



City of Johnstown Emergency Management Agency

Dam Failures



Dam failures pose a serious threat to many communities located downstream from major dams. The worst dam failure to occur in the state resulted in the Johnstown flood of 1889, which claimed 2,100 lives. Other dam failures included: Jeanette in Westmoreland County in 1903 resulting in the loss of 23 lives; Austin in Potter County in 1911 resulting in the loss of 77 lives, and the Johnstown area of Cambria County in 1977 when seven dams failed contributing to the 85 lives lost during a major flood.

Livingston, TX, September 26, 2005 -- Livingston Dam, weakened by rain from Hurricane Rita, is forced to open gates to prevent a major failure. Releasing pressure causes some flooding downstream, but prevents a major catastrophe. (FEMA)

Dam Safety

There are about 80,000 dams in the United States today, the majority of which are privately owned. Other owners are state and local authorities, public utilities, and federal agencies. The benefits of dams are numerous: they provide water for drinking, navigation, and agricultural irrigation. Dams also provide hydroelectric power and create lakes for fishing and recreation. Most important, dams save lives by preventing or reducing floods.

If dams have many benefits, they also can pose a risk to communities if not designed, operated, and maintained properly. In the event of a dam failure, the energy of the water stored behind even a small dam is capable of causing loss of life and great property damage if there are people downstream of the dam. The National Dam Safety Program is dedicated to protecting the lives of American citizens and their property from the risks associated with the development, operation, and maintenance of America's dams.

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[Information on Dam Failures](#)
[Before Dam Failures](#)
[During a Dam Failure / Flood](#)
[After a Dam Failure / Flood](#)