The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Levees: Past, Present and Uncertain Future

Marks for entering the Sacramento and its Forks at their confluence

Mark for entering the second section of the Middle Fork of the Sacramento River

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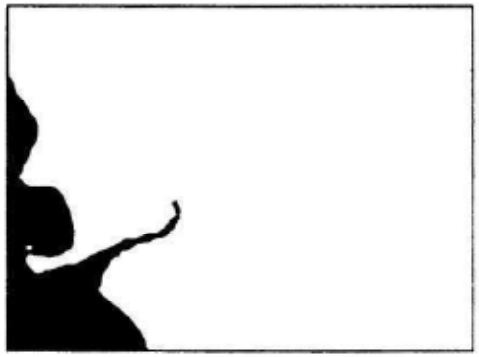
Center for Watershed Sciences
UCDAVIS

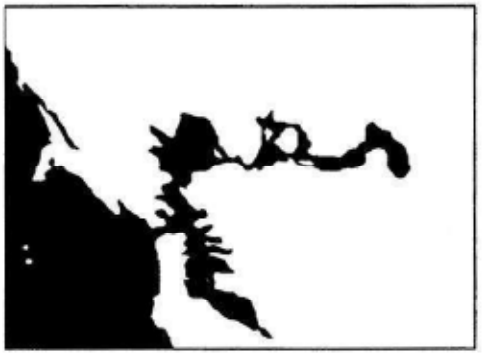
Delta of the Past

- 700,000 acre tidal marsh
- Mostly fresh water, with brackish water at western end
- A product of Holocene rise in sea level
- Extraordinary organic accumulations
- High hydrologic residence time

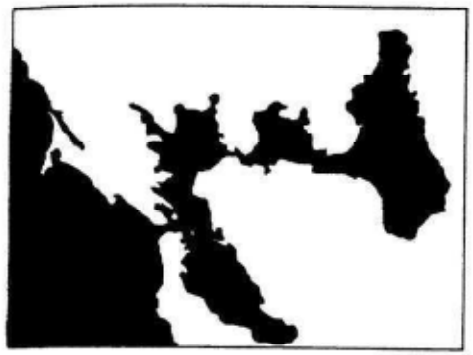
15,000 Years Ago
(End of last Ice Age--sea level approximately 400 feet below present level; rivers not shown)



10,000 Years Ago
(Formation of Farallon Islands and intrusion into the "Golden Gate")

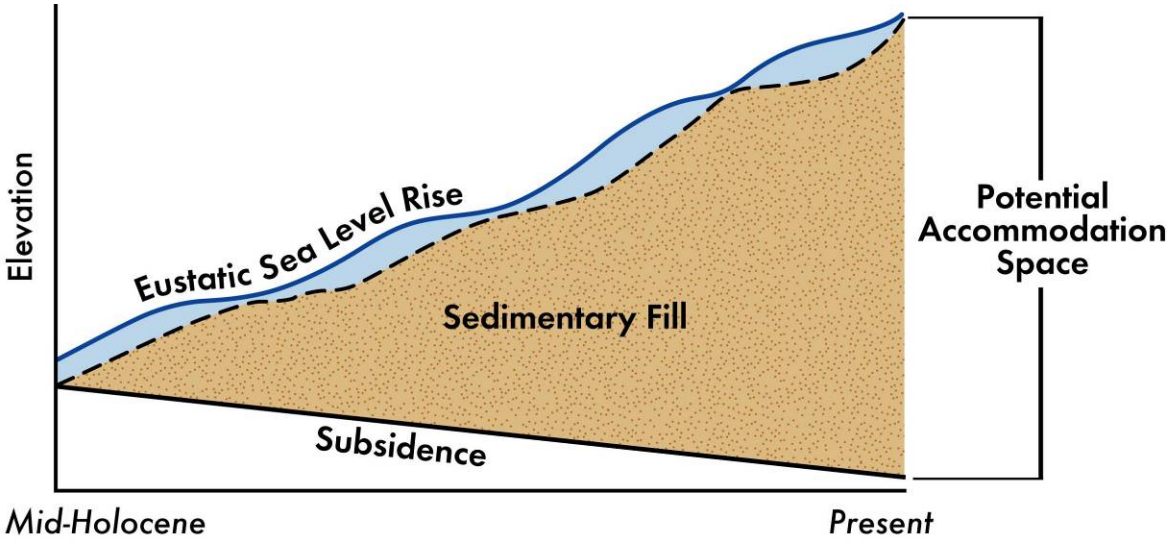


5,000 Years Ago
(Formation of Bay and Delta Basins)



