



CALIFORNIA'S WATER: A CRISIS WE CAN'T IGNORE

SACRAMENTO-SAN JOAQUIN RIVER DELTA

The Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta (Delta) is a key link in the water system that serves most Californians. A natural estuary of more than 738,000 acres, the Delta is the pathway through which more than 25 million people and 2.5 million acres of productive farmland receive their water.

Delta Plays Key Role in California's Water System

The Delta is a patchwork of nearly 60 islands and tracts surrounded by natural and man-made channels and sloughs and home to more than 750 distinct species of plants and wildlife. Since about two-thirds of the islands and tracts are below sea level, the Delta relies on a maze of levees to protect land and key infrastructure from floods and daily high tides. In all, there are more than 1,100 miles of levees in the Delta, including many built more than a century ago to protect farmland.

The Delta is the single most important link in California's water supply system. Delta waterways convey water from Northern California rivers to pumping facilities in the southern Delta. Delta levees play an important role in preventing salty water from San Francisco Bay from intruding into critical parts of the Delta and contaminating the fresh water that supplies communities and farms. Unfortunately, this important resource is in an ecological crisis that threatens people, as well as the environment.

Delta's Fragile Environment in Peril

California's Delta has a host of environmental problems, including the decline of native plant and animal life and pollution. The introduction of non-native, invasive species, urban development and pollution are just a few of the reasons that many Delta species have been listed as "threatened" or "endangered." The most well-known threatened Delta species is the Delta smelt, the focus of recent federal court action which will dramatically affect California's water supply. For information on this and other threatened species, please visit http://calwater.ca.gov/delta/species/delta_species.html.

Aging Delta Levees Offer Critical Protection

Today, the Delta's increasingly fragile levee system is being asked to protect much more than farmland. Three state highways, a railroad, natural gas and electric transmission facilities, and aqueducts serving water to parts of the Bay Area also depend on Delta levees. In addition, more 400,000 people live in Delta towns and communities, some of which rank among the fastest growing areas in California.

The Delta faces a myriad of problems that strain its ability to meet the state's human, agricultural and environmental needs. One of the principal worries is the ability of the man-made levees, many of which were constructed a century ago, to withstand a flood or earthquake. Experts warn that a 6.5 magnitude earthquake would cause substantial damage to the levees, resulting in flooding of communities and farmland, allowing the intrusion of salt water into the Delta's fresh water and dramatically disrupting the statewide water supply and delivery system.

To make matters worse, California's water reserves are at a dangerously low level. If the Delta's levees were damaged due to heavy flooding or an earthquake, the state unlikely would have the water to meet the public's needs.

For more information, please visit www.calwatercrisis.org.