

Adirondack Mountain Reserve permit system to reopen April 17, for bookings that start May 1

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## NY dam chief: scores of hazardous dams are out of compliance

April 4, 2023



*The Old Forge Dam, rated intermediate hazard, is up to date on regulatory documents, but about half of the other intermediate hazard dams in the Adirondack Park are not. Photo by Zachary Matson*

## Required engineering assessments missing for many Adirondack levees

By Zachary Matson

Around half of New York's intermediate hazard dams have failed to meet regulatory requirements adopted more than a decade ago, the state's dam safety chief estimated in a recent interview. **Adirondack Mountain Reserve permit system to reopen April 17, for bookings that start May 1**

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Donald Canestrari, who took over as the Department of Environmental Conservation's dam safety division director about a year ago, said compliance is nearly universal among high hazard dams, ones that could result in loss of life if they failed.

Around 600 intermediate hazard dams across the state could potentially result in widespread property damage and personal injury if they failed. Half of the 50 intermediate hazard dams in the Adirondack Park have not submitted engineering assessments despite a DEC deadline of 2015, according to an Adirondack Explorer review of state records.



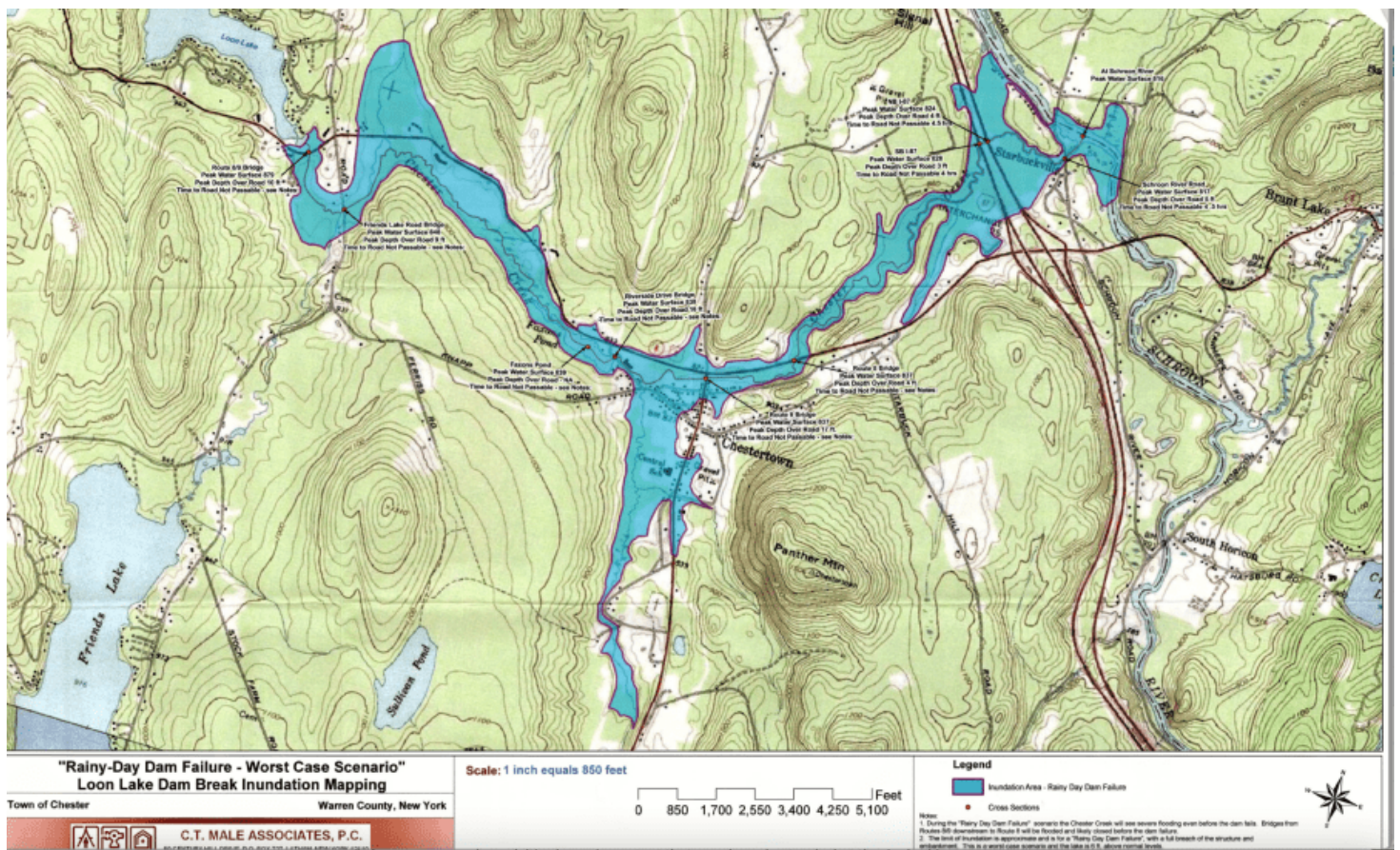
Department of Environmental Conservation dam safety director Donald Canestrari. Photo provided by DEC.

