

## **Comments by William Eisenstein**

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Press Conference to Release *ReEnvisioning the Delta*

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As most of you are likely well aware, the Sacramento – San Joaquin Delta is in crisis. It is unsustainable in every sense of that word. With the threat of earthquakes, floods on the Sacramento or San Joaquin Rivers, continued soil subsidence, and climate change all bearing down on the region, it is becoming more and more likely that we could suffer a mass levee failure in the Delta that will kill people, destroy property, badly harm the ecosystem, and potentially cut off the fresh water supply to 23 million Californians and several industries that are crucial to the state's economy. One estimate by our colleagues Bob Twiss of UC-Berkeley and Jeff Mount of UC-Davis places that likelihood at over 60 percent over the next 50 years.

In the face of this situation, it is truly remarkable that the major trend in the land use of the Delta is to place *even more* people and *even more* of our economy at risk. The Delta is one of the most rapidly urbanizing parts of California. Housing developments are being proposed and permitted on land that is below sea level or directly in the path of inevitable flooding. Even after the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina, the lesson still apparently hasn't been learned that voluntarily placing human lives and businesses in flood-prone areas behind levees is incredibly foolish.

The report we are releasing today – entitled *ReEnvisioning the Delta: Alternative Futures for the Heart of California* – documents the magnitude and the consequences of these urbanization trends in the Delta. It contains input and quotes from literally dozens of key experts and stakeholders that all point to the same conclusion – rapid, unplanned urbanization in and around the Delta is a very bad idea, both for the Delta itself and for the state of California.

But the report doesn't limit itself to pointing out the bad ideas. It also proposes some very good ideas for the Delta's future. These are drawn from two sources: examples of land and resource conservation success stories from elsewhere (including places like Lake Tahoe, the Everglades, and the Santa Monica Mountains), and from the design ideas of graduate students in landscape architecture and city planning at UC-Berkeley. The Delta is not just a problem for the state of California; it is also a unique place in its own right, with a rich heritage and enormous potential as a recreational and environmental asset for the people of the region.

Before talking more about that, let's take a look at a picture of this urbanization risk. This map, included in the report and compiled by Brooke Ray Smith and Alex Westhoff on behalf of the Delta Initiative, is the first map ever compiled that illustrates all of the potential development in and around the Delta. The areas in red are either already urbanized, or are already the subject of specific development proposals that are at various stages of local permitting processes right now. Especially in the south Delta, these red areas are already bumping right up against the light green areas depicting the Delta's primary zone.

Orange areas are places that are slated for urban growth in as part of urban spheres of influence, but which are not yet the subject of a specific proposal. The yellow areas are the remainder of the Delta secondary zone, none of which is explicitly protected for ecological or flood control purposes right now. The black line illustrates the boundary of the legal Delta – the outer limit of the secondary zone.

This “red zone” already covers numerous areas that are critical to the future of the Delta. For example, both sides of the San Joaquin River where it flows into the Delta are already covered in red. This is a highly flood-prone area, and always will be. One development, called River Islands, is proposed to be built on a site called the Stewart Tract that was under 10 feet of water in the floods of 1997.

Developments like River Islands are a bad idea for no less than *five* specific and compelling reasons. First, they place people directly in harm’s way. Even if the developers create levees with a [XXX]-year level of flood protection, as they say they will, that still leaves a [XX] percent chance that the houses will be flooded over the life of a 30-year mortgage, for reasons that we can discuss in the Q&A if you are interested.

Second, putting a housing development here will make it harder to protect the people who already live nearby from flooding. Floodwaters have to go somewhere, and if they can’t pass through Stewart Tract they will want to break through the older, lower levees protecting Lathrop and Stockton.

Third, even if all these inhabited areas could be protected, having an entire corridor of high levees along the river will simply send raging floodwaters into the central and western Delta, putting huge pressure on the levees there. Failures of these

islands would ruin local farmers and could impede the system that brings fresh water through the Delta to the Tracy pumps.

Fourth, urbanization of this kind will degrade water quality, because the rainfall that drains off urban areas is highly polluted with nitrogen, heavy metals, and other contaminants that are bad for the Delta ecosystem and bad for drinking water quality.

Finally, putting housing in these areas eliminates numerous options for the future management of the Delta. The Delta Vision Process is charged with defining what a sustainable future Delta will look like, and figuring out how we can get there – a very worthwhile goal to which the Delta Initiative is actively contributing. But the Vision Process will not be fully complete until the end of 2008 at the earliest, and then implementation of its ideas will undoubtedly take several years beyond that. We may come up with a great Vision for the Delta only to find that many places we want to make into flood bypasses, wetlands, habitat preserves or water management facilities have already been covered by houses in the meanwhile.

This picture of urbanization, as bad as it is, is only the beginning of what's coming. One growth projection discussed in our report estimates that as many as 3.8 million people – more than the entire current population of the state of Connecticut – could move to the five counties that contain the Delta before the year 2050. That would more than double the population of these counties. Though only some of this growth would actually be in or near the Delta, it will still put massive additional urbanization pressure on critical Delta lands.

Looking at the region over the next few decades also gives us opportunities for a more optimistic outlook, however. The Delta has been unfairly characterized solely as a source of problems for the state, but our report also argues that the Delta has enormous value as a recreational and open space asset for Northern California. This is already true, but with millions more people moving to the region over the next few decades, it will become even more the case. The Delta, in fact, could become a kind of grand Central Park for the mega-region stretching from Folsom to San Jose to Stockton.

The report presents the winning entries in the 2006 Thomas Church landscape architecture graduate design competition held at UC-Berkeley, which re-imagines the Delta as a multi-purpose open space that provides recreational, habitat, and water management benefits for the region and the state. The report also describes numerous land conservation precedents from around California and the United States that are relevant to the Delta today – including the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, the Bay Conservation and Development Commission, the Lake Tahoe experience, the Everglades, and even Central Park itself.

But before we can get to those grand visions of the Delta's future, we have to grapple with the scale and pace of urbanization in the short run. We feel that the state and local governments should do two things. First, we should collectively declare a moratorium on new developments in what we call “deep floodplains” – areas that are either below sea level or at least 10 feet below the 100-year flood peak. These are areas where flood risks are truly extreme and where flood damage will be severe.

This moratorium should last at least until the conclusion of the Delta Vision Process and the Delta Risk Management Study, at which time the state will have a clearer idea of how the Delta can be made sustainable over the long term. Right now, it is likely that many of the options that the Delta Vision Process could potentially pursue, such as creating a flood bypass on the San Joaquin River, or restoring seasonal wetlands at the edges of the Delta, will simply be rendered impossible because the lands in question have already been built on.

Second, the state should immediately create a non-regulatory Delta land trust that will have the funding and the flexibility to purchase land and easements that are critical to the Delta's future. Land trusts are the ideal mechanism to do this because they are nimble enough to act quickly, and landowners get fair market values for their property. Given the large amounts of money that California voters have decided to spend – and will need to continue spending in the future – to enhance flood protection, purchase of land and easements for flood bypass purposes is a very cost-effective investment.

Both of these moves would preserve our ability to make smart choices about the Delta's future. Urbanization is throwing away long-range management options before we can even consider them. We hope to work with the state and local governments to ensure that California continues to benefit from this invaluable resource.