

Report finds delta among most vulnerable rivers

Kelly Zito, San Francisco Chronicle, 6-2-10

The river system that makes up the backbone of the state's economy ranks as one of the most imperiled watersheds in the nation, putting at risk drinking water for millions of Californians as well as billions of dollars worth of crops and urban infrastructure, according to an annual report on the country's most important waterways.

The Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, whose fingers extend from the slopes of Mount Shasta in the north to vast farm fields near Fresno in the south, is "extremely vulnerable to catastrophic failure" from over-pumping and declining ecosystems, according to American Rivers, a Washington, D.C., conservation group.

And increasingly, surging storm waters and rising sea levels induced by global climate change threaten to ravage the delicate network of levees and channels that route water through the confluence of the two rivers and protect low-lying cities such as Sacramento, Lathrop and Stockton.

"The (levee) system is fragile, old and degraded ... and the delta is the most important estuary in North America," said Jeffrey Mount, a prominent UC Davis watershed scientist and American Rivers board member. "And there's no money to fix it. That's why there are hard choices to come."

Cracks in the system

Water supplies from the delta slake the thirst of some 23 million Californians and hundreds of thousands of acres of the nation's richest agricultural land. In recent years, however, cracks in the system have turned into yawning gaps in the face of drought, rising oceans, pollution, invasive species, and aging pipes and canals.

Those myriad pressures placed the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta at No. 2 on the group's list of most endangered rivers, behind the Upper Delaware River in Pennsylvania and New York, and just ahead of the Gauley River in West Virginia. Both the Upper Delaware and Gauley rivers are under threat from contamination tied to energy operations - natural gas extraction along the Upper Delaware and mountaintop mining along the Gauley.

Repair plans

California's water woes are familiar to anyone who has followed the protracted political, legal and financial battles over fixing the system. This year's American Rivers report, released today, coincides with deadlines on several broad-based efforts to overhaul both the management and infrastructure of the system.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan, which Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is rushing to finish before his term ends in January, aims to find a balance between a reliable water supply and ecosystem restoration. Its centerpiece is a controversial, multibillion-dollar canal that would funnel water around the delta to prevent further environmental damage and ensure a consistent water supply.

Under a separate project with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the state is identifying the weakest parts of the Central Valley's flood-control system. The Department of Water Resources must complete that plan by Jan. 1, 2012.

American Rivers officials say both plans offer opportunities to improve on the status quo. However, they worry that any steps may simply open the spigot wider, diverting more water from the rivers with little regard for ecological rehabilitation.

Learn from example

Instead, says American Rivers' John Cain, state leaders should learn from the success of the Yolo Bypass, a kind of flood-safety valve for the Sacramento River completed in the 1930s. In addition to its main function, the bypass has emerged as an important rest stop for migratory birds.

"It's an example of what works right in the system," Cain said. "We need to create more room for rivers to flood when the inevitable floods do come, instead of spending hundreds of millions on emergency levee repairs."

The Department of Water Resources says any statewide water plan will address what it sees as the three key problems facing the system: water reliability, water quality and ecosystem rehabilitation.

"We absolutely agree that the Sacramento-San Joaquin delta is in crisis. That's why we're continuing to collaborate on a planning process to fix this critical hub," said department spokesman Matt Notley.