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Contact: Lori Spragens, 859-550-2788, lspragens@damsafety.org



May 16 Marks 140th Anniversary of Mill River Dam Failure

Tragedy led to Massachusetts's first legislation regulating dam design, construction and liability

Lexington, Ky. – On the morning of May 16, 1874, the Mill River Dam near Williamsburg, Mass., failed after heavy rain, sending 600 million gallons of water downstream. The resulting flood killed nearly 140 people, including 43 children under the age of 10, and destroyed the villages of Haydenville, Leeds, Skinnerville and Williamsburg. Investigators determined that the dam failed due to inadequate design and faulty construction.

The Mill River Dam failure helped spur the commonwealth's first legislation regulating dam design, construction and liability. Today, the Massachusetts Dam Safety Program regulates 1,485 dams.

“Strong laws and resources to carry out dam safety programs are vital to the safety of dams across the country,” said Lori Spragens, executive director of the [Association of State Dam Safety Officials](#) (ASDSO). “The anniversary of the Mill River Dam failure reminds us of the importance of good planning and effective dam safety programs at all levels of government. These efforts have reduced the loss of life resulting from dam failures dramatically.”

State governments regulate approximately 77 percent of dams in the United States, but many state dam safety programs lack the necessary resources to adequately monitor and regulate their dam inventories. In early 2013, Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick signed into law a bill that provides funding and enhances reporting and enforcement authority to make it easier to repair or remove unsafe dams.

Everyone has a role to play in creating a future where all dams are safe. To help ensure their safety, ASDSO encourages people who live, work or play near dams to familiarize themselves with evacuation routes, make sure all family members know what to do in the event of an emergency, and prepare an emergency kit.

More information on staying safe near dams can be found in ASDSO's informational guide, [Living with Dams: Know Your Risks](#), which the organization developed in conjunction with the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#).

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The Association of State Dam Safety Officials (ASDSO) is a national, non-profit organization founded in 1984 and dedicated to improving dam safety through research, education and communication. Web: www.damsafety.org