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OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

THE WHITE HOUSE

MEETING OF THE PRESIDENT WITH
THOMAS KLEPPE, SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR,
GILBERT STAMM, COMMISSIONER, BUREAU OF RECLAMATION,
AND RICHARD FELTNER, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE,
MARKETING AND SERVICES ON THE
COLLAPSE OF THE TETON DAM

THE OVAL OFFICE

12:25 P.M. EDT

MR. STAMM: There are probably three aspects of the problem. The initial one is the dam, Teton Dam itself.

THE PRESIDENT: Is that where the dam is?

MR. STAMM: (indicating on map) The dam is approximately where I am pointing on the Teton River. We were aware of an unstable foundation and we took extreme care in the specifications and in the implementation to seal off the foundation. We installed what we call a grout curtain, but not one, but three. We put in a triple grout curtain and ran it a thousand feet back from the Canadian wall and ran it down to the impervious lake sediments, about 250 feet below.

So theoretically what happened couldn't happen, but it did. So our job now is to identify precisely what caused the problem and we are forming a blue ribbon team of non-Federal people--world recognized engineers, and we are also making our own independent investigation to find that trouble, and that will take some little time.

We may have to tunnel into that embankment, abutment, and that will take some time.

The next two aspects are the devastation downstream. Downstream from the dam to about Idaho Falls, the lands were flooded and there was terrific devastation, homes lost, trailer courts, lands washed away, irrigation systems washed out, and I think for the image of the Federal Government, as well as the welfare of the people, we need to move in immediately and start something there.

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There is another aspect, however. From Idaho Falls down to American Falls reservoir there are about 400,000 acres of highly productive lands, all irrigated, all dependent upon headings from the river. Those lands are not flooded and will not be flooded but the headings themselves are being washed out. I think I would place that number one priority to move in there and protect, or restore or replace those headings because if those lands go ten days or two weeks without irrigation, we will have additional terrific crop loss from lands that are not affected at all by the flooding directly.

So I would say the number one priority is to protect these lands. Number two and almost in the same priority is to get equipment out there within 24 hours, if possible, to demonstrate to the people that we mean business and we are ready to go.

THE PRESIDENT: Can you really do certain things that will preserve these farm areas?

MR. STAMM: Yes, we think so.

SECRETARY KLEPPE: Mr. President, that is the part I would like to come down on the hardest. We ought to use whatever authorities are available to us to get action within 24 or 48 hours. I understand FDAA has already asked us and the Corps of Engineers to join together and do what we can to bring about saving those lands, not because of possible devastation but because of drying up, because of irrigation problems that we understand can be solved and, therefore, that has become very, very important. At this point I think this is the most critical thing.

MR. STAMM: We have several agencies that are competent to negotiate contracts immediately, the Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation, Soil Conservation Service and we would propose -- and we have already started.

THE PRESIDENT: What is the mileage from the dam down to this area here?

MR. STAMM: South Idaho Falls?

SECRETARY KLEPPE: Each one of these squares is six miles. You get down to about 55 miles in flood damage.

THE PRESIDENT: Rexburg was here -- Sugar City?

SECRETARY KLEPPE: That is correct.

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MR. STAMM: Sugar City was the very first city that was hit below the dam and Rexburg was the next and those two were the hardest hit. I happen to have a few pictures here. More are coming. That is Sugar City at the height. By the time I got there Sunday afternoon this had largely receded. Many of the buildings had been washed off their foundations but the foundations were exposed and the return flow from this water to the river was causing a second crest down the Idaho Falls and that is what is moving down the river now.

THE PRESIDENT: The height of the water flow, how deep was it in Sugar City?

MR. STAMM: I would estimate about seven feet but that is purely an estimate. The press took a number of pictures and I think they took the ones they felt were the worst situations and I saw one where the water line in the living room of the home was within a foot or a foot and a half of the ceiling so that would indicate the height was about six or seven feet.

THE PRESIDENT: How much warning did these people have from the time --

MR. STAMM: About two hours. The first leak that was of any concern was discovered about 8:45 in the morning. We got the first notice to the Sheriff about 10 o'clock. I got a precise recording of that but that is essentially it. We ordered the contractor in to try to do some emergency work. He had two large caterpillars in there by 11 o'clock. Both were lost. The operators were saved.

At 11:15 the dam went out. And assuming -- as I say the specifications and the implementation appeared to be excellent but the fact that the water got there (indicating on map) means it had to have gone around there some way and followed back closely to those curtain walls or got through the curtail walls some way. The only way we can find out for sure is to --

THE PRESIDENT: What is the best estimate of the loss of life at the present time?

MR. FELTNER: The most recent an hour ago was seven dead, 153 injured and missing varies from hour to hour, between 80 and 135. People keep on showing up. In other words, there were scouts --

SECRETARY KLEPPE: Scouts have turned up people that were called missing, so we are down to about 50, I think, that are still missing.

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THE PRESIDENT: When I called Governor Andrus Saturday night about 10:45 the count was 150.

MR. STAMM: The first estimate was 150. When I was there the confirmed dead were four with a possibility of five. Now you said you had a later report.

MR. FELTNER: Seven and of those injured there is one that is listed as serious.

MR. STAMM: And the fact there was not greater loss was due to the fact we had tremendous support from the National Guard, the Sheriff's office, the radio-TV media, all concerned. Because the time was short, everybody cooperated.

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