

Envisioning Futures for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta¹

Major report themes:

1. ***The current Delta is unsustainable for almost all stakeholders.*** The combined effects of continued land sinking, sea level rise, increasing seismic risk, and worsening winter floods make continued reliance on weak Delta levees imprudent and unworkable over the long term. Current management is also unlikely to maintain desired species in the Delta.
2. ***Improved understanding of the Delta provides opportunities for new solutions.*** Delta management policy over the past 70 years – aiming to keep the Delta always fresh – is not beneficial to native species; it favors harmful invasive species. Seeing the Delta as a more complex ecosystem with fluctuating flows and salinity, as it once was, allows us to think of new solutions to the Delta’s problems.
3. ***Most users of Delta services have considerable ability to adapt to risk and change.*** Water and land users have many adaptive responses, which although sometimes costly, do allow them to adjust. Many users are already adjusting to anticipated changes.
4. ***Promising alternatives exist, but the current levee-based policy is not among them.*** Out of nine broad alternatives for Delta management, the report finds five to be promising, based on environmental, water supply, and economic performance. The promising alternatives allow western Delta salinity to fluctuate. They either rely on new conveyance to maintain current water exports or require lower, more variable exports, with pumping only at times of high freshwater flows. It is premature to single out any one alternative as “best.”
5. ***Promising solutions are unlikely to arise from a stakeholder-only process.*** Strong political and institutional leadership will be needed to negotiate tradeoffs. Solid technical analysis is needed to develop and evaluate alternatives.

Key recommendations for crafting a long-term solution:

1. Focus efforts on promising alternatives.
2. Strengthen Delta land use governance (e.g., SF Bay Conservation and Development Commission or Coastal Commission).
3. Combine up-front beneficiary pays commitments and mitigation mechanisms to ease transitions.
4. Create a technical track to support the policy process, with problem-solving R&D.

Key recommendations for “no regrets” short-term actions:

1. Advance emergency preparedness for flood response and infrastructure outage plans.
2. Limit risks of Delta urbanization with adequate flood guidelines and habitat protection.
3. Launch restoration projects for pelagic fish habitat in Suisun Marsh and Cache Slough.
4. Establish a “do not resuscitate” list for some Delta islands.

¹ By Jay Lund, Ellen Hanak, William Fleenor, Richard Howitt, Jeffrey Mount, and Peter Moyle, Public Policy Institute of California, February 2007. For more information, go to: www.ppic.org and watershed.ucdavis.edu.