


Arkansas River's Low-Water Dam 'A Drowning Machine'

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Craig Day



Dangers are not to be underestimated along the low-water dam, an area rescuer says.

Three men were swept away early Thursday near the Arkansas River pedestrian bridge at 31st Street and Riverside Drive.

The fire department identifies the men as Conner Norvell, 20, from Colorado; Troy George, 23, from Louisiana; and Eric Harris, 27, from Tulsa.

They were students at Tulsa Welding School.

The group started hand-fishing at about 3 a.m., but as they worked their way down the river, one of the men disappeared about 5:15 a.m.

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Right away, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers stopped releasing water from Keystone Dam to help with recovery efforts downstream, but no matter how much water is released from the lake the low-water dam is always a dangerous spot."

Conditions on the low-water dam on the Arkansas River are so dangerous, many first responders call it the drowning machine.


"It's a vicious cycle, they just keep going around and around," Tulsa Fire Capt. RB Ellis said.

Ellis, the rescue coordinator, said when three men went under, the water flow had incredible force.

"Water moving at 10 miles an hour has the same force as an F-1 tornado," Ellis said.

"Water moving at 10 miles an hour has the

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At the low-water dam, when water flows over it, some of it pushes back toward the dam.

It creates suction and a circular flow, creating a rolling effect for anything caught in it.

"Even the best swimmers would have a difficult time trying to survive in this environment," Ellis said.

That's why Tulsa requires people to stay 150 feet away from the dam, both upstream and downstream.

"At this point here, their chances would be very slim," Ellis said.

Keystone Lake is already 5 feet above normal, so the Corps had plans to more than double the water released. But the gates were shut to help draw the water down in the river to help search teams.

With runoff from recent rain, the lake will rise a foot each day while the gates are closed.

Once the victims are found, the Corps will release more water than first planned to maintain an appropriate water level in the lake.

Since even more water is going to be released from Keystone Lake once the bodies are recovered, it's going to make conditions along the Arkansas River even more dangerous.

So the Corps is urging people to be extremely cautious along the river, at least for the next few days.

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