The assessments identify structural problems, model how dams perform against serious floods and recommend steps to align with state standards. In 2009, DEC [adopted regulations that required owners of intermediate and high hazard dams](https://govt.westlaw.com/nycrr/Browse/Home/NewYork/NewYorkCodesRulesandRegulations?guid=I06198200b5a111dda0a4e17826ebc834&originationContext=documenttoc&transitionType=Default&contextData=(sc.Default)) ([https://govt.westlaw.com/nycrr/Browse/Home/NewYork/NewYorkCodesRulesandRegulations?guid=I06198200b5a111dda0a4e17826ebc834&originationContext=documenttoc&transitionType=Default&contextData=\(sc.Default\)](https://govt.westlaw.com/nycrr/Browse/Home/NewYork/NewYorkCodesRulesandRegulations?guid=I06198200b5a111dda0a4e17826ebc834&originationContext=documenttoc&transitionType=Default&contextData=(sc.Default))) to conduct the engineering assessments and develop emergency action plans.

Canestrari also said he was open to publicly posting the inundation maps of hazardous dams, considered by some public safety professionals a best practice. The maps show flooding projected if a dam failed in different scenarios. **Adirondack Mountain Reserve permit system to reopen April 17, for bookings that start May 1** ✕  
 Some states publicize such data (<https://fmds.water.ca.gov/maps/damim/>). The maps are included as part of emergency action plans, which can be obtained in New York through formal records requests.

A Federal Emergency Management Agency model state dam safety program guide published in September (<https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/risk-management/dam-safety>) noted that some states have found “there are more benefits to having a knowledgeable public during an emergency event than there are risks resulting from the release of this information.”

The maps reveal an invisible risk landscape of potential crises across the park. Indian Lake, Chestertown, Bolton, Inlet, Chazy Lake, Garnet Lake, Ticonderoga and Peck Lake all host high hazard dams in need of improvement. Failure of any of the park’s nearly three dozen high hazard dams would swamp major roads, isolate emergency services, flood homes and damage businesses. In some places, floodwaters could reach schools, municipal buildings, wastewater treatment plants or transfer stations.



The inundation map for Loon Lake Dam in Chester shows that if the dam failed during a major storm floodwaters could reach the Northway.

"I think it's a great idea, information is a great thing to get out there," Canestrari said, adding "when maps are released, it's always important that people understand what they're looking at."

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Canestrari worked for about a decade as a senior engineer in the dam division before moving in 2015 to the bureau of water permits, where he worked on industrial pollutant discharge permits and design standards.

New York dam inspectors aim to visit high hazard dams every two years and intermediate hazard dams every four years. They may get to some larger, low hazard dams convenient to other inspections. Canestrari said travel restrictions during the pandemic set them behind in the review of intermediate hazard dams, but he expects to get back on schedule in the next year or two.

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Thousands of dams across the state considered lower hazard have not been inspected in decades or at all, [the Albany Times Union reported in 2021 \(https://www.timesunion.com/projects/2021/ny-dam-hazards/\)](https://www.timesunion.com/projects/2021/ny-dam-hazards/).

