Delta Stewardship Council

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Council Sees Need for Action on Delta Emergency Plan

Amid growing concern over the risk of levee failure in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, the Delta Stewardship Council called for an emergency preparedness and response plan tailored specifically to the region.

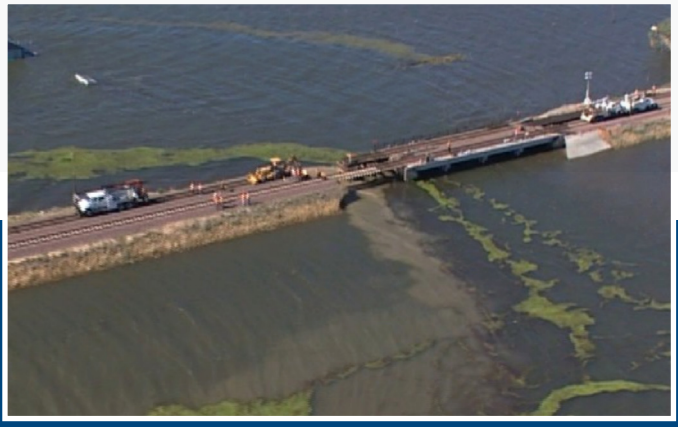
The Delta Reform Act requires the Council's Delta Plan to "attempt to reduce risks to people, property and state interests in the Delta by promoting effective emergency preparedness, appropriate land uses, and strategic levee investments."

After a presentation at the Council's November meeting by the California Emergency Management Agency (CalEMA), which is responsible for coordinating disaster response among state agencies, Council members noted the need to move more quickly and work together more closely to address the Delta's vulnerabilities.

The Council directed DSC staff and Agency officials to meet within the next few weeks to discuss their progress.

"There is no Delta-centric plan," said Council Chair Phil Isenberg. "My overall impression is everyone is planning to build a plan. We plan to plan. Who's responsible for today?"

*See **Emergency**, Page 3*



Courtesy of California Department of Water Resources

A levee breech can occur at any time. In 2004, the Jones Tract levee east of Stockton failed without warning and in sunny weather.

Council Issues Two New White Papers

The Delta Stewardship Council has issued two new white papers – addressing the issues of emergency preparedness and land use – as it continues to lay out a factual foundation for its work developing a Delta Plan.

The Council, which earlier issued white papers on the Delta ecosystem and flood risk, discussed the latest reports at its November meeting.

The white paper on emergency preparedness noted that although the frequency of levee failures in the Delta has decreased over the last 50 years, "the risk of levee failure remains a growing concern."

While an earthquake or other natural disaster is the most likely cause of any future levee failure, the aging condition of many levees creates the potential for surprise failures, like the Jones Tract levee failure near Stockton in 2004, which occurred in good weather without warning.

"Empirical evidence suggests that less major disasters can be dealt with sufficiently," said Eric Nagy, a consultant with HDR Inc., an engineering firm that prepared the white paper. "We need much more thinking about how to deal with a true catastrophe."

The white paper also explains that a Delta-specific plan needs to consider a worst-case scenario based on the unique geography of the area. Ideally, an effective plan needs to address all four phases of emergency management: preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation, the paper notes.

Also at its latest meeting, the Council discussed the white paper on land use, which Councilmember Don Nottoli called a "sensitive piece of the Delta Plan."

The Delta's predominant land use is agriculture, but there are many legacy communities with natural and cultural heritage that need to be considered in land use issues.

"This Council needs to absorb a great deal of information and has to respect local land use authorities," Nottoli said.

The Council will continue to review and discuss additional white papers as it prepares the Delta Plan. To review and submit written comments on the white papers and other planning documents, click **HERE**.

Council Adds Fish Screen Study and Construction Project to Interim Plan

The Delta Stewardship Council's Early Actions Committee has added two items concerning fish screens – the Rock Slough Fish Screen Project and the Clifton Court Forebay Low Flow Fish Study – to the Council's Interim Plan.

As Council members work to craft a final plan that implements the state's coequal goals for the Delta, the Interim Plan provides the primary framework for the Council's efforts. Fish screens are designed to prevent fish from being drawn or swimming into a diversion of water such as a dam, aqueduct or cooling water intake.

The Contra Costa Water District successfully submitted the two actions to the Council. Both are fully funded.

With the average cost of a fish screen near $800,000, according to a presentation by the California Department of Water Resources, Council members were quick to point out that neither project was asking for funding.

"Both items were simply presented to inform the Council of what is going on," Chair Phil Isenberg said. "It's a lot easier to mandate that something be done than to allocate money to do it. These projects are not an expedition to find money."

The Clifton Court Forebay Low Flow Fish Study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of a new kind of fish screen specifically designed for use near pumps with low flows. Researchers hope to increase both the abundance and lifespan of nearby fish while improving the quality of water that passes through the screens.

*See **Screens**, Page 3*

Courtesy of California Department of Water Resources

The Rock Slough Fish Screen Project and the Clifton Court Forebay Low Flow Fish Study were both added to the Interim Plan at November's Council Meeting. Both projects aim to reduce losses of delta smelt, shown here, and improve water quality.

