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State dam safety program under scrutiny after break

Watchdogs and engineers question sufficiency of DEC agency's funding, staffing

By **MATT PACENZA**, Staff writer
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FORT ANN -- Raphael Colb watched Saturday night as the trickling stream that winds through his 35 acres became a shrieking river within 10 feet of his home.

After a newly built dam on Hadlock Pond burst that gorgeous summer evening, up to 1 billion gallons of water tore through his neighborhood.

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"We have pieces of boats hanging from trees 30 feet up in the middle of the woods," Colb said. "It changed the landscape completely. Thank God no one was hurt. Thank God I still have my home."

One week after the Hadlock dam ruptured, sparing lives but destroying four homes and damaging a dozen others, engineers and state officials are trying to figure out what happened.

Interviews with dam experts and Hadlock Pond residents suggest the problem was a design flaw or construction problem in the face of the 450-foot-long, 35-foot-high earth embankment dam. A weak spot became a fissure that sprung a leak and carved a hole, ultimately tearing a 65-foot-wide chasm in the face of the dam.

The origin of that problem may not be known for weeks or even months. But watchdog groups and available data raise serious questions about insufficient resources at the dam safety unit of the Department of Environmental Conservation, the state agency charged with making sure thousands of dams in New York remain safe.

By the numbers, New York does not have a robust dam safety program, according to a 2004 state-by-state comparison by the Association of Dam Safety Officials.

The DEC has five full-time members in its dam safety unit. They are charged with keeping an eye on 5,021 dams statewide, a ratio of 947 dams for every employee. The national average is 260 dams for every dam safety employee. New York ranks 43rd out of 50 states by that measure.

It also spends less on dam safety than other states do. The total budget of \$746,000 works out to \$149 for every dam in the state. The national average is \$318.

Those numbers provide a rough indicator of the quality of a state's program, said Meg Galloway, a safety engineer with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

"A well-funded, well-staffed dam safety program will be a safer program," said Galloway, president of the Association of State Dam Safety Officials.

beneath facades A dam break conjures images of an old, crumbling structure.

In fact, new dams fail frequently.

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Precise numbers aren't available, but construction or design flaws are among four principal causes of dam collapses, experts say, along with catastrophic weather, a structure's age and operator error, as when someone fails to open a spillway.

One of the most famous dam collapses in U.S. history happened when the new Teton Dam in Idaho failed just as its reservoir was being filled. The 1976 incident killed 14 people and caused nearly \$1 billion in damage.

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