

Testimony on H.778

For the record I am Eric Forand the Director at Vermont Emergency Management, thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.778

To start, I wanted to touch briefly on Act 121 and the Dam Safety Summer study. It was a very thorough study with detailed information about dams in Vermont. It proposed four potential solutions, but as mentioned in past testimony, it did not make a final recommendation. The four solutions included - having the towns create their own EOP, having RPC draft the EOP for the towns, having VEM regional coordinators draft them, and hiring a contractor.

H.778 aligns with choice number 3, having VEM coordinate the effort. As the study points out, there are some pros to this solution; it also points out some very significant cons, the biggest being that VEM does not have the capacity to accomplish these tasks. I also want to clarify that the study did not mention the additional tasks of training towns, dam owners, and first responders on the plan, and then conducting exercises, which are all additional tasks outlined in H.778.

VEM is recommending that this bill be reduced to the pilot project only at this time. The pilot project develops the tools that will be needed to do the planning, training, and exercise that are required in the first half of the bill. The current version of the bill creates a timeline for the remainder of the work, now before the pilot is complete. This creates an environment where several significant variables (templates, rollout structure, and cost) are unknown, and it sets an expectation of completion independent of the results of the pilot. The pilot will most likely highlight several gaps in resources to meet the expectations in this bill. Those gaps will need to be addressed before the remaining dams can be successfully completed.

The current timeline has the pilot project completing 2 dams (including templates, processes, etc.) by 2028. That then leaves 29 dams to do planning, training, and exercise for in 3 years (2031). With 29 dams, that would be about 1 dam per month to draft a plan, train – town- responders etc, and exercise. For context, a normal timeline for a plan that incorporates several towns, multiple first response agencies, and a critical infrastructure owner would take at a minimum of a year. Additionally, planning an exercise for that many parties would take a minimum of 6 months.

After the pilot is completed, a more realistic timeline can be created, which would include time to close any gaps that were defined in the pilot. Bifurcating the creation of the planning, training and exercise pilot structure from the timeline to complete all of the dam reviews, allows time to ensure that the process is adequate and resourced properly.