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6/9/11 Is Ft. Peck Dam in Danger of Collapse, Again?

By [Bismarckman](#) | Posted June 9, 2011 | Bismarck, North Dakota

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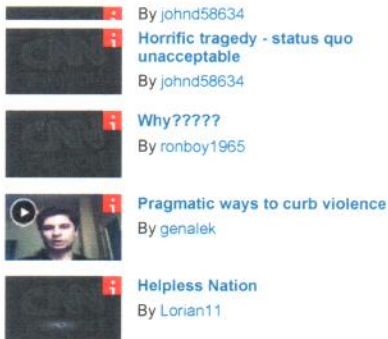
What Bernard Shanks Really Meant When He Wrote about the "Looming Missouri Dam Flood"

By Mark Armstrong

6/9/2011

"I've created quite a stir with my article, haven't I?," were the first words, after introductions, when Dr. Bernard Shanks returned my telephone call today. His article in "St. Louis Today", which bills itself as "The #1 St. Louis" website, has indeed created a stir. If you haven't read it, click here first, <http://tinyurl.com/6a34mr6>. He claims that Ft Peck is the weak link in the chain of dams from Montana to just north of Nebraska. If it fails, then the other five could collapse as well, leaving an unimaginable wake of destruction from Montana to the Gulf Coast. The lead of this article states, "There is very real threat of a flood that will leave St. Louis in chest-high water."

Attachment 5



The facts speak for themselves, Ft. Peck dam in Montana, above Garrison dam here in North Dakota, is the oldest dam in the system, finished in 1940. It is the largest hydraulically filled dam in the U.S. Ft. Peck is scheduled to crank out almost double its record outflow that it pumped out back in 1975 (from 35,000 cubic feet per second to 60,000 this week) and might be forced into higher releases if there are big rain events in the northeastern plains of Montana. Construction on the dam began in 1933 as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's push to put America back to work during the depression. At one time over ten thousand workers poured into remote northeastern Montana to work on the project. As it was nearing completion, on September 22, 1938, a portion of its massive side, slumped and then collapsed (see photo), killing eight construction workers, leaving six of them permanently entombed in the dam.

"I have studied all the literature on dam failures from around the world for more than 40 years and the possibility of failure at Ft. Peck is greater than of any of the six Missouri river dams," said Shanks. The failure rate is one of statistics, much like the chance of having a flood if you live in the 100 or 500 year flood plain, with one difference: The older a dam gets, the more likely it will fail. Dams don't last forever. Their original design called for 50-100 years of life. Parts of Ft. Peck are 78 years old.

"Once a dam reaches 50 years or older, then its chance of failure increases. I would say any dam over 50 years old, especially one along the design of Ft. Peck with known failure issues, would have a failure rate of one to three percent," said Shanks.

Shanks is not saying there is an imminent chance for failure at Ft. Peck and believes the Army Corps will manage it to ensure that it will not get above full pool. "Dams like Ft. Peck and Garrison cannot have water go over their earthen tops or it would be over quickly (within hours). There are giant flood spillway systems to ensure that doesn't happen. We are seeing these systems being used for the first time in history as a flood management tool."

What Shanks hopes will happen as a result of what officials are calling the "Perfect Storm" with record breaking snowpacks coupled with record rainfalls and already full reservoirs, is a public outcry for a replacement of the aging dams on the Missouri river. "This year's flood is going to be completely devastating to communities down all 750 miles of the Missouri. The primary purpose of the dams originally was flood control and it is clear that that mission failed the people this time."

Bernard Shanks is an adviser to the Resource Renewal Institute and has studied the six main-stem Missouri River dams for more than four decades.


He worked for the U.S. Geological Survey and served as director of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. He has written three books on public land policy and is completing a book on the hazards of the Missouri River dams. I am guessing after this year, he might have a best-seller on his hands around here

TAGS: dam, flooding, danger, breaking_news, river, missouri, safety
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