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California's water chief says he may release Oroville Dam documents after trying to keep them secret

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OROVILLE

California's top water official said Thursday he's considering releasing redacted copies of safety and progress reports at the troubled Oroville Dam after his office had tried to keep them secret because of terrorism concerns.

Bill Croyle, the acting director of the Department of Water Resources, told reporters that his staff met for several hours Thursday with Butte County Sheriff Kory Honea to discuss which parts of the documents should be kept secret and which to release.

He defended the need to keep sensitive material in the documents secret, but said he's considering releasing versions of records with portions redacted, or blacked out, to meet potential security concerns.

"The information that's appropriate to push out, we'll push out," he said.

Croyle's announcement comes two days after The Sacramento Bee reported that state officials had refused to release certain dam inspection reports and other records, citing federal regulations designed to thwart terrorist attacks. In addition, Croyle said last week that he wouldn't release documents related to the bidding on the repair work at Oroville Dam's battered spillway.

Local elected officials had complained about the secrecy after experts said the records could shed light on what caused the dam's near catastrophic spillway problems and guide repairs. On Thursday, the lawmakers said they were encouraged by Croyle's statement.

"We heard loud and clear the frustrations from our constituents with regards to the need for transparency in what occurred at Oroville and the planned repairs," said Sen. Jim Nielsen and Assemblyman James Gallagher, the Republican state lawmakers who represent the area, in a joint statement. "It is understandable that some highly sensitive,

verifiable information should be withheld for legitimate national security purposes – but blocking entire reports and requests for information is unacceptable.”

DWR has been sealing documents related to the spillway recovery operation in the past several weeks, after The Bee reported on one document that had been posted online by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. That document, a memo by an outside board of engineering consultants, revealed that the repairs to the spillway wouldn't be finished this year and that the concrete structure was saddled with design flaws dating to its 1968 construction.

Croyle said last week that document shouldn't have been made public.

Croyle also announced Thursday that the DWR plans to reopen the dam's spillway gates Friday morning for the first time since March 27. He said dam operators expect to run the spillway for 10 to 14 days, shut it off for inspections, and then run it again one more time this spring.

In all likelihood, Croyle said, repairs on the spillway are likely to start in late May or early June. Until then, he said, DWR will focus on reducing lake levels to around 835 feet “to anticipate that snowmelt and the storms that keep coming.” The latest storms have elevated lake levels to around 863 feet.

DWR is attempting to strike a balance between lowering the lake level as much as possible and shutting off the spillway for good to begin repairs. As it is, Croyle has acknowledged that spillway repairs won't be complete until sometime next year, and the 3,000-foot-long concrete chute will remain partially unfixed through the next rainy season. Still, he said the spillway, despite the enormous damage that's occurred since the initial fracture Feb. 7, will be functional next winter.

DWR is so pressed for time that it expects to execute a contract for repairs as early as next Monday even though the design is far from finished.

“I can't wait for 100 percent design,” Croyle said. While it's an unusual situation, he said DWR can work with the contractor to finalize the design in the coming weeks before the repairs begin.

Four contractors are in the running for the repair project, which could run to several hundred million dollars: Kiewit Corp. of Omaha, Neb.; Granite Construction of Watsonville; Barnard Construction Co. of Bozeman, Mont.; and ASI Constructors Inc. of Pueblo West, Colo. All have experience with major dam projects; Kiewit, for instance, worked on the \$900 million auxiliary spillway expected to open this fall at Folsom Dam.

The Feb. 7 fracture of the Oroville Dam spillway triggered a near disaster five days later. When DWR reduced flows over the spillway because of concern about the damage, the reservoir filled to the point that water for the first time ever flowed over the nearby emergency spillway, which consisted of a concrete lip atop an unlined hill.

After dam engineers spotted severe erosion on the hill just below the lip, leading to fears the emergency structure would fail, officials ordered the evacuation of 188,000 downstream residents. Catastrophe was averted when engineers dramatically increased outflows from the battered main spillway, reducing lake levels to the point that water stopped flowing over the emergency spillway.



Excavators dredge along the edge of the diversion pool below the spillway at Oroville Dam on April 6 in Oroville, California's top water official said Thursday he's considering releasing redacted copies of safety and progress reports at the troubled Oroville Dam after his office had tried to keep them secret because of terrorism concerns. Randy Pench rpench@sacbee.com

Video links: Press conference explaining the plan to fix Oroville Spillway 2:42. Bill Croyle, acting director of Department of Water Resources, explains the current plans to fix the Oroville spillway and the emergency spillway. Video by Randy Pench. Produced by Sue Morrow

<http://www.sacbee.com/news/state/california/water-and-drought/article143229734.html>

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