

#2 SACRAMENTO-SAN JOAQUIN RIVER DELTA

CALIFORNIA

THREAT: OUTDATED WATER AND FLOOD MANAGEMENT

Summary

California's Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta supplies drinking water for 25 million people, irrigates the most productive agricultural land in the country, and provides critical habitat for the Pacific salmon fishery and millions of migratory birds. However, outdated water supply and flood management systems have decimated the ecosystem and closed the commercial salmon fishery all while leaving Californians ever more vulnerable to droughts and floods. Now two separate efforts to reengineer the state water supply and flood control system threaten to increase water diversions and preclude floodplain restoration that is essential for salmon recovery and public safety. Decisions by Governor Schwarzenegger in the last months of his term could advance river restoration, public safety, and water supply reliability through these plans, but only if powerful interests do not prevail in perpetuating the failed policies of the past.

The River

The Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta is the largest watershed in California, accounting for 40 percent of the run-off. The Delta drains the west slope of the Sierra Nevada into San Francisco Bay - the largest estuary on the West Coast. National Geographic called the Delta the hydraulic heart of California. It once supported millions of salmon and other fish, wintering habitat for millions of migratory birds, herds of tule elk, and even grizzly bear. Now many fish are endangered and the river is on the verge of collapse. Forty percent of the river's flow is diverted to provide drinking water for 25 million Californians and irrigation water to cultivate half the nation's fruits and vegetables. Dams, levees, and agricultural development have eliminated over ninety five percent of floodplain and freshwater tidal marsh habitats. Despite these insults, the system still provides critical habitat for birds migrating along the pacific flyway and a substantial portion of the Pacific salmon fishery in California and Oregon.

The Threat

The Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta is extremely vulnerable to catastrophic failure— ecological collapse, massive flooding, and/or a water supply crisis. This precarious situation has prompted state and federal efforts that could either devastate the river or place it on a more sustainable course. Record low numbers of endangered fish have prompted regulators to curtail water diversions to farms and cities and close the commercial salmon fishery for two consecutive years. Senator Feinstein has threatened to sponsor legislation that would override the Endangered Species Act in order to reduce the impacts of these reductions in water deliveries on powerful corporate agricultural interests. Mean-



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while, prominent scientists, led by Dr. Jeffery Mount of the University of California at Davis (an American Rivers board member), have warned that climate change threatens catastrophic levee failure that will shut down the state's principal water supply and flood the low-lying cities of Sacramento and Stockton.

The state and federal governments have jointly launched two separate efforts to address this crisis. The Bureau of Reclamation and Department of Water Resources are working with a broad group of stakeholders, including American Rivers, to develop the Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP) to both restore endangered wildlife and improve water supply reliability from the Delta. The cornerstone of the BDCP is a \$10 billion canal that would route water around the Delta, theoretically to safeguard the water supply system and reduce the environmental impacts of diversions. Many environmental organizations are understandably concerned that this canal will simply increase water diversions from the Delta.

In addition, the state is working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on the development of a comprehensive flood plan that will update the antiquated levee system to withstand the more frequent and severe floods that come with a changing climate. Expanded floodplains are an obvious strategy for reducing flood risk. However, traditional flood control interests are seeking new dams and bigger levees to protect the status quo, which allows them to develop flood prone lands with the expectation that the government will literally bail them out.

What Must Be Done

The state is rushing to complete the Bay Delta Conservation Plan before the end of Governor Schwarzeneg-

PHOTO: PATRICK KELLY

ger's final term this fall. The administration has been very active on this issue and is highly motivated to strike a legacy deal. American Rivers is negotiating with the other Delta stakeholders, and we are cautiously optimistic that we can agree on a good plan. We remain worried, however, that powerful water agencies will exploit the crisis to weaken protection for the salmon fishery and extract more water out of the Delta, particularly in drier years.

The state legislature has ordered a new flood plan for the Central Valley by December 31, 2011. American Rivers has been actively promoting natural flood management strategies that expand floodways to reduce flood risk and restore habitat for birds and fish, including the prized Chinook salmon. The science is clear that it will not be possible to restore the Delta ecosystem and safeguard against future floods without restoring floodplain habitat.

In both the BDCP and the Central Valley flood plan, Governor Schwarzenegger should insist that 21st century solutions like water efficiency and natural flood management are prioritized, and that the river's health is restored. First and foremost, the governor should:

1. Ensure that the BDCP reduces the amount of water diverted from the Delta during the driest forty percent of the years.
2. Immediately launch large scale floodplain restoration efforts, starting with improvements to Freemont Weir and the Yolo Bypass, to ensure that the BDCP will actually benefit the state salmon fishery while reducing flood risk for Sacramento.
3. Take immediate action to prevent additional development on flood plains by rigorously enforcing state levee standards and directing state bond funds to acquire flood prone lands.

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