD to implement these major initiatives given short deadlines, limited resources, and competing priorities.