

Feds refuse to pay for Libby Dam flooding

BONNERS FERRY, Idaho - The Federal Emergency Management Agency has declined a request from Boundary County officials for emergency relief money for flood damage along the Kootenai River near Bonners Ferry.

Bob Graham, Boundary County's emergency services coordinator, said high water last spring caused millions of dollars in damage to farmers and other property owners. He also said the flooding did about \$54 million in damage to dikes along the river.

Graham said county officials are dismayed with the decision because the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which manages Libby Dam 70 miles upstream of Bonners Ferry and controls the flow of the river, released a report last month that said the agency might have prevented flooding with different decisions.

He estimated damage to the dikes at \$1 million per mile, with 54 miles in need of repairs.

"Our chances of getting federal assistance are slimmer and slimmer each day," he told The Spokesman-Review of Spokane, Wash. "It's becoming a much graver problem. The farmers feel they can't afford to bring them up to standards."

Graham also said the county has asked the National Weather Service to set a lower mark for flood stage of the river. Currently, flood stage is at 1,764 feet above sea level, measured at Bonners Ferry. But he said damage occurs well before the river reaches that mark.

Graham said that he plans to meet with weather service officials next week and show them where flooding occurred last spring.

"We get considerable damage well below 1,764," he told The Associated Press on Friday. "That's our rational to attempt to get the weather service to lower that level this winter."

Environmental groups are also concerned about how Libby Dam is operated. The Center for Biological Diversity and WildWest Institute want water releases that benefit fish by releasing more water in the spring when endangered Kootenai River sturgeon are spawning.

"One thing we've realized is maybe we can't provide everything to every different purpose for all occasions," said Jim Barton, chief of water management for the Corps of Engineers' northwestern division. "We are trying to balance so many different competing demands."

Information from: The Spokesman-Review, <http://www.spokesmanreview.com>

A service of the Associated Press(AP)