

Department of Water Resources

California Water News

A daily compilation for DWR personnel of significant news articles and comment

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1. Top Item

Giant gate for Delta?; Katrina disaster renews interest in European barriers

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By Alex Breitler, staff writer

THE DELTA - This idea has a history - but does it have a future?

Some water officials are pushing for construction of a giant gate on the Delta's western edge, a machine that would slam shut in a matter of minutes to ward off a saltwater invasion from San Francisco Bay.

That disaster could occur if one or more Delta levees were breached during an earthquake or a flood. Water would flow into low-lying islands and create a sort of vacuum in the freshwater channels, drawing in salt water from the Bay and potentially tainting the drinking water for 23 million Californians.

Prolonged contamination could force the shutdown of Delta pumps that export water hundreds of miles to the south. Farmers' fields could lie fallow and taps could run dry, warns Jim McLeod, who heads the board of directors of the Banta-Carbona Irrigation District in Tracy.

"It would absolutely ruin the economy of the state of California," McLeod said.

His board recently voted to support at least the concept of building a large barrier gate near Chipps Island, east of Suisun Bay.

It's not a new thought: State officials considered some kind of water-blocking device as far back as 1960. But this time, supporters have an

example to which they can point.

A pair of gates was installed in 1997 over the New Waterway shipping channel in the Netherlands at a cost of \$700 million, protecting low-lying communities from giant ocean waves. The barrier could serve as a model for the Delta device, McLeod said.

He hopes to seek advice from representatives of the Netherlands who are scheduled to tour the Delta early next week with Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Tracy. The visit is intended to "bring the best minds and ideas on how to tackle some of our infrastructure problems here," Pombo spokesman Lucas Frances said.

It is not specifically about the gate proposal, he said.

Critical of the barrier plan is Bill Jennings, head of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance and a longtime Delta advocate. He calls it a "pipe dream," just one of 1,001 proposed fixes for the Delta's water woes.

"The scope of this, the billions and billions of dollars that would be required and the potentially horrendous impact it would have on the entire ecosystem - it's just not going to happen," Jennings said.

The idea was studied but rejected decades ago, said hydrologist Maury Roos with the state Department of Water Resources.

Commercial shippers and recreational boaters didn't want a barrier in their way, nor did conservationists who worried about passage for migratory fish.

McLeod, however, says the gates would rarely be closed and that fish passage issues can be solved by engineers. State water experts have yet to officially weigh in on the latest idea.

"It's pretty clever," Roos said. "Maybe it's a possibility."

At times, brackish Delta water forces officials to increase flows from upstream reservoirs to flush out the salt.

That strategy puts a drain on the state's supply of fresh water.

And if a levee breaks, repairs could take at least a month. That's long enough to seriously jeopardize the Delta's drinking water, McLeod argues. Export pumping was reduced for a time after the Jones Tract flooded in 2004.

In addition to his Banta-Carbona district, the San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority - which represents 32 water agencies serving 2.1 million acres of land in the western San Joaquin Valley - has passed a resolution of support.

Stockton attorney Dante Nomellini says the plan has merit. He represents reclamation districts charged with maintaining Delta levees.

In major drought years like 1977, the state piled rock barriers into sloughs to keep salt out, Nomellini said. The work took weeks.

"Instead of doing that, you'd have a gated structure that you could push a button and close. I think it's worthy of review," he said.

In 1953, an area of the Netherlands that had been reclaimed from the sea was blasted by a storm that caused 450 dike breaches and killed nearly 1,900 people.

The government responded by building gates that can protect the low country from storms likely to occur only once every 10,000 years - far better than the 100-year flood protection sought in the San Joaquin Valley.

The European gates have seen a swell of interest from other parts of the world since Hurricane Katrina.

There is, however, no dollar estimate for such a structure here.

"Everyone says, 'What would it cost?' " McLeod said. "What will it cost if we don't do it?" #

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