

Lance Maggart
lmaggart@skyhidailynews.com

October 8, 2015

Multi-million dollar rehab project planned for Ritschard Dam

A massive rehabilitation project is being planned for Ritschard Dam, the earthen dam that holds back water from Wolford Mountain Reservoir, just north of Kremmling.

Jim Pokrandt, communications specialist for the Colorado River Water Conservation District, owners of Ritschard Dam, confirmed the project Tuesday. Pokrandt said the project is still in the design analysis stage and no official decisions have been made yet regarding specifics but said, “We are on a pathway to rehab the dam. Right now we are in the design analysis stage. We don’t have a final design on what the work will look like.”

Pokrandt emphasized the project is still subject to change and no dates or figures have been finalized but estimated a cost of roughly \$15 million. He explained funding for the project would come from the District’s Enterprise Fund.

“The River District has the finances in place to take care of the work,” he said.

Work on the project is tentatively scheduled to begin in 2017 with work wrapping up in 2018. The River District plans to remove a portion the earthen dam material, shaving off layers, though how much will be removed is yet to be determined. The District expects to finalize plans related to the Ritschard Dam rehabilitation project sometime in early 2016.

The River District has been monitoring the movement and settling of the earthen dam from some time now. Pokrandt explained the continued settlement of the dam has spurred caution regarding the long-term safety of the structure.

“Computer models built upon readings from instruments indicate this thing is not going to stop settling and work is in order,” he said. “I say that noting the dam is still safe and is not under any restrictions. The River District is taking a very cautionary and proactive stance to make sure the Dam will be in tip-top shape.”

His sentiments were echoed by Bill McCormick, Chief of Dam Safety for the Colorado Division of Water Resources who explained no water storage restrictions have been placed on Ritschard.

“We appreciate working with the Colorado River District on this,” McCormick said. “It is not a great situation that they will have to spend a lot of money to fix this dam but we really appreciate that they are being proactive and recognize their responsibilities.”

McCormick said the Colorado Division of Water Resources is following the River District’s monitoring and analysis of Ritschard Dam and explained the River District has voluntarily kept Wolford Mountain Reservoir’s water storage levels low to minimize any dam safety risks.

The Ritschard Dam, approximately 5 miles north of Kremmling, was built in 1995 at a cost of \$42 million. The earthen structure is 122 feet tall and 1,910 feet wide and spans Muddy Creek, which dumps into the Colorado River just before entering Gore Canyon.

The Dam is classified by the State as a large size high hazard dam. All dams in the State are rated high, significant or low hazard. Hazard classification as based on the consequences of a hypothetical unanticipated sudden dam failure.

“If our computer modeling shows a potential for a single loss of life that puts it into the high hazard category,” McCormick said. About 400 of the 1,850 dams overseen by the State Dam Safety Division are classified as high hazard dams.

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