

Will a big quake leave our water supplies high and dry?

Art Bishop, Yucca Valley Hi-Desert Star, 2-27-12

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From a Feb. 22 article by Aaron Task of The Daily Ticker: "...The Strait of Hormuz is a waterway that connects the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea. It is the only passage to the open ocean for some of the biggest oil producers in the Middle East

"Because so much of the world's oil travels through strait, any disruption to the shipping channel would have a major impact on global crude oil prices, which ultimately determine the price we pay for gas at the pump."

Californians face a similar crisis as in the Strait of Hormuz, but our "strait" is the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, and our "oil" is our water supply.

We've been told for years when it comes to earthquakes, the "Big One" could happen at any moment and that a significant portion of the state's water supply could be wiped out for a year or longer. So we buy earthquake kits, flashlights, bottled water, extra canned food for our homes — we take action to prepare. Billions of dollars have been spent retrofitting bridges, highways, hospitals, schools and prisons. But to date, no effective measures have been taken to secure our water supply in the event of an earthquake.

Because of prudent management by the Board of Directors, including establishment of a water banking program, Mojave Water Agency's service area likely would not be adversely affected like other areas by a catastrophic earthquake. But the region's supplies won't last indefinitely. It's time to retrofit our state's water delivery system.

The main concern is about a 6.7 earthquake striking Northern California and its effect on the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, a network of rivers, streams, marshes and grasslands. The largest estuary on the West Coast, it currently doubles as the state's primary water conveyance system, sending freshwater to 25 million Californians throughout Northern, Central and Southern California.

But that water is ushered through by 100-year-old levees that are weak, poorly engineered and could collapse in the event of an earthquake. If that happens, water from the San Francisco Bay would rush into the delta, turning freshwater into saltwater.

The economic toll of this seismic event could amount to \$40 billion from losses in water supplies, farm production, wages and jobs and downed utilities.

To avoid such a catastrophe, public water agencies have been working with state and federal agencies ... and other stakeholders on a comprehensive plan to protect California's water supply, protect local communities and restore the Delta's ailing ecosystem. The plan, known as the Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP), couples a new water delivery system with habitat restoration to achieve long-term water supply reliability and a healthy delta ecosystem.

New infrastructure — either a tunnel or canal — would carry a carefully managed portion of water underneath or around the delta, rather than through the fragile ecosystem and away from the weak levees. By doing this we would restore reliability to our water supply, protect it from floods and earthquakes, improve water quality, all while restoring and protecting the delta ecosystem.

The BDCP is likely to be one of the largest public works projects in California history and public water agencies have already agreed to provide the funding for construction.

With five years of research and planning and more than 300 public meetings already complete, the state is now close to finalizing the BDCP and beginning the environmental review process.

...It's time for residents throughout the state to get informed and understand the risks to our water supply system and the solutions presented by the BDCP. The Southern California Water Committee, including support from Mojave Water Agency, has launched a public education program, "Delta Disrupted," to provide more information on this critical issue. To learn more, check out www.socalwater.org/delta-disrupted.