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Plans are being finalized for the repair of Champion Lake, following approval of funding for the project.

Heavy rains in June, 2007 in Champion and along the Frenchman River that feeds the lake damaged the dam. Because gates at the dam couldn't be repaired at the time, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) had to drain the lake at the request of the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ).

State Senator Mark Christensen originally sponsored LB 289 to provide some funding to renovate the lake. That bill, which provided \$55,554.25, was not passed but was included in the budget this spring.

Christensen explained that the legislature provided funding for another lake the NGPC was seeking to repair, thereby freeing up funds for the Champion project.

"It was internal Game and Parks funds" that financed the \$55,554.25, he said.

His bill, he added, "didn't get done as stated as a whole, because funds were so tight."

The NGPC applied for and was approved for assistance with repairs by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). FEMA has approved 75 percent of the cost of the renovation, according to Jim Fuller, Administrator of the NGPC Parks Division. The total cost will be \$222,217.

"In this particular case it was a long process," Fuller said of the quest for funding and approval for the project. The lake was drained, there was a six-month study by NGPC, engineers had to determine the minimum flow rate while working with DEQ, funding had to be found, plans still have to be finalized and bids have to be let.

Fuller said the first step, actually, was to apply to the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), which processes applications when a disaster is declared.

NEMA then sends the applications on to FEMA, which then contacts NGPC. After money is approved by FEMA, it goes into a state escrow account, Fuller said. NGPC then applies for reimbursement once the project is complete.

The project consists of several different parts. The first, Fuller explained, is a new design for the gates at the dam, or "control structure."

"The three existing gates didn't meet the minimum requirements" before the flood, he noted. The new design will allow water to move through the three gates and an additional area, he said.

A gate damaged during the flood will be repaired to allow it to be opened and locked in place "to maintain the historic integrity of the old dam," Fuller said.

The additional area he spoke of is a raceway alongside the south side of the gates, which will allow water to spill over into the river below.

Fuller said water can still be used by Champion Mill to propel the mill wheel.

"If we get the new control structure in, and get water to flow, we can run some of the equipment inside and grind some wheat to give people an idea of how the mill operated."

Repair plans also include dredging the lake. Part of the silt dredged will be used to build a berm of about a quarter circle in the lake bed.

"Water will go over the top of the berm before it goes over the top of the control structure," he said.

Locations will need to be found to dispose of the rest of the dirt, Fuller added.

Another part of the plan was to eliminate trees on the dam itself, which has been done. "Mother Nature took care of some of that," Fuller noted, and roots and stumps have also been removed so as not to damage the dam.

Fuller said no more trees should need to be removed from the dam.

Christensen said it's been a long three years. "The people of Champion have waited too long," he said, and the project needs to be completed.

He's hoping to see the final plans by the first of August. The plans then need to be bid, and a contractor selected.

Fuller said once the bids are let, "It's a matter of when the contractor can get on site and get started. I would like to see it done yet this fall."

Christensen agreed, saying "We're missing a great year this year," as the area has received decent rainfall and above-normal flows from rivers and streams.

"I feel very good to get this accomplished and moving," Christensen said of his legislation and the project.