

The Use and Misuse of the Class I High Hazard Classification

What the public hears

“Class one high hazard dams”

“High hazard dams”

“Public safety threat”

Natural inference by a lay audience:

The dam itself is inherently dangerous, unstable, or likely to fail.

What “high hazard” actually means in dam safety classification

A high hazard dam is *not* defined by the condition of the dam.

It is defined by **downstream consequences if failure were to occur**, specifically:

- presence of buildings
- presence of people
- development patterns that occurred after construction

A structurally sound dam can be classified as high hazard solely because development exists downstream. This distinction is **foundational** in dam safety practice.

Nothing has changed -not the downstream development pattern, not the hazard classification, not the dam’s basic configuration. This is a small historic dam. The Lower Lake would otherwise be classified as a category IV for Height and a category III for volume if not for the urban development downstream.

Why this matters ethically

1. It manufactures fear through omission

By omitting the explanation of *why* the dams are classified as high hazard, the speaker creates an emotional response that the facts alone do not require.

2. It shifts responsibility away from land use decisions

Framing the dam as the problem obscures the role of:

- municipal planning and lack of stewardship
- development approvals
- historical land use change

That is a political and ethical shift, not a technical one.