Member Spotlight

Fiorini Brings Wealth of Water Work to Council

Delta Stewardship Councilmember

Randy Fiorini

For Delta Stewardship Councilmember Randy Fiorini, service on the Council is about bringing nearly three decades of water experience to bear on removing the obstacles to restoring and strengthening the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

"When I was asked to serve, I agreed because I care about the problems facing California that relate to water reliability and a healthy ecosystem," said Fiorini, who was appointed to the Council by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in March of this year. "I expect to make many positive contributions during my term of service."

Fiorini's seat on the Delta Stewardship Council does not mark his first foray into water policy. In addition to his longtime role as managing partner of Fiorini Ranch, he also served 16 years as director of the Turlock Irrigation District and 12 years as a Board member and President of the Association of California Water Agencies and as President and Board member of the California Farm Water Coalition.

"These experiences not only exposed me to the complexity of the issues facing California, but also provided me an opportunity to participate in meaningful ways to help solve some of those problems," Fiorini said. "Most of all, my years of service have afforded me the opportunity to meet, work with and learn from many of California's most knowledgeable and dedicated water policy leaders."

The Delta Stewardship Council, created by the Legislature in November 2009, is a state agency that has been charged with developing a Delta Plan – a comprehensive set of policies and regulations to guide future activities in the Delta, or anywhere in the state that either affects or benefits from the Delta. The 738,000-acre estuary supplies drinking water to about 25 million Californians and is home to countless species, some of which are endangered or threatened. It is also a vital source of water to California's multibillion-dollar agricultural industry.

*See **Fiorini**, Page 3*

Emergency, *Continued from Page 1*

Isenberg went on to note that not only was it necessary to build a plan that calls for basic protection of life and property, but it's also necessary that it consider the policy objectives that support the coequal goals of reliably supplying water to Californians and restoring the ecosystem.

CalEMA officials noted that progress has been made, including the development of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Multi-Hazard Coordination Task Force. The agency is also coordinating development of a draft emergency preparedness and response strategy for the Delta region.

"We want to assure the Council that we have made many positive steps forward for the Delta specifically," said Jim Brown, the Agency's administrator for the inland region.

Isenberg, however, reminded officials that even after a disaster, the Delta is expected to supply water to millions of Californians, and encouraged the agency to provide a more detailed plan so it could be properly considered in the context of the Delta Plan.

"How do we protect valuable resources like our water supply and our ecosystem by having options that might be exercised, but need not be?" Isenberg asked. "Are you bound, or have you thought about, how to respect the coequal goals and the Delta as an evolving place?"

"We all need to keep in mind the coequal goals," added Councilmember Felicia Marcus. "With a multi-levee collapse, the water supply will be threatened. We're all on notice. We need to engage at all levels."

But there are some who question whether concerns about levees aren't masking other motives.

"All the hype about levee strength is just another thing to throw out there to prove the Delta is unsustainable and in danger," said Delta farmer Mike Robinson. "I don't agree with that. And it's another thing to justify a canal or a pipeline."

Dr. Jeff Mount, a professor of geology at UC Davis and a member of the Delta Independent Science Board, is one of the leading experts on levee sustainability. He argues the situation will not get better on its own.

"The levees weren't constructed. They evolved," Mount said in an online interview with Popular Mechanics. "They would have to continuously add on to these levees to make them bigger and stronger as the islands subside, and frankly, the fact is things are getting worse…when you put a foot of new material on top of a levee…you have to count on the fact that you'll lose about half of that."

Screens, *Continued from Page 2*

Isenberg and Councilmember Randy Fiorini stressed that the addition of these items is not a rubber stamp on all fish screens in the Delta.

"Because the screens are somewhat controversial, a study seems necessary," Fiorini said.

The Rock Slough Fish Screen Project is intended to reduce the loss of delta smelt around the Rock Slough pumping facility in Oakley. This project was added to the Interim Plan by virtue of being a necessary component of a previously adopted action.

"Last month we approved a connected project for [Contra Costa County Water District's] pipeline, and this is a necessary part," Isenberg said. "They are not asking us to fund it – the pipeline construction is absolutely completed, paid for, not an issue, this is a required ingredient."

Both were approved on votes of 5-0, with two Council members absent.

Yolo County also received Council support for its efforts to improve emergency communications in the Delta and to expedite the study of 1,600 miles of rural levees. The Council voted 6-0, with one member absent, to include its support of these efforts in the Interim Plan.

Fiorini, *Continued from Page 2*

The public process to determine what this set of policies and regulations should be began in April of 2010 and must be completed by January 1, 2012. Stakeholders and members of the public with an interest in the statutory coequal goals of water supply reliability for California, ecosystem health for the Delta or the Delta as an evolving place are encouraged to follow and contribute to the Council's process.

"The complexity of California's water supply system and the public policy challenges that have emerged in the past several decades are fascinating to me," Fiorini said. "The challenges we now face demand comprehensive solutions. I would like to help."

He noted that Council members have a "huge task" before them.

"We are off to a great start, and I have enjoyed every minute of it … so far," Fiorini said.