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Testimony Before the
Subcommittee on Water and Power
United States House of Representatives

Oversight Hearing on
“Protecting Sacramento/San Joaquin Bay-Delta Water Supplies and Responding to Catastrophic
Failures in California Water Deliveries”

April 6, 2006

The Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta is the tidal area where the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers and their tributaries meet the Delta Estuary, the largest estuary on the West Coast of the United States. The Delta comprises more than 738,000 acres in six counties. The Delta's 700 miles of waterways surround more than 60 levee protected tracts and islands. The lowest islands are in the agricultural portions of the western Delta where much of the land is 15 to 25 feet below sea level and continuing to sink due to oxidation of the peat soil. Most of the 1,100 miles of levees surrounding these islands are privately owned and maintained. The Delta serves as the hub of fresh water deliveries from northern to southern California. The State Water Project and Federal Central Valley Project transformed the Delta from a salt water estuary into a fresh water conveyance for a multi-billion dollar urban and agricultural economy. The Central Valley Project relies on Delta fresh water conveyance capabilities to supply 7 million acres of highly productive farmland south of the Delta.

A massive Delta levee failure, likely caused by an earthquake with a similar occurrence probability as Hurricane Katrina, would bring immense economic impact by ceasing water deliveries to much of the state not to mention displacing hundreds of thousands of people from their homes. If a catastrophe of this magnitude were to occur, the fresh water conveyance for 2/3rds of the state's drinking water supplies would be lost for many years. Losing the Delta would be devastating to the 5th largest economy in the world. Existing storage, conservation and alternative sources of fresh water would simply not sustain the water demands throughout the state. A likely scenario would be the tremendous loss of agricultural lands as irrigation water would be transferred to urban uses.

Approximately 400,000 people live in and around the Delta. The portion of the City of Stockton located within the Delta is protected from flooding by levees. These levees are well maintained and provide 100-year flood protection per FEMA criteria. Immediately to the west of the City are the numerous tracts and islands which are protected by levee systems and comprise the heart of the Delta. These levee systems are critical to the efficient control of salinity intrusion from the San Francisco Bay, allowing the Delta to be the fresh water supply for 23 million Californians. Although not currently drawing drinking water supplies from the Delta, Stockton will have its Delta Water Supply Project on line in 2010 to supply the metropolitan area with 35 percent of its current municipal and industrial needs.

Except for 275 miles of federal project levees along the navigable channels, the Corps of Engineers has not inspected or rehabilitated the private Delta levees because they are not part of the federal levee system. In recent years the State has provided assistance through the Levee Subventions Program, matching 75% of repair and maintenance costs. That highly successful program ended in 2005. Assemblymember Lois Wolk (D-Davis) has introduced a bill to extend the Levee Subventions Program an additional two years and seeks greater funding for Delta levee maintenance. It is estimated that \$1 billion dollars would be needed to repair and reinforce the worst 500 miles of Delta levees to minimum FEMA standards. Federal dollars are needed to supplement the Levee Subventions Program to maintain the Delta's viability to convey fresh water to pumps that serve 2/3rds of the State's population. Although the risk of levee failure will be reduced through ongoing levee maintenance efforts, it will never be eliminated.

Need For Immediate Funding For Upgrading Delta Levees

Although the State and Federal interest and need for action to upgrade Delta levees has been clear for many years, significant State and Federal assistance has been basically limited to disaster assistance until 1984 when the State committed roughly ten million dollars per year to the State Delta Levee Maintenance Subvention Program.

Federal interest in agriculture, commercial and recreational navigation, transportation, fish, migratory waterfowl, and fresh water supplies as related to the Delta is and has been clear, however, the non-disaster federal contribution to maintenance and rehabilitation of the non-project levees in the Delta has been directed primarily to studies.

There Is A Real Need To Secure Funds That Will Result in Immediate Placement of Dirt and Rock On Existing Levees To Reduce The Risk of Levee Failure

The most effective way to accomplish this result is to contribute funding to the already ongoing State Delta Levee Maintenance Subvention Program which is administered by the State Reclamation Board through the California Department of Water Resources and California Department of Fish and Game.

Disaster Response

Local agencies can help fight flooding but do not have the financial ability to repair a levee break, dewater the flooded areas or otherwise undertake major restoration work. Once a levee break occurs, the assessable base of the local agencies is of little value. This was the case in June 2004, when an unexpected levee break of Lower Jones Tract overwhelmed the local ability to respond. This single break cost nearly \$100 million for emergency response, damage to private property, lost crops, levee repair, and pumping costs. The opportunity for possible reimbursement through currently structured disaster assistance or similar types of programs does not provide the cash necessary to accomplish the work. Given today's costs, only a state or federal agency has the financial capability to adequately respond to a Delta levee break. A plan for immediate response by a state or federal agency once a levee break occurs is essential to containment of the damages including the protection of the water supply. The plan should provide for immediate restoration of the levee and drainage facilities to the point that the local agencies can financially and effectively resume operation and maintenance. Emergency response regardless of the type of emergency should not involve a debate on policy. Immediate no holds barred response to arrest the threat should be the goal.

Federal Responsibility

Due to the critical importance of the Delta levee system to the State's economy, the federal government should to take immediate action to channel federal dollars to supplement the Levee Subventions Program and the Corps of Engineers should be directed to take action to evaluate the future of the Delta, invest in levee repair and maintenance and develop an action plan to close levee breaks and dewater flooded areas in the Delta to minimize interruption and loss of water supplies for the federal Central Valley Project and other projects dependent upon the Delta.