

Report -- California should prepare for 3-foot sea level rise this century

Brendan P. Bartholomew, San Francisco Examiner, 8-18-14

California is “woefully unprepared” for the challenge of accelerating sea-level rise and could potentially lose billions of dollars in revenue due to related impacts, according to a final report recently issued by the Assembly Select Committee on Sea Level Rise and the California Economy.

Chaired by state Assemblyman Richard Gordon, D-Menlo Park, the Select Committee held a series of hearings around the state featuring testimony from scientists and industry leaders about potential impacts to the state’s economy and infrastructure.

Rep. Jackie Speier, D-Hillsborough, has called San Mateo County “ground zero” for sea level rise on the West Coast because so many of its assets are located at sea level.

The Select Committee’s final report urges Californians to prepare for the seas to rise by an average of three feet during this century, and cites data generated in the Bay Area to support that conclusion. The nation’s oldest continually operating sea-level gauge, which is located at Fort Point in the San Francisco Bay, recorded a seven-inch rise in area sea level during the 20th century, the report says. According to a 2012 report by the National Research Council, the 21st century is seeing a dramatic acceleration in the rate of sea-level rise for California, with an additional 36 inches projected by 2100.

Findings highlighted in the final report include blows to key segments of the state’s economy, with industries including agriculture, fishing and tourism being especially affected. Airports, shipping ports and infrastructure are also expected to suffer impacts as a result of rising sea levels.

“Extreme” storm events and king tides that have inundated the Bay Area in recent years have provided a preview of “the new norm,” and such weather events are exacerbated by sea-level rise, according to the report.

Additionally, saltwater intrusion into coastal aquifers is compromising fresh water sources, and being accelerated by sea-level rise. Coastal erosion is another resulting problem, breaking down natural barriers between the sea and coastal communities, the report says.

As a response measure, the report calls for coordinated planning across jurisdictional boundaries, claiming important decisions will need to be made about where to “armor” the coast, in areas where possible, and when retreat from the coastal zone should be encouraged. Currently, insufficient state funding is a barrier to taking appropriate actions, the report says.

Among policy recommendations, the report suggests educating the public in order to achieve community “buy-in” towards making the issue an immediate priority. Also called for are incentivizing responses to sea-level rise by making additional monies available to existing grant programs, creating new funding sources, and establishing a state revolving loan program to assist communities with adaptation efforts.

The report also advocates ensuring that there is “a continued repository for science in the state in order to make educated policy decisions,” and cites the California Ocean Protection Council as an agency capable of helping to realize that goal.

One possible science and engineering repository that could help meet the need for better-coordinated planning would be the Planning for Sea-Level Rise Database, a statewide resource that would be created if Gordon's recently introduced Assembly Bill 2516 is adopted.