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Airport bolsters flood defenses

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

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The Omaha Airport Authority took emergency action Tuesday to shore up the defenses of the region's largest commercial airport against floodwaters that threaten much of the area.

Although Eppley Airfield operations haven't been disrupted by the swollen Missouri River, officials believe that additional measures must be taken to protect 2,700 acres of airport infrastructure worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

High water levels are expected to persist in the area for weeks.

"This airport is extremely important to the economy, not just of the city but the state," said Steve Coufal, the Airport Authority's executive director.

"It must be protected at all costs."

Eppley serves more than 4.2 million passengers a year on about 90 daily flights. The airport serves much of Nebraska, the western half of Iowa and southern South Dakota.

That calculus is at the core of the airport's current mission — plan for the worst, even though it might not come.

There are three primary areas of focus:

- >>The integrity of a seven-mile stretch of earthen levee that surrounds Eppley runways.
- >>Airport pumping systems responsible for bailing out rainwater and underground water that bubbles to the surface.
- >>Protecting infrastructure if additional rain contributes to flooding.

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Officials with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have assured the Omaha Airport Authority that the levee will stand up to mounting pressure. Airport workers check Eppley's portion of the levee every two hours for any sign of deterioration.

The bigger concern for the airport's safety comes from underground.

As large amounts of river water press against the federally constructed levee, the water will naturally force itself anywhere possible to relieve the pressure. That means water will seep into the surrounding soil, thereby elevating underground water levels below the airport property.

If airport officials did nothing, computer models show, groundwater levels would rise to a point where water would bubble up and envelop the runways and terminals — along with the area adjacent to the river.

But authorities said they're not standing idle.

"If we do nothing, then we're obviously at risk," said David Roth, the Airport Authority's planning and engineering director.

The Omaha airport currently has three pump stations: one on the north side of the airport, one on the east side and one on the southern boundary.

Each pump station is capable of handling water flows to a point, Coufal said, but officials want to increase the airport's pumping capacity and install redundant systems to protect against equipment failure. Workers monitor river and groundwater levels daily.

"This equipment was designed for rain events, storm events," Roth said. "It's extremely heavy equipment, but running it 24-7 for a long duration was not what it was designed for."

Officials have assembled a team of seven contractors and two government agencies, including the City of Omaha and the Corps of Engineers, to construct new defenses, identify potential weaknesses and monitor what is certainly a fluid situation.

The Airport Authority board on Tuesday approved executing contracts with engineering and construction firms on an emergency basis, bypassing normal bid solicitation procedures for the work.

The companies that will work with the airport include HDR Inc. and Hawkins Construction. Other entities have experience in levee design and large-scale design projects of pump station facilities and will lead specific tasks for the airport's contingency plan.

One firm will help pump groundwater off airport property, for example, and other companies will examine levee and groundwater problems or help protect airport property. Airport officials will buy sandbags, generators, pumps and other equipment as the need arises.

There is considerable confidence on the airport board that the assembled team will successfully protect Eppley.

"That's really where the contractors come in, to provide those resources and that knowledge needed for sustainability," Coufal said.

What is still unclear is how much the flood defense work will cost the airport.

Stanley Kathol, the Airport Authority's finance director, said the costs would most likely be absorbed by Eppley's flood insurance policy, federal disaster assistance funds and the airport's operating budget.

"We'll worry about the money later," said the board's chairman, Eric Butler.

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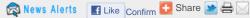
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