Inspectors may visit up to 10 dams in a single day, and one senior engineer can be scheduled to inspect around 125 intermediate and high hazard dams in a year. The agency has a staff of about 10 inspectors.

After a field review, inspectors outline their findings in a letter to the owner and local officials. Those letters also provide an update on whether the owners have provided the necessary documents to state regulators, under the 2009 rules. The state notified the town supervisor in Dannemora every two years for nearly a decade that it had failed to submit its emergency action plan.

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ChazyLake-inspection-2019.pdf

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Photo 18 Dam ID# 199-6282 Chazy Lake Dam 08/15/2019  
Downstream slope of left dam

08/15/2019 Page 10 of 11

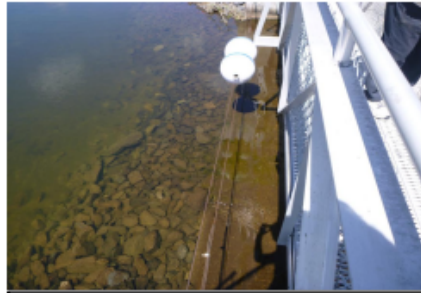


Photo 19 Dam ID# 199-6282 Chazy Lake Dam 08/15/2019  
Upstream of primary spillway

[ChazyLake inspection 2019 \(https://www.adirondackexplorer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ChazyLake-inspection-2019.pdf\)](https://www.adirondackexplorer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ChazyLake-inspection-2019.pdf) [Download \(https://www.adirondackexplorer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ChazyLake-inspection-2019.pdf\)](#)

“We’re trying to inform people how to get there and educate them,” Canestrari said. “I think the continued outreach will assist us in getting the remainder of the intermediates into conformance.”

Around 230 intermediate hazard dams had not submitted emergency action plans by 2017, according to data collected for a [2018 Comptroller’s report \(https://www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/dam-infrastructure-understanding-and-managing-risks-june-2018\)](https://www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/dam-infrastructure-understanding-and-managing-risks-june-2018). Currently, 165 intermediate hazard dams have not submitted emergency action plans, according to DEC.

The dam safety staff is also responsible for reviewing proposed repairs and upgrades, including improvements to spillways and other structural components found wanting under upgraded safety standards. Permit reviews can take months and the division processes around 25 to 30 of them a year, Canestrari said.

“When we see work proposed for a dam we want to move that forward,” he said. “When owners are willing to go there, we need to prioritize that to get it out the door.”

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The division has about 10 engineers on staff, including some recent hires who are being trained in the complexities of technical reviews. Despite a dam inventory estimated at over 7,000 across the state, including over 1,000 rated high or intermediate hazard, Canestrari said he was confident that current staffing was sufficient.



Donald Canestrari at the Howlands Lake Dam in Bedford, Westchester County, in 2015. Photo provided by DEC.

“We’re always on call 24/7,” he said.

Recalling how the owners of the first dam he inspected gradually came to understand the issues they were discussing, Canestrari said outreach and open communication is critical to ensuring owners take the necessary steps at their dams.

