



UC group urges freeze on Delta development

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CONTRA COSTA TIMES
Friday, March 15, 2007

SACRAMENTO - A team of UC Berkeley researchers is calling for a temporary halt on new construction in most of the Delta, saying rapid urbanization is threatening water supplies and restricting the ability of state officials to solve a water supply and environmental crisis.

In a report issued Wednesday by the university's Delta Initiative, the researchers said the Delta is facing extremely high growth pressures, even by California standards.

The five Delta counties, including Contra Costa, are projected to double in population by 2050 -- from 3.7 million to 7.5 million -- adding a new mass of people equal to that of Connecticut. The bulk of that growth is expected in the relatively undeveloped and flood-prone Delta regions of the counties, the report said.

"So much of the Delta is deep floodplain. You basically have the (New Orleans) 9th Ward that we are creating in California," Matt Kondolf, an environmental planning professor, told a joint hearing of four legislative committees.

About one-third of the drinking water used in California is drawn from the Delta, a 740,000-acre expanse that includes portions of Contra Costa, Solano, San Joaquin, Yolo and Sacramento counties.

Kondolf and the other authors of the report, "ReEnvisioning the Delta: Alternative Futures for the Heart of California," recommended a temporary moratorium on new construction for those deep floodplain regions until a new, two-year "Delta Vision" process plays out. The planning effort was ordered last year by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in response to the Delta's unraveling ecosystem and the failure of state water officials to stabilize and improve water supplies from the Delta.

It is expected to develop a plan for how the Delta will look in the future. Among the most contentious issues is whether to continue delivering drinking water to 23 million Californians and irrigation water to millions of acres of San Joaquin Valley farms through the Delta, or whether to build a peripheral canal to deliver water around the Delta.

Such a canal has been highly controversial in the past, particularly in Contra Costa County, where it could pose a serious threat to water quality for 500,000 residents. The canal could increase the amount of farm runoff from the San Joaquin River and decrease the amount of cleaner Sacramento River water near the Contra Costa Water District's intake pipes.

Still, support for a canal or similar aqueduct is gaining support, in large part because of the desperate condition of the Delta ecosystem and the increasing potential for environmental concerns to reduce

water supplies throughout the state.

The researchers said new construction in some currently open areas could be problematic.

Development in west Stockton, for example, threatens to cut off preferred routes for the canal, which could make building it more costly or impossible.

And another area of the Delta called Stewart Tract could have accommodated a flood bypass to protect San Joaquin county communities, but state and local agencies approved an 11,000-unit subdivision there called River Islands.

Environmental groups have sued to overturn the developers' permits, but if the project goes forward it could greatly complicate any future plans to build a flood bypass.

"Urbanization is throwing away long-range management options before we can even consider them," said William Eisenstein, another of the report's authors.

The likelihood of a state-ordered moratorium on new construction seems remote, at least for the time being -- though the experts' proposal reinforces the growing sense of crisis in the Delta.

Assemblywoman Lois Wolk, D-Davis, a leading advocate for stricter regulation on development in the floodplain, said a moratorium at this point probably goes too far and said she would prefer stricter levee and construction standards to protect residents.

But, she added, "If we don't act, then a moratorium starts to make more sense."

Kondolf, the environmental planning professor, said even developers who build levees that are twice as protective as the current standard would put the houses behind them at high risk, with a 10 percent chance of flooding during the life of a 30-year mortgage. And in deep areas of the Delta, the flooding could extend as high as the ceiling.

The report amounts to an attempt to raise the profile of land use issues in the Delta, a region where major controversies rage over the flow of water for cities, farms and the environment.

"Everybody is arguing about water and nobody is doing anything about land use, which will ultimately foreclose opportunities," said John Cain, the report's third author and a restoration ecologist at the Natural Heritage Institute.

The report's authors recommend increasing recreational opportunities in the Delta, forming a land trust to buy Delta land for public uses and considering government oversight in the Delta modeled on agencies such as the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, or other agencies at Lake Tahoe and the Florida Everglades.

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