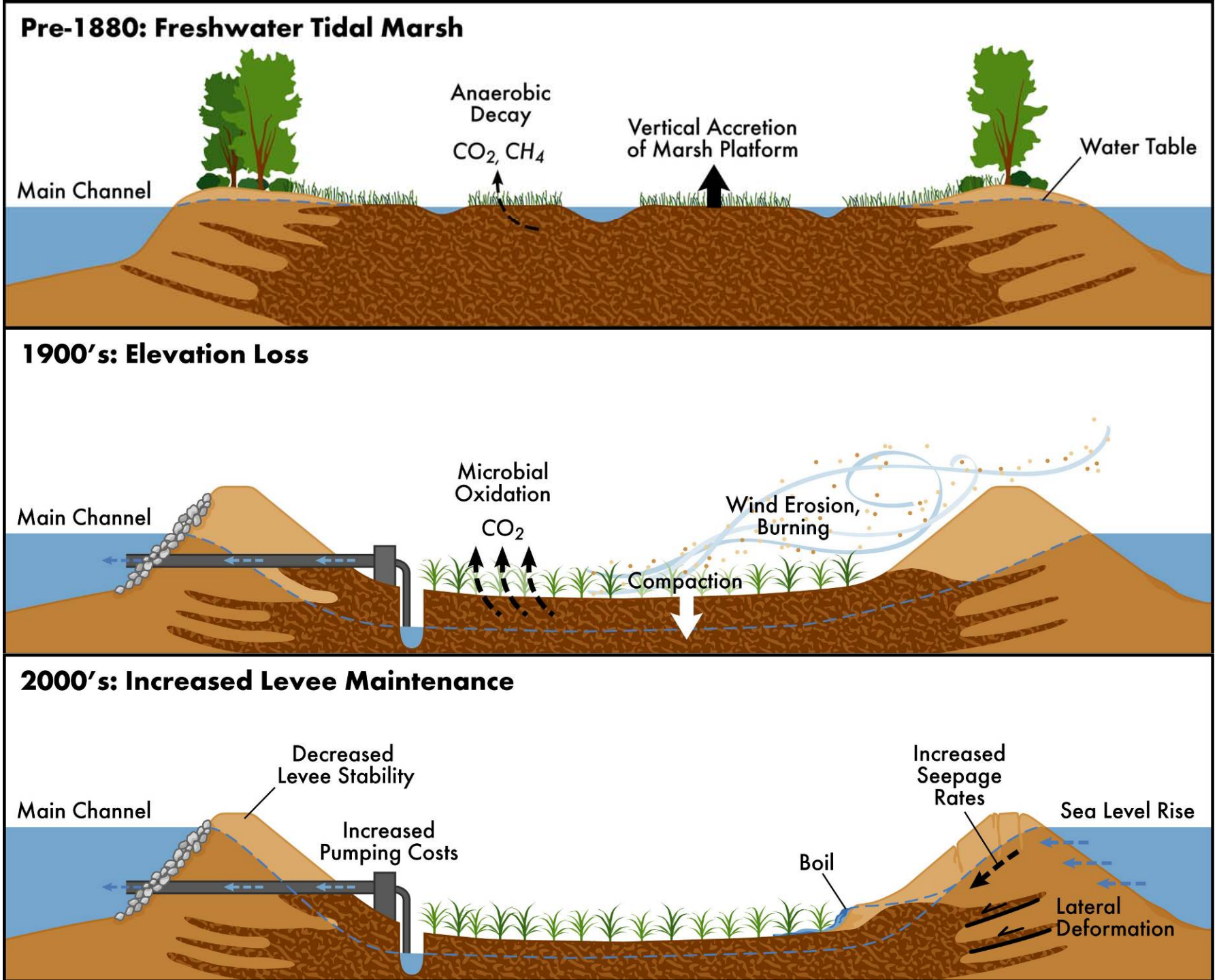
125 Years Ago
(Landward edge of undiked tidal marsh)

From: Atwater, 1982



Transition to the 20th Century Delta

- Reclamation of 700,000 acres of tidal freshwater marsh
- 1100 miles of levees separate land from water (most of the time)
- Transition from dynamic, self-adjusting to static, homogeneous Delta


Pre-1880: Freshwater Tidal Marsh
Anaerobic Decay
CO_2, CH_4
Vertical Accretion of Marsh Platform
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1900's: Elevation Loss
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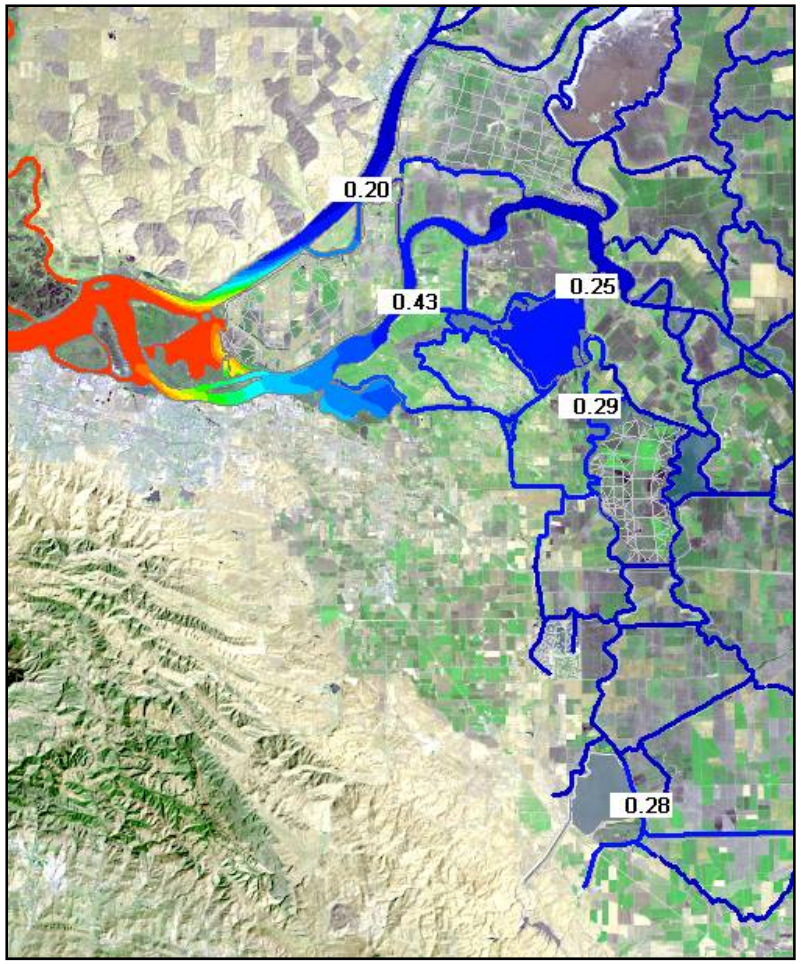
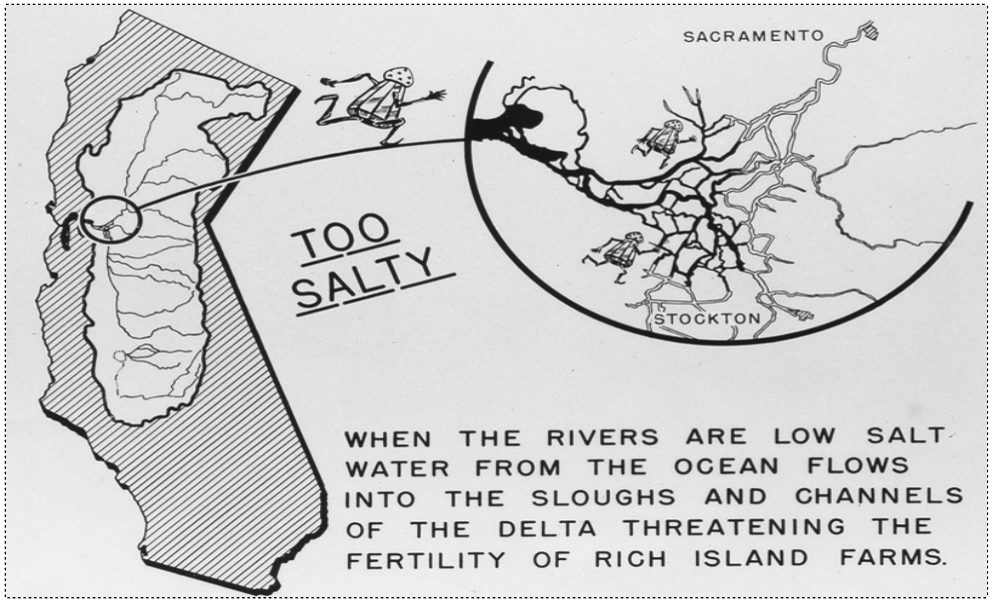
Decreased Levee Stability
Increased Seepage Rates
Main Channel
Sea Level Rise
Increased Pumping Costs
Boil
Lateral Deformation

