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Improving Disaster Response in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta

In the debate on the future of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta there seems to be general agreement on at least one thing; the Delta, as a distinct geographical region, is very important to California. Given this agreement, we need to move past the mere description of current emergency management systems and the superficial recommendations that have characterized discussion on Delta emergency response to date. We need to come to grips with the real response gaps that still exist despite past advances in emergency response process.

In light of this need, the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Multi-Hazard Coordination Task Force report is important because it does bring to light some very real response gaps that are not going to be fixed by just having another exercise. This was achieved because it is the only report on the subject prepared by individuals actually responsible for managing Delta flood response. Sometimes it takes experience, and the weight of actual responsibility, to get past descriptions of how things are supposed to work to how they really work in real life.

The Task Force report is also important because with its release we now have one of the two key ingredients for progress in any area of endeavor; a credible, coherent and comprehensive strategy for action. Fortunately, the second critical ingredient for progress is also appearing; the resources to implement the strategy. Besides its own internal planning, the Department of Water Resources (DWR) has announced the imminent release of the first ever grants to local jurisdictions for flood response projects from the bonds passed in 2006. The Central Valley Flood Protection Plan (CVFPP) program has simultaneously announced that additional funds will be funneled to regional planning bodies for use, in part, on flood preparedness projects. Finally, the California Emergency Management Agency (CalEMA) has announced the allocation of funds for the preparation of a Northern California Catastrophic Flood Incident Plan over the next year.

So the ingredients for true progress in Delta flood response are present. But if this historic opportunity is to be effectively exploited policy makers must ask some vital questions. Have all levels of government committed to using the Task Force strategy to guide their separate preparedness efforts? Or is everyone, instead, just going to go their own way in their own “silo” under their own priorities and strategies? Will these separate funding streams be coordinated to ensure an integrated and efficient effort to implement the joint strategy? Or will these separate programs move along more or less independently, leading to potential duplication of effort, conflicting results, or incomplete implementation? The answers are not yet clear to me.

As far as the specific Task Force recommendations, it is important to keep in mind that there are two key separate components to a flood response. There are the functions that most people

equate with the term “emergency response”; evacuation, rescue, shelter, public assistance etc. And there is the “flood fight”, consisting of those efforts to prevent levee failure during the flood and to reduce the extent and duration of impounded flood waters if a levee does fail.

It is important to make this distinction for two reasons. First, each component involves completely different players and completely different response issues. Second, the flood fight component is really the priority focus in a flood because if we are as efficient and effective as possible in preventing levee failure, and as efficient and effective as possible in limiting the extent, depth, or duration of flood waters if a levee does fail, then we prevent or physically limit the subsequent tragedy. An effective flood fight also makes the other response functions easier to perform and maybe unnecessary. The report recommendations address one or the other of these key response components and should be analyzed in that light.

Finally, I have a brief comment on three of the report recommendations that bear on those flood fight operations. The Task Force report calls for the creation of a Delta multi-agency coordination system (MACS). Common sense tells us that floods occur within distinct physical and hydrological regions. Within those regions, such as the Delta, residents struggle with the same threat, need the same resources, and are dependent upon each other for ultimate success. Yet, the current emergency management system divides the Delta into five operational areas, two mutual aid regions, numerous local jurisdictions, and several state and federal agency jurisdictions. The call for a Delta MACS is a first attempt to create a more regionally integrated response to what are regional disasters within a distinct geographical area that has just refused to conform to political and administrative boundaries.

The Task Force report calls for flood contingency mapping in the Delta. It only took one flood for me to realize that we were making flood fight decisions and collecting vital information in the middle of the crisis that could have been made and collected when the rivers were quiet. I also saw that the information that we did have was not in a format amenable for use in the environment in which critical decisions were being made. San Joaquin County pioneered the development of flood contingency maps to address these issues. Examples can be seen at www.sjmap.org/oesfcm. The Task Force recognized the need to fill this gap for the entire Delta. FEMA Region IX Mitigation Branch also recognized the importance of this step in 2009 and funded the preparation of a guide outlining best practices for accomplishing it.

The Task Force report calls for creation of a flood fight emergency response funding mechanism. We currently have an upside down funding system for responding to levee problems or failures. The jurisdictions best placed to respond to problems, the reclamation districts, often do not have adequate cash flow when the crisis arrives and the agencies that potentially have the funds to respond can be slower to respond for bureaucratic and other reasons. I have personally witnessed numerous cases where there were 24-48 hour delays in responding to an identified levee problem as agencies struggled with the issue of who was able or willing to act, and when. Fixing this issue, in my opinion, is of the highest priority.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on this subject important to the residents of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, whose lives and livelihood are at stake, and to all of California. I am willing to further elaborate on my comments as the committee may desire.