



# USSD Position Statement

## National Investment in US Dam and Levee Safety

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### Summary of USSD Position

Dams and levees are essential for U.S. safety and economic stability, protecting communities and supporting development. With over 90,000 dams and 30,000 miles of levees, their maintenance is crucial. Recent funding for infrastructure improvements is at risk, but cutting it could lead to disasters and higher costs. Historical failures like the Teton Dam collapse highlight the need for robust safety programs. Agencies like the USACE and FERC have reduced failures through proactive regulation. Continued investment is essential for economic growth, community resilience, and disaster prevention.

### Background on the Issue

Dams and levees are foundational to the safety, economy, and sustainability of communities across the United States. There are over 90,000 dams listed in the National Inventory of Dams (NID) with almost 70% regulated by states. Over 15,000 of these dams are classified as high-hazard potential because of the downstream communities at risk in the event of a failure, with many more becoming high hazard as development expands into vulnerable areas. These vital structures serve quietly and reliably in the background—working day and night to protect lives and property, support economic development, and enhance the natural and built environments. The safety of these dams is paramount, as their failure could result in catastrophic loss of life and property.

Levees, which are equally important, protect vast areas of land from flooding. The National Levee Database indicates that there are approximately 30,000 miles of levees in the U.S. Many of these levees were constructed decades ago and require substantial investment to ensure their resilience and adaptive capacity in withstanding modern flood and seismic hazards.

Recently, Congress allocated significant funds towards improving the nation's dam and levee infrastructure. These investments are now at risk of being cut, threatening the progress made towards ensuring the safety and reliability of these critical structures. It is imperative that these funds remain intact to prevent future disasters and maintain the integrity of our infrastructure.

Each dam is uniquely designed and maintained to serve a range of public and environmental purposes—from reducing flood risk and supporting water supply, to enabling navigation, hydropower, recreation, mining, and habitat protection. These structures, together with levees, form the backbone of our nation's water infrastructure. Their presence allows communities to thrive in places that would otherwise be vulnerable to flood disasters or lack critical water resources. The need for strong, well-regulated dam and levee systems is not theoretical—it is written into our history.

In the 20th century, catastrophic failures such as the Teton Dam collapse in Idaho (1976) and the St. Francis Dam failure in California (1928) resulted in the tragic loss of hundreds of lives and millions of dollars in damages. These events, among others, served as wake-up calls and catalyzed the development



of modern dam safety programs and federal oversight mechanisms. Since then, regulatory efforts by agencies like the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Bureau of Reclamation, and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), in concert with state and local authorities, have led to a remarkable decline in the frequency and severity of dam failures.

Consider also the events that occurred nearly 20 years ago: the levee failures in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the deadly Kaloko Dam failure in Hawaii in 2006 remind us that lapses in oversight or underinvestment can be devastating. Yet the progress made since these events underscores how robust dam safety programs, proactive regulation, investment in inspection and rehabilitation, and interagency collaboration can save lives and safeguard public resources. According to the Association of State Dam Safety Officials (ASDSO), the number of reported dam failures in the U.S. has steadily declined over the past several decades—even as the average age of our dams increases—thanks in large part to continued public and private sector investment in safety improvements.

The progress made in recent decades is a direct result of dedicated funding, proactive regulation, and interagency cooperation. This stands as a testament to the effectiveness of our government agencies. Through strategic planning, collaboration, and policy implementation, they have demonstrated how coordinated efforts can drive impactful changes. Their commitment to safeguarding public welfare, managing resources efficiently, fiscal prudence, and preventing disasters reflects the very essence of responsible governance.

The United States Society on Dams (USSD) exists to advance technical excellence and support best practices in dam and levee design, construction, operation, and regulation. This work would not be possible without our federal partners. Agencies like Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), and the Bureau of Reclamation play essential roles in ensuring that dams and levees are safe, resilient, and equipped to meet modern challenges—especially with larger flood and earthquake hazards, aging infrastructure, and increasing development around these structures adding new layers of complexity.

Dam and levee safety is more than maintaining infrastructure—it's about protecting lives, strengthening communities, and ensuring long-term resilience. We must continue the progress that's been made. Cutting investment in dam and levee infrastructure would not only put lives at risk but also create greater financial burdens to taxpayers in the aftermath of preventable disasters. By maintaining and strengthening funding for these programs, we not only protect lives but also drive economic growth, foster community development, support job creation, attract businesses, and build a more resilient nation capable of facing future challenges.

In conclusion, continued and sustained investment in dam and levee infrastructure is fiscally responsible. More importantly, it ensures the health, safety, and well-being of the public. Proactive strategies lead to greater efficiency and cost savings, rather than reactive crisis management. Preventive maintenance, inspections, and upgrades for our nation's dams and levees cost a fraction of what a failure can incur—in both lives and dollars. The progress our nation has made is proof that proactive investment works, reducing risks and safeguarding essential resources. As we look ahead, ongoing commitment to these programs is not only financially prudent but also serves as a moral imperative in securing a reliable, safer, more resilient, and prosperous future for all.