



Origins of the Association of State Dam Safety Officials

By Charles H. Gardner, ASDSO President 1986-1987

The formation of the ASDSO represents the convergence of common interests resulting from several somewhat independent events and national trends in the dam safety community. This brief history attempts to identify some of those trends and events, and focuses on the cooperative efforts of several groups and individuals that culminated in the official formation of the Association on June 20, 1984.

The need for public assurance of dam safety has drawn progressively increasing attention over the past few decades, particularly in reaction to several catastrophic dam failures across the country.

Notable among those catastrophes were the devastating social impacts of the dam failures at Johnstown, Buffalo Creek, Baldwin Hills, Laurel Run, Teton, and Kelly Barnes (Toccoa Falls). A very close call was experienced by the partial failure of the Lower Van Norman Dam, which could have killed thousands of people had the failure completely developed.

In reaction to these and other dam failures, the federal agencies responded by improving their dam safety programs. Notable among the federal responses were the passage of the National Dam Inspection Program (PL92-367) in 1972 and the creation of the Interagency Committee for Dam Safety (ICODS).

However, improvements in federal dam safety only brought into clearer focus the deficiencies of a vast number of non-federal dams, the responsibility of the states.

The importance of non-federal dams and state dam safety programs was long recognized by some organizations, as exemplified by the United States Committee on Large Dams (USCOLD) publication in 1970 of a Model Law for State Supervision of Safety of Dams and Reservoirs. In the early 1970's a national dam inventory was established (under the authority of PL92-367) and it identified nearly 90,000 non-federal dams; in 1978-81 (under PL92-367) about 9,000 of these non-federal dams were inspected in a "crash program" (Phase 1) and about 1/3 of them were found to be "unsafe." Since the federal government has no direct responsibility or authority concerning the safety of non-federal dams, the results of the Phase I studies dramatically pointed out the need for adequate state dam safety programs.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was particularly concerned about the large number of unsafe non-federal dams and indications that many, or most, states had inadequate dam safety laws and programs. In response, FEMA funded a National Research Council Committee on Safety

of Non-Federal Dams. Its report (1982) pointed out the need for better state dam safety programs, interstate dam safety communication, and the need for a national perspective (assessment) of the problem of poor state dam safety programs. This report was followed by a National Research Council report, *Safety of Existing Dams* (1983), a technical manual focused on dam safety assessments and remedial alternatives.

A landmark assessment of state dam safety programs was conducted by Dr. Bruce A. Tschantz in 1982 and published under FEMA sponsorship in 1983 as a *Report on Review of State Non-Federal Dam Safety Programs*. That report, based on a detailed questionnaire distributed to the 50 states, made it clear that over half the states either had no dam safety law or no dam safety program. Another very important conclusion of the report, based on the questionnaires, was that almost without exception the states felt a need to have an interstate forum for sharing information related to state dam safety programs.

Thus, by the early 1980's both federal and state interests felt that a vacuum existed in interstate dam safety communication. Rather spontaneous and informal interstate regional conferences had begun to develop, but no mechanism for national interstate communication existed. It became increasingly apparent that the states could help each other strengthen and streamline their dam safety programs and that, collectively, they could have an impact on federal policies and programs concerning non-federal dams if they could establish a formal association. During 1982 the writer had several independent conversations with Dr. Bruce Tschantz of the University of Tennessee, Mr. Bill Bivins of FEMA, and representatives of the Council of State Governments to discuss this issue.

In January of 1983 a meeting was held between Bill Bivins, Bruce Tschantz, the writer, and several staff members of the Council of State Governments (CSG) including Leslie Cole, Judith Sardo, and Doug Roderer. The purpose of the meeting was to explore the possibility of having CSG assist the states in putting together a national association of dam safety officials. It was agreed that 1) the writer would develop an organizing committee to work with CSG to plan a national meeting of state dam safety officials and 2) CGS would submit a proposal to FEMA to solicit funds for the national meeting and national organizing efforts. State dam safety representatives from all 50 states were invited to attend a meeting on February 28, 1983 in Orlando, Florida (concurrent with a Southeastern Dam Safety Conference) to discuss the concept of a national association and to form the organizing committee. In response, 16 states sent representatives to the Orlando meeting and an additional 26 states sent letters of support for the concept.

At the February 28, 1983 meeting in Orlando, Dr. Tschantz reviewed the state dam safety program survey results, Mr. Doug Roderer of CSG and Mr. Bill Bivins of FEMA indicated supporting roles their organizations could take, and the writer solicited the following broad-based Organizing Committee for the Association of State Dam Safety Officials: Charles Gardner (NC), John Clarke (TX), Joe Ellam (PA), Jeris Danielson (CO), Louis Jordan (KS), Delbert Downing (NH), Bruce Pickens (OH), and George Christopoulos (WY).