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Although some local residents say they repaired a broken gate at the Champion Lake dam and question the need for a project to make more repairs, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is requiring those repairs and construction.

Bids for the Champion Mill Dam Rehabilitation and Sediment Removal project are to be opened Feb. 9.

The DNR ordered the draining of Champion Lake following a flood in 2007 that caused damage to the dam.

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) Superintendent for Enders and Champion, Bill Christensen, said the NGPC had originally hoped that repairs would be minimal. He said NGPC hired an engineering firm from North Platte to inspect the structure shortly after the flood. Christensen said the firm told the NGPC that the dam looked to be in good shape, and suggested dropping the lake level one foot. Cleanup around the dam was also recommended.

“If it was up to the Game and Parks we would have been happy to throw dirt into the washout and get the gates working” for a minimal cost, he said recently.

However, Christensen said he then received a hand-delivered letter at his house from the DNR telling him to drain the lake. “I was furious, after all the work we’d done,” he commented.

The DNR said the lake needed to be drained for safety reasons. “Their engineers said the dam was unsafe and repairs needed to be made,” he said.

Christensen said the people of Champion felt that if they got the gates working, the lake could be refilled.

That wasn’t the case, however. He said the DNR told the NGPC to develop plans to repair the dam to meet DNR requirements.

The plans call for cleaning up the lake in front of the dam, and using silt dredged from there to build a quarter circle berm in front of the structure.

The berm will be hard surfaced with concrete and rip rap. A concrete wall will also be constructed that lines up with the north wall of the existing raceway. A new control structure will be built into the wall, consisting of drop boards that can be raised or lowered in slots to control the flow of water.

Christensen said the new control structure will allow water to run over the top without having to open gates “in the middle of the night” at times of flooding.

The existing dam will be left in place for historical reasons.

About \$222,217 has been appropriated for the project. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) will reimburse the state for 75 percent of the cost, while the Nebraska Legislature approved an allocation of \$55,554 for the portion that will not be reimbursed.

Christensen stressed that NGPC “hands are tied” as to the repair project. The DNR is calling the shots, he noted.

He said he appreciated the efforts of Champion residents to help with repairs. However, he said the DNR said those repairs are not an option.