



DELTA ISSUES

Guest Commentary: California's calamity in waiting

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**By Kevin Starr, University Professor and professor of history at USC.
His latest book is "California: A History."**

THINKING catastrophically should come naturally in this year of disaster. Instead, most California policymakers have distracted themselves with relatively minor matters, as with the recent special election.

Meanwhile, this state remains vulnerable to devastation that would combine elements of Pakistan's earthquake and New Orleans' flood.

The conversation turned almost casually to this tragic scenario as I dined recently with two Metropolitan Water District board members, David Farrar, an attorney representing the city of Los Angeles, and fifth-generation rancher Randy Record, who represents eastern Riverside County. With us was Ron Gastelum, interim president of the L.A. Chamber of Commerce, formerly the chief executive of the MWD. My companions were chillingly quick to agree that it is probable — and inevitable if no action is taken — that a quake will someday trigger a catastrophic failure of public works, and that this could prove Katrina-like in its effect. The following week, Lester Snow, director of the state Department of Water Resources, in testimony before a joint legislative committee, confirmed everything that Farrar, Record and Gastelum had been discussing.

The scenario is as simple as what unfolded in New Orleans. The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is below sea level. It is protected by a network of earthen levees dating to the frontier era, many built by Chinese laborers following completion of the trans-Sierra railroad. Through this delta flow the waters of Northern California, which are channeled southward to the semi-arid reaches of Central and Southern California via a network of

aqueducts and pipelines representing a multibillion-dollar investment by state and federal government across 75 years of construction.

Ringed the delta is a rich empire of agriculture and suburban development. Should a magnitude 6.5 earthquake strike the San Francisco Bay Area — almost a certainty by mid-century, though it could happen today — about 30 major failures can be expected in the earthen levees.

About 3,000 homes and 85,000 acres of cropland would be submerged. Saltwater from San Francisco Bay would invade the system, forcing engineers to shut down the pumps that ship water to Central and Southern California while the levees were being repaired. This would cut off water to the State Water Project and the federal Central Valley Project.

The MWD has a water reserve of six months set aside for such a crisis, and it also accesses water from the Colorado River. Multiple smaller water agencies south of the delta, however, have no such reserves or alternate sources of supply.

Think of it: 3,000 homes under water; 16 delta islands and 85,000 acres of cropland lost to flood; drought conditions in Central California, followed by drought conditions in Southern California as thirsty people drink up MWD reserves in the first six months of a 12- to 18-month reconstruction period. Nor would the MWD be able to tap into an increased supply of Colorado River water, these resources having long since been allocated to Nevada and Arizona.

Snow predicts that besides wrecking the levees, such a quake would rupture natural gas and oil pipelines and down electrical transmission lines. Floods would wash away railroad routes, he says, adding that 30,000 jobs would be lost and the economy would take a hit of \$30 billion to \$40 billion.

A year or so ago, contemplation of such a catastrophe would have glazed over eyes by the millions. "Yeah, yeah, yeah" would have been our response.

Having just lost New Orleans, however, and seeing this loss destabilize our society in terms of its fundamental social arrangements, we cannot remain detached — or accuse Snow and those board members of alarmism. "I passionately believe," Farrar said, "that this issue is the Achilles' heel of

California, given the fact that there is an absolute certainty that such an earthquake will come. The only question is when. If such an earthquake happens before we've solved this problem, it will be a disaster beyond our imagination."

That's what Fire Chief Dennis Sullivan told the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1905 regarding that city's inadequate water system. But the supervisors didn't listen, and the city burned. Nor did the powers that be listen to the Army Corps of Engineers and its consultants when they suggested that the levees holding back the waters of Lake Pontchartrain were in need of remedial action.

Californians have been no more cautious. In 1982, voters rejected the Peripheral Canal that would have routed water around the delta to the southern parts of the state. Some were motivated by legitimate concerns on environmental damage to the delta. But the strongest opposition came from Northern California voters whose anti-Southern California sentiments made them oblivious to the common treasure that is our state's integrated water system.

Cross-purposes do abound. People who support major work to bolster the levees fear a peripheral pipeline to move water because they believe that once such a pipeline is built, no one will give a damn about the levees.

Meanwhile, Republicans and Democrats alike want Other People's Money — namely the federal government's — to do the job (supporting native daughter Joan Didion's observation in her recent memoir that Californians pretend to be self-reliant but basically want their water- and flood-control tab picked up by the feds).

The devastation in New Orleans should have made us take another look at how our political system can be used to preserve the society we've created. But a paralyzed state government still seems more willing to take up trivial issues while taking a pass on assuring that we have continued access to water — the substance that keeps us alive.

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