Water Supply: an Afterthought

- Second largest ecosystem service of the Delta
- 1800 diversions
- 7.5 MAF/year export

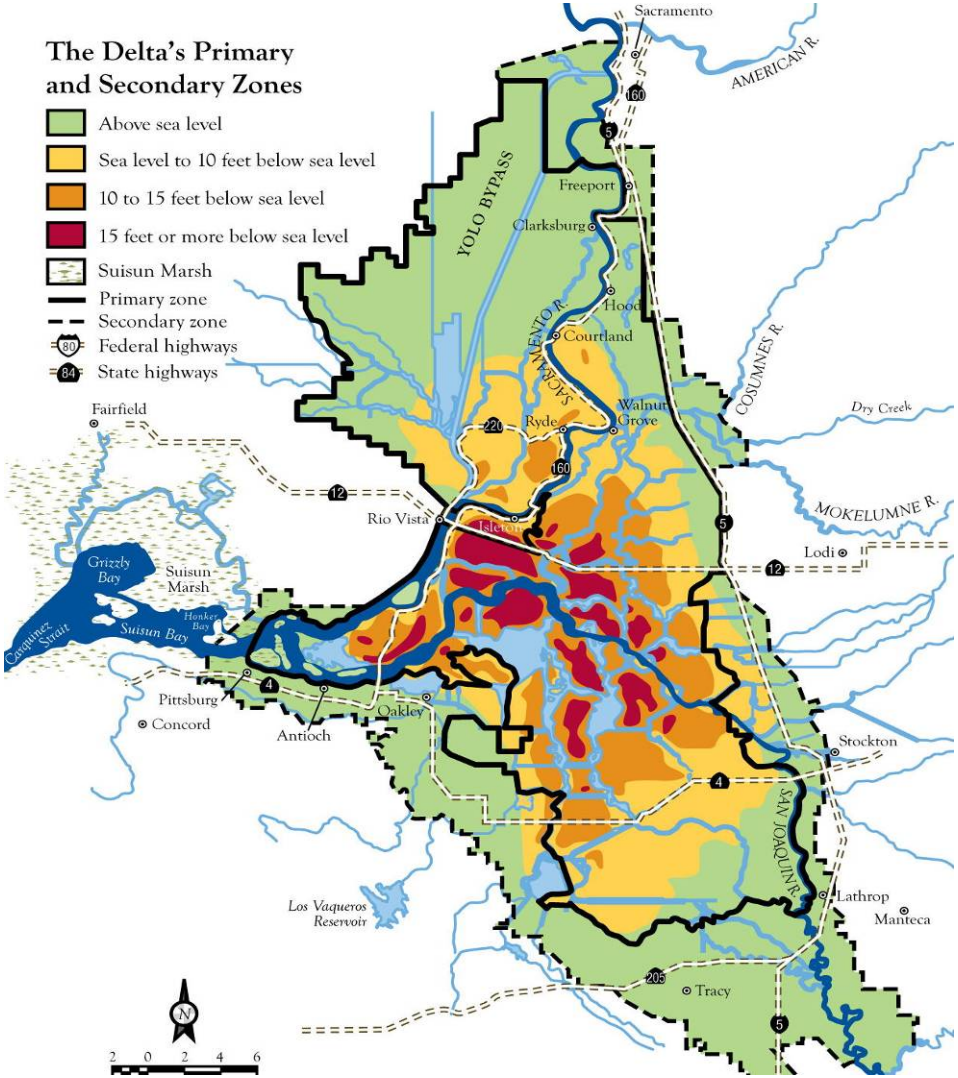
Keeping the Delta fresh, all the time

