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Lake Okeechobee dike in danger

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The Herbert Hoover Dike as seen from Port Mayaca.

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Lake Okeechobee just south of Pahokee where the dike was damaged by erosion after Hurricane Wilma.

A report by a panel of engineering experts hired by the South Florida Water Management District said the dike has narrowly escaped failing and has been deteriorating. The report said there's a 1-in-6 chance the dike would collapse in a given year and a 50-50 chance of failing in the next few years.

A dike failure would result in billions of dollars in damage, could irreversibly damage the Everglades, would threaten to contaminate South Florida's water supply and "would submerge vast areas ... to the south and east," the report said.

To lessen the lake's pressure on the dike, the state called on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to keep the lake's level low.

The report also prompted then-Gov. Jeb Bush to order plans for mass evacuations from the Glades before the next threatening hurricane.

The dike has served its original purpose: Preventing a repeat of the catastrophe of 1928, when a hurricane slogged the lake over a 6-foot muck levee and killed more than 2,500 people. Although it has withstood subsequent hurricanes, it has repeatedly sprung large numbers of leaks.

The county's existing evacuation maps show floodwaters could reach Wellington's outskirts within days. But those maps could seriously understate the scope of the flooding, the state-hired experts said.

They noted a dike breach could spill more than 1.6 trillion gallons and take years to repair.

Leak-proofing the 143-mile dike, which nearly encircles the 730-square-mile lake, could take decades. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has begun working on a repair project to counteract the earthen dike's tendency to spring dozens of leaks during high water.

The dike has suffered for years from leaks caused by high water in the lake, but the issue gained new urgency following the catastrophic failure of New Orleans' levees after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

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