

A Near Miss Dam Failure in Meridian Draws Attention to Dam Problems

Willie McKercher, Dam Safety Division

“That dam has been there for 50 years, and it has never had a problem.” This common statement from some dam owners across Mississippi has been a popular go-to phrase when explaining their dam’s condition in recent years. However, what many dam owners do not understand is that the designed lifespan of a dam is typically less than forty years. Once a dam approaches that age, it has to be rehabilitated and reworked in order to extend that lifespan. Given that the heydays of dam construction in Mississippi picked up steam in the 1960s through the 1980s, many dams in Mississippi are in need of inspection and rehabilitation by owners.

In Meridian on March 26, 2021, a five acre dam less than 100 feet from the southbound lane of Highway 19 felt the full pressure of a small localized rainfall event that dropped two to three inches of rain in a timespan of two to three hours. This would not be



an issue for a well-maintained structure, but the condition of this unclassified dam was illustrative of the types of conditions that pose a risk of failure. Its slopes were covered in trees and brush with signs of animal burrows to protect them from predators. The undersized pipe installed to control the water elevation is believed to have become clogged, forcing the flow of water to overtop the dam, and washing away the supporting soils that had held back the lake for so long. The resulting flood of water from the dam failure swiftly rose to depths exceeding five feet in the intersection of Highway 19 and Jimmie Rodgers Parkway. Cars traveling on Highway 19 came to a stop before moving into the flooded area. One car trapped in the rising waters was towed back by a fellow motorist before his vehicle was overtopped by the flood.

Emergency Management officials for Lauderdale County and the City of Meridian responded swiftly to coordinate efforts with local and state support to remove the sediment and debris deposited on roadways to restore traffic flow within hours. The MDEQ Dam Safety Division responded to the incident to confer with the Lauderdale EMA and investigate the cause of the dam breach. After declaring the breach completed, dam officials cited the deteriorated condition of the dam as the cause of the failure.

Dams allow for citizens of Mississippi to enjoy our many beautiful public and private lakes across this great state, but they also require maintenance and active oversight to protect these wonderful resources and the health and safety of fellow citizens. For more information on dam maintenance and emergency prevention measures, please [visit our website](#).