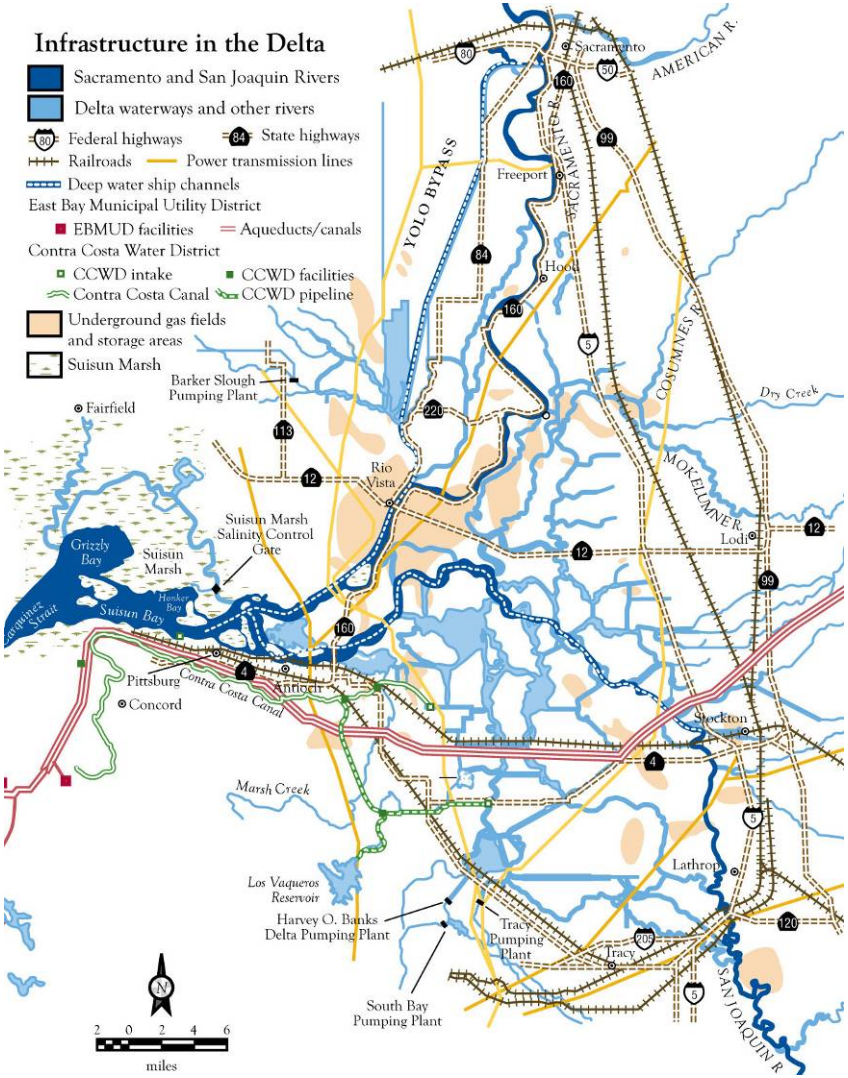




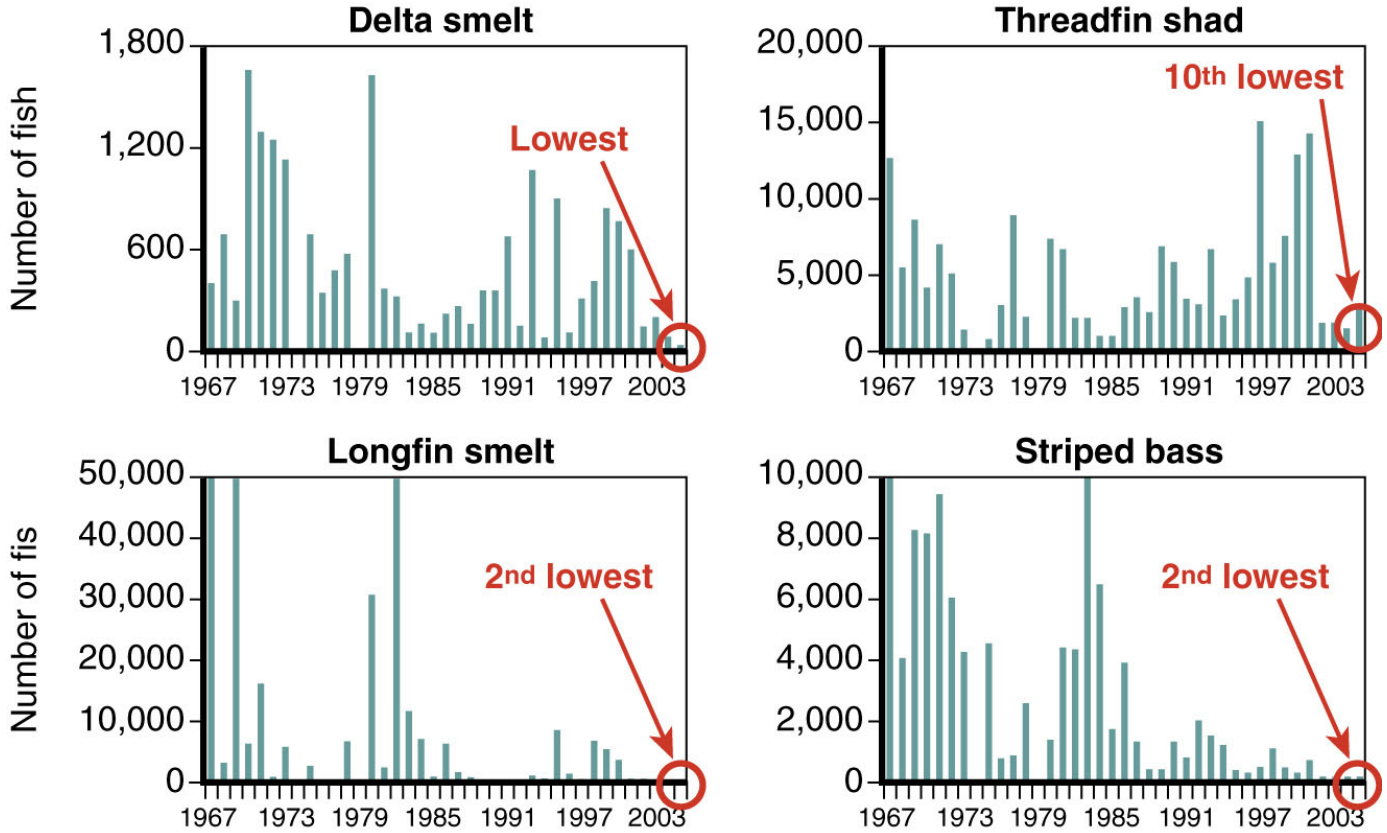
A policy since the 1940s to maintain the Delta as an unvarying, freshwater “estuary”, through carriage releases to reduce impacts of tides