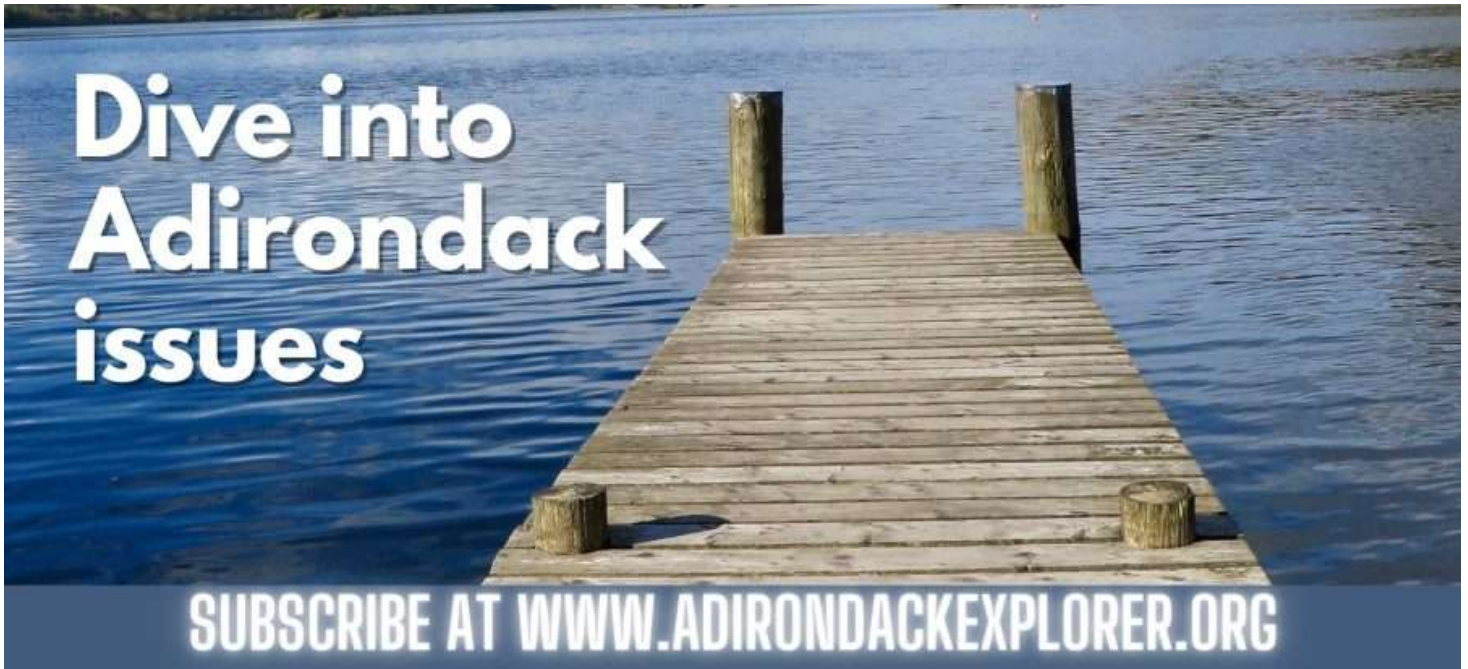
“We’re not just pointing things out to be picky, we have a reason, and the more the owner understands that, it moves us to the point of where we both want to be,” he said. “We all want a safe dam.”

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*Editor’s note: This story was updated to correct the definition of dam hazard classifications and clarify how many intermediate dams have not submitted emergency action plans.*



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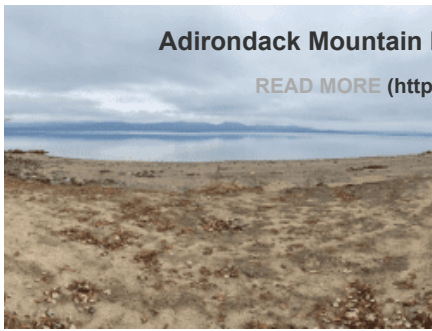
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### About Zachary Matson

Zachary Matson has been an environmental reporter for the Explorer since October 2021. He is focused on the many issues impacting water and the people, plants and wildlife that rely on it in the Adirondack Park. Zach worked at daily newspapers in Missouri, Arizona and New York for nearly a decade, most recently working as the education reporter for six years at the Daily Gazette in Schenectady.

[View all posts by Zachary Matson \(https://www.adirondackexplorer.org/author/zmatson\)](https://www.adirondackexplorer.org/author/zmatson).

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Michael H Hay says

April 4, 2023 at 2:34 pm (<https://www.adirondackexplorer.org/stories/dams-chief#comment-620139>)





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Ask Mr Canestrari about the Hadlock Pond dam catastrophic collapse in the town of West Fort Ann. Taking out homes downstream and 2 sections of Rt 149. The dam was newly built to NYS DEC specifications, inspected by NYS DEC officials and given the green light.

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