

The Great Myth of the Delta's 'Earthquake-Prone' Levees

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Dan Bacher, Indy Bay, 2-1-11

One of the most deceptive arguments used by agribusiness, southern California water agencies and the state and federal governments in their campaign to build the peripheral canal/tunnel on the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta is the myth of the Delta's "fragile, earthquake-prone" levees.

This narrative has been pushed forward by the water "experts" of the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) in their reports, funded by Stephen D. Bechtel Jr. and the Lucille and David Packard Foundation, to scare California residents into building the peripheral canal/tunnel.

in the July 2008, the PPIC released a report stating that, "A major earthquake would cause a catastrophic failure of the levee system, jeopardizing water supplies from the Bay Area to San Diego."

The report (<http://www.ppic.org/main/pressrelease.asp?p=859>) concluded, "Building a peripheral canal to carry water around the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is the most promising strategy to balance two critical policy goals: reviving a threatened ecosystem and ensuring a high-quality water supply for California's residents."

In an otherwise good San Jose Mercury News editorial: "Brown needs to find a way to fix the Delta," the "earthquake-prone" levee myth is perpetuated (http://www.mercurynews.com/editorials/ci_17230039?source=rss&nlick_check=1).

"The Calaveras and Hayward faults are less than 50 miles west of the Delta's 1,300-mile levee system, parts of which are more than 50 years old and fragile at best. A major earthquake could mean catastrophic failure of the levees, which are the only thing keeping San Francisco Bay's saltwater from intruding into the freshwater estuary, which is below sea level," the editors wrote.

However, Delta advocates take issue with the argument that imminent disaster awaits the Delta and California water supplies from an earthquake if a peripheral canal isn't built.

"Do Delta levees need repairs and upgrades?" asked Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, campaign director of Restore the Delta. "Of course they do, as do all levee systems. Levees need constant maintenance."

However, Barrigan-Parrilla emphasized, "We have never lost one levee in the Delta to an earthquake. Not in 1989, and not before that."

The greatest threat to the Delta is a catastrophic flood, not an earthquake. Ironically, the Department of Water Resources (DWR) will not release the bond money marked for such levee improvements as voted on by Californians, according to Barrigan-Parrilla.

Why is that? "So that the failing Delta becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and DWR protects its relevance by building a new state water project," she suggests.

I agree with Barrigan-Parrilla and other Delta advocates that to prevent Delta levees from collapsing, DWR needs to release the bond money marked for levee improvements, not build a new canal.

While the "canal huggers" in the state and federal governments claim that they want to build the peripheral canal/tunnel to increase "water supply reliability" and "restore the ecosystem," the real reason behind building such a big government project is to increase water exports to corporate agribusiness on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley, Southern California water agencies, and corporate water privateers.

There is no example in U.S. or world history where a canal system has ended up diverting less water from a watershed and restoring an ecosystem, as the "canal huggers" claim the canal/tunnel will do. California water is already overallocated many times - and the canal will only serve to divert more water needed for imperiled Central Valley and Delta fish populations to recover to agribusiness and southern California.

Bill Jennings, executive director/chairman of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, pointed out in a recent Delta Stewardship Council hearing in Stockton that the unimpaired flows down the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers amount to 29 million acre feet of water per year, while the state has identified 345 million acre feet of water rights, including water for hydropower.

Construction of the canal may mean big profits for engineering firms, real estate companies and construction corporations that raid the public trough to build the canal, but the export of more water from the Delta is likely to lead to the extinction of Sacramento River chinook salmon, Central Valley steelhead, Delta smelt, longfin smelt, Sacramento splittail, green sturgeon and other imperiled fish populations.