The 20th Century Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta





An Ecosystem in Crisis

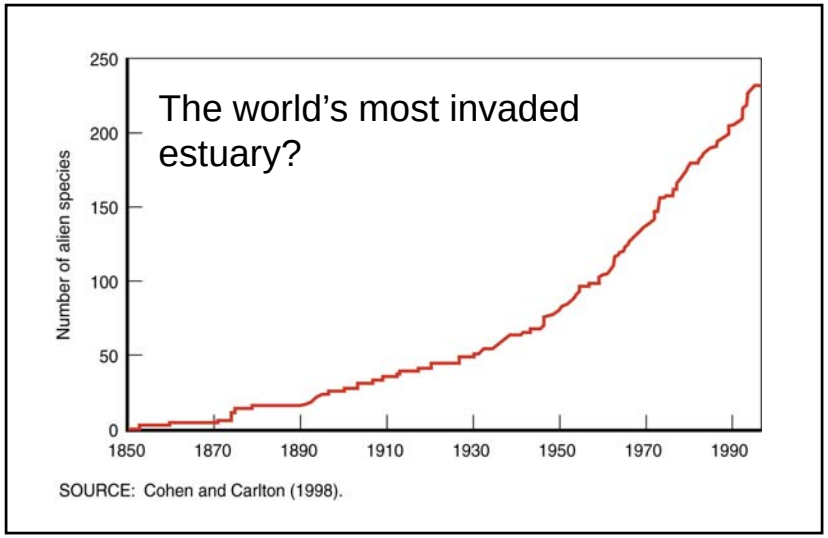


SOURCE: California Department of Fish and Game.

NOTES: Graphs report the indices for the fall midwater trawl. Circles indicate the rank of indices in 2005. For delta smelt, longfin smelt, and striped bass, the recent indices represent low points in long-term declines of their populations.

Static, Warm, Freshwater Delta Ideal for Invaders, Poor Habitat for Native Fishes

- Profound, irreversible ecosystem changes due to invasions, flow conditions, loss of physical habitat and decline in primary productivity
- Alien species do best with constant salinity (fresh or saline); natives evolved in and tolerate variability
- Delta plant and animal communities resemble a lake in southern Arkansas



Asiatic clam

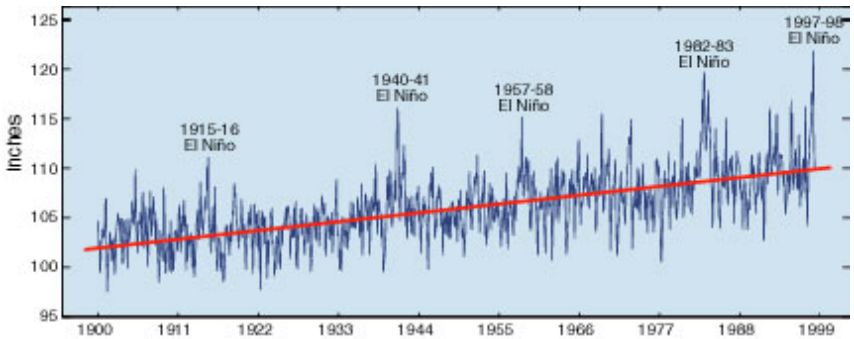
Brazilian waterweed

Overbite clam

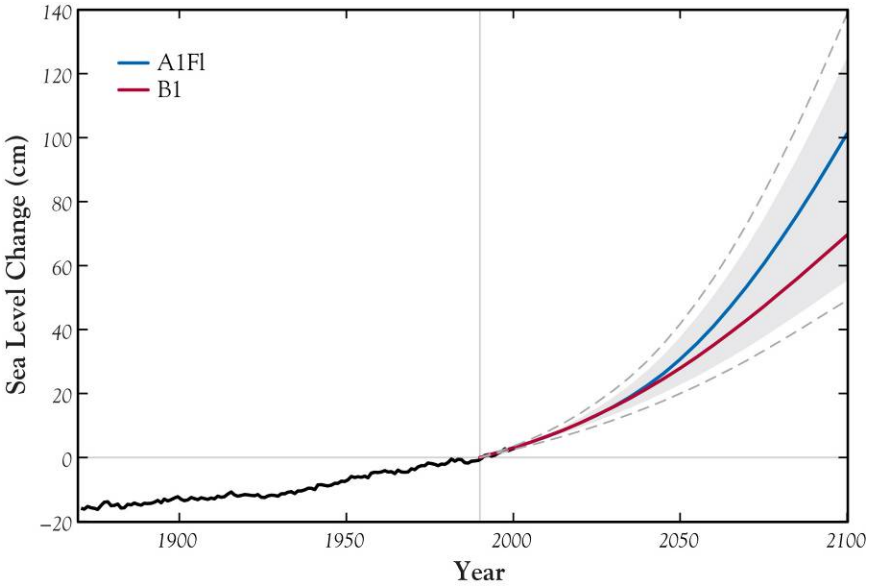
Transition to the 21st Century Delta: Drivers of Change

