

San Jose Mercury News
Editorial: Delta's problems need action now
February 15, 2007

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is teetering on the edge of catastrophe. Its aging levees are failing, and the land they protect is sinking. Native fish populations are plunging, with some in danger of extinction.

Most important, the fresh water that 23 million California residents and thousands of Central Valley farms draw from the delta is increasingly tainted by salt as ocean water from the San Francisco Bay moves farther into the sprawling network of waterways. Global warming will only intensify the crisis.

California must end its political paralysis on the delta's problems. A recent flurry of attention to the issue has jump-started the conversation. Now state policy-makers need to push for a real delta action plan.

If the state continues to do nothing, the delta will continue to deteriorate. And an earthquake or other natural disaster could easily cut off much of California's water supply, including half the water for Silicon Valley, costing the state as much as \$40 billion.

Any solution to the delta's problems will be complicated -- politically, environmentally and financially.

State Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, is pushing the long-dormant idea of building some kind of alternative waterway such as a pipe, aqueduct or canal to divert fresh water from the Sacramento River before it reaches the delta.

The "peripheral canal" concept was soundly defeated by voters 25 years ago, largely because Northern Californians viewed it as a blatant attempt by thirsty Southern California to hijack their water supply.

But Simitian argues that his new \$5 billion proposal -- which would also require voter approval -- would reduce the amount of water currently being taken and also provide vital money for delta restoration and conservation projects. "The world has changed," he said.

The respected Public Policy Institute of California also suggested reconsideration of the canal concept in a major report last week that analyzed the delta's problems.

An alternative offered by the PPIC is to reduce the amount of water the state pumps from the delta. This would require unpopular conservation measures and anger many of the state's farmers, but it would also reduce the damage to the delta's fragile ecosystem.

The state could also adopt a more incremental strategy of shoring up some levees and making a strategic decision to allow some low-lying areas to flood. The \$4.1 billion in levee bonds approved by voters in November could help with that effort. It wouldn't solve the delta's ecological issues, but it would improve the reliability of the fresh water supply and protect many people who live near the levees.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is adding to the momentum for change. He just appointed a task force of political, environmental and scientific leaders to recommend a delta management plan by the end of the year.

Ensuring the adequacy of the state's water supply and the environmental health of the delta are critical. California needs to craft a delta strategy that achieves a balance between both goals.

And we need to do it soon. The residents of New Orleans learned the hard way: Nature doesn't care if we're ready or not.