- Sea Level Rise
- Subsidence
- Changing Inflows
- Seismicity
- Economic
  - Competing Public Interests
  - Limited Public Funds

Sea Level Rise

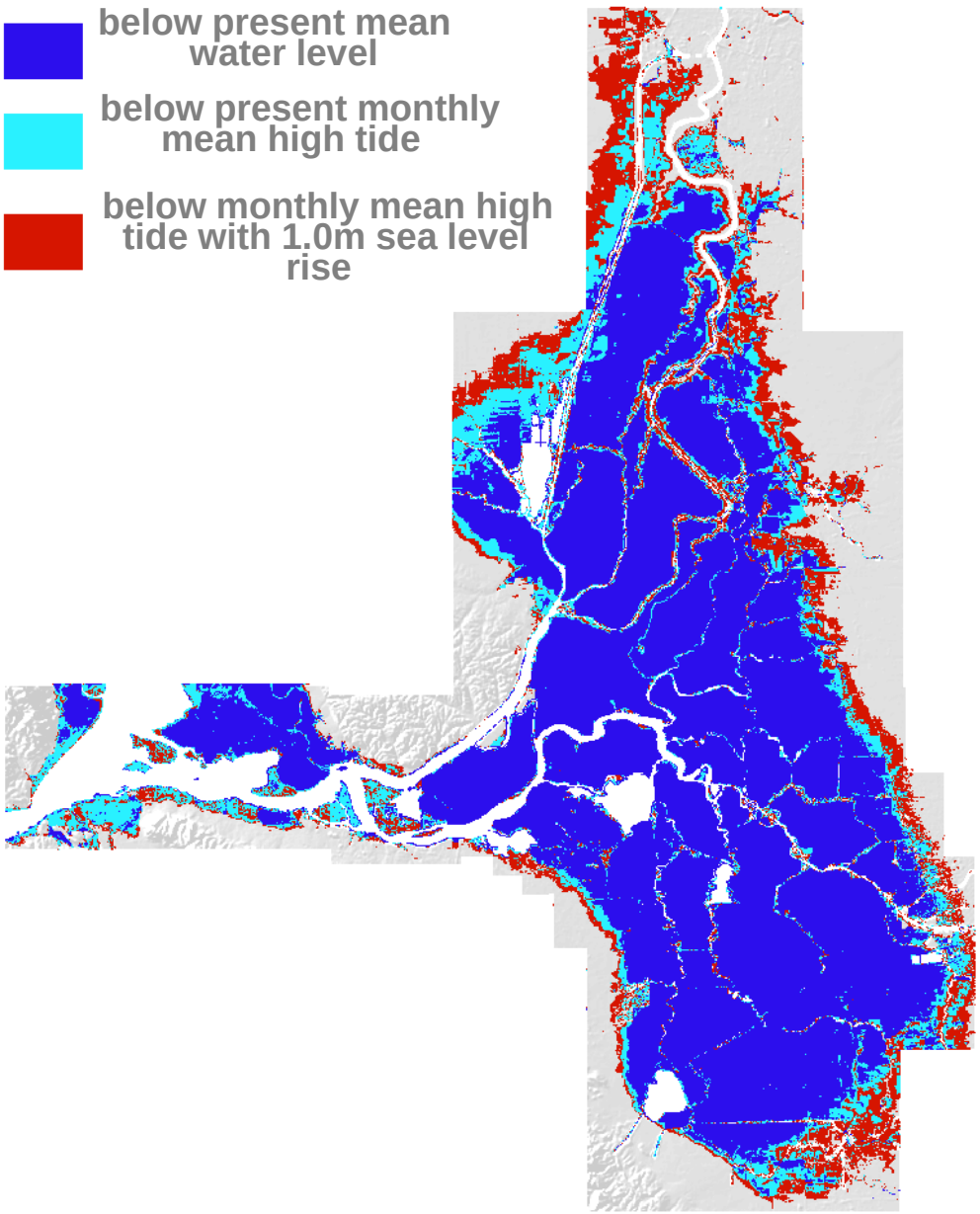


Ryan et al., 2005



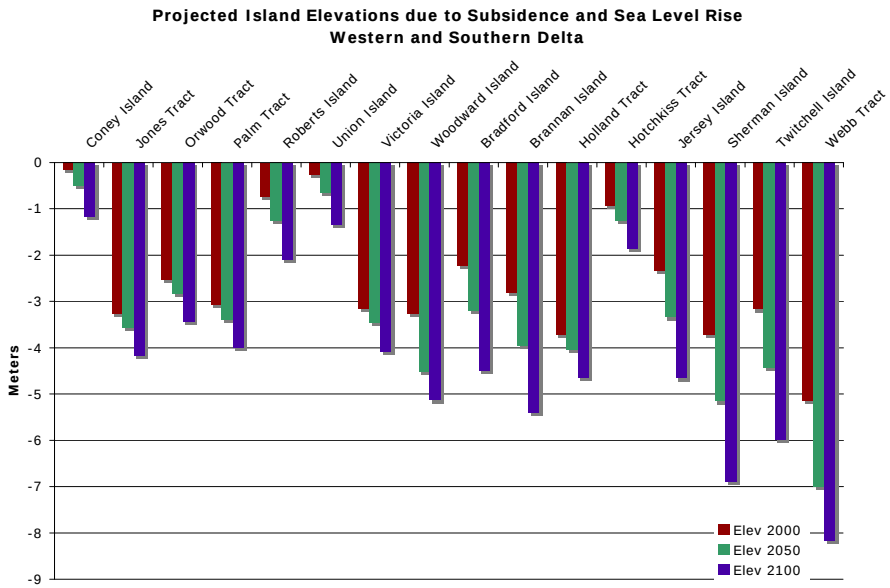
- Character of Delta based on sea level
- All hydrodynamics, habitat conditions, levee heights tied to sea level
- Rate of sea level rise increasing
- A modest rise overwhelms current Delta levee network

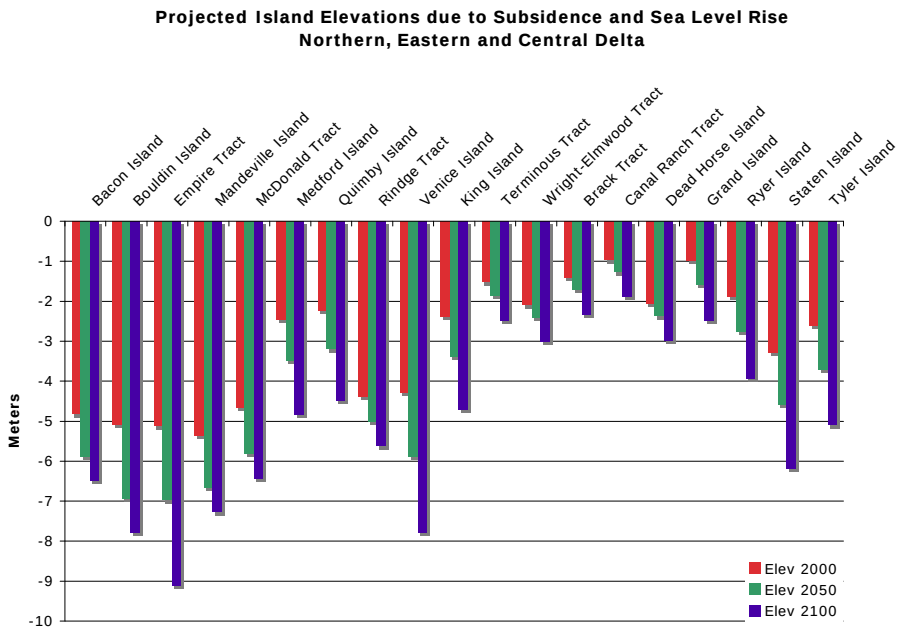
- 1 m sea level rise = 750,000 acres of potential inundation
- Most protected by levees
- Most of Delta is below current and future sea level
- ***Sea level rise increases salinity of the Delta***

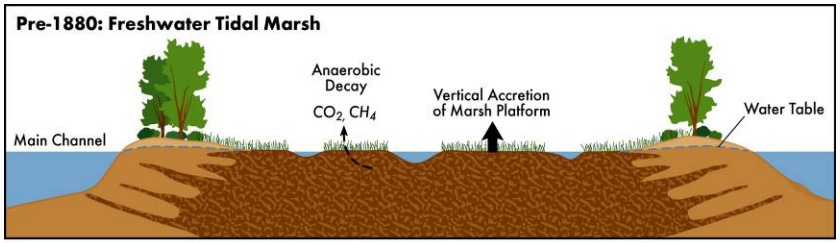


Courtesy: Noah Knowles, USGS

Subsidence


Projected Island Elevations due to Subsidence and Sea Level Rise
Western and Southern Delta
Coney Island
Jones Tract
Orwood Tract
Palm Tract
Roberts Island
Union Island
Victoria Island
Woodward Island
Bradford Island
Brannan Island
Holland Tract
Hotchkiss Tract
Jersey Island
Sherman Island
Twitchell Island
Webb Tract
Meters
0
-1
-2
-3
-4
-5
-6
-7
-8
-9
Elev 2000
Elev 2050
Elev 2100


Projected Island Elevations due to Subsidence and Sea Level Rise
Northern, Eastern and Central Delta
Bacon Island
Bouldin Island
Empire Tract
Mandeville Island
McDonald Tract
Medford Island
Quimby Island
Rindge Tract
Venice Island
King Island
Terminous Tract
Wright-Elmwood Tract
Brack Tract
Canal Ranch Tract
Dead Horse Island
Grand Island
Ryer Island
Staten Island
Tyler Island
Meters
0
-1
-2
-3
-4
-5
-6
-7
-8
-9
-10
Elev 2000
Elev 2050
Elev 2100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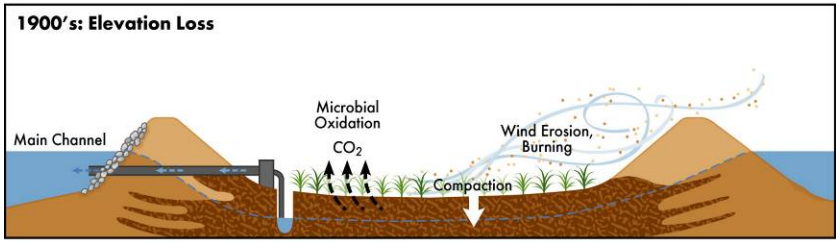
Main Channel
Anaerobic Decay
CO_2, CH_4
Vertical Accretion of Marsh Platform
Water Table


1900's: Elevation Loss
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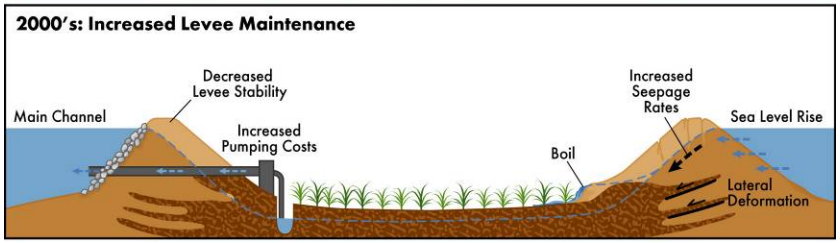
CO_2
Wind Erosion, Burning
Compaction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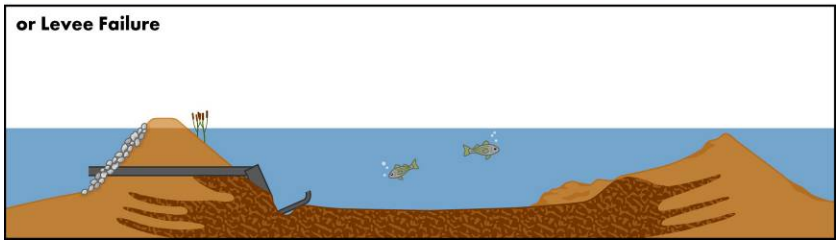
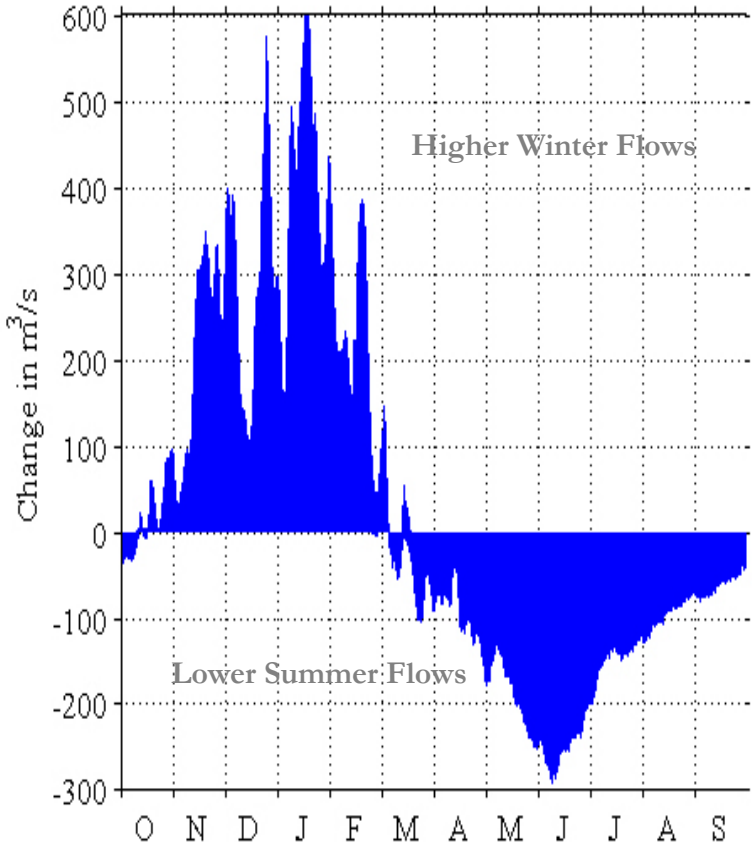

or Levee Failure

Changing Inflows



Change in inflows to Delta in 2060 (Knowles and Cayan, 2004)

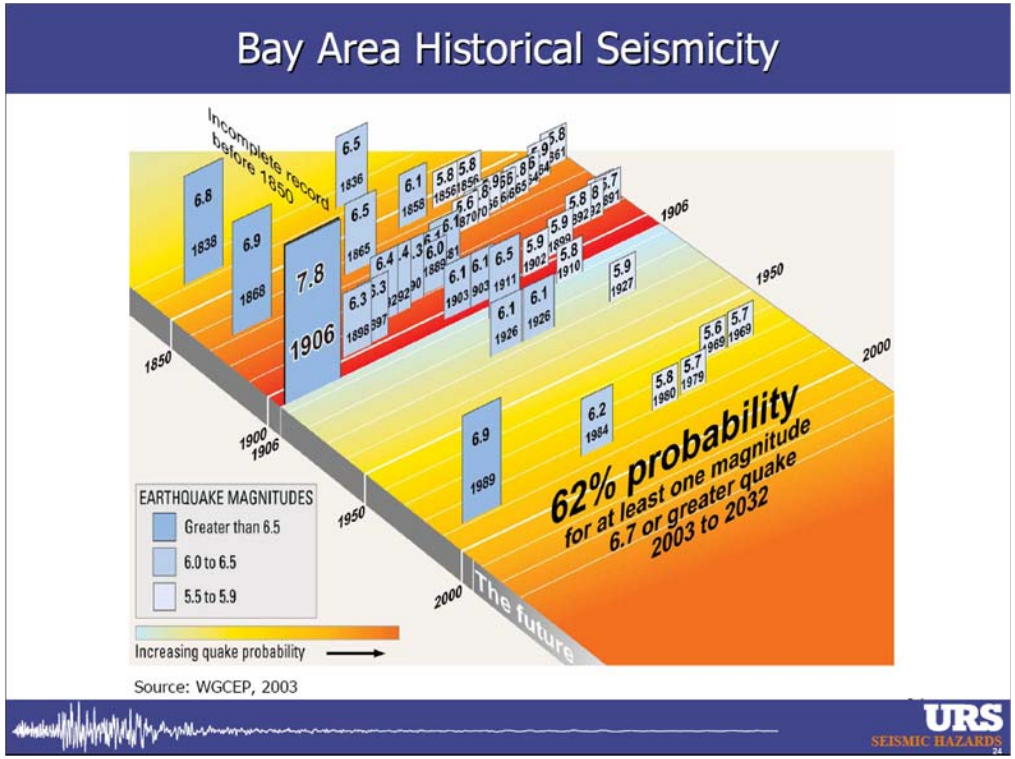
Changing inflows to the Delta associated with changing upstream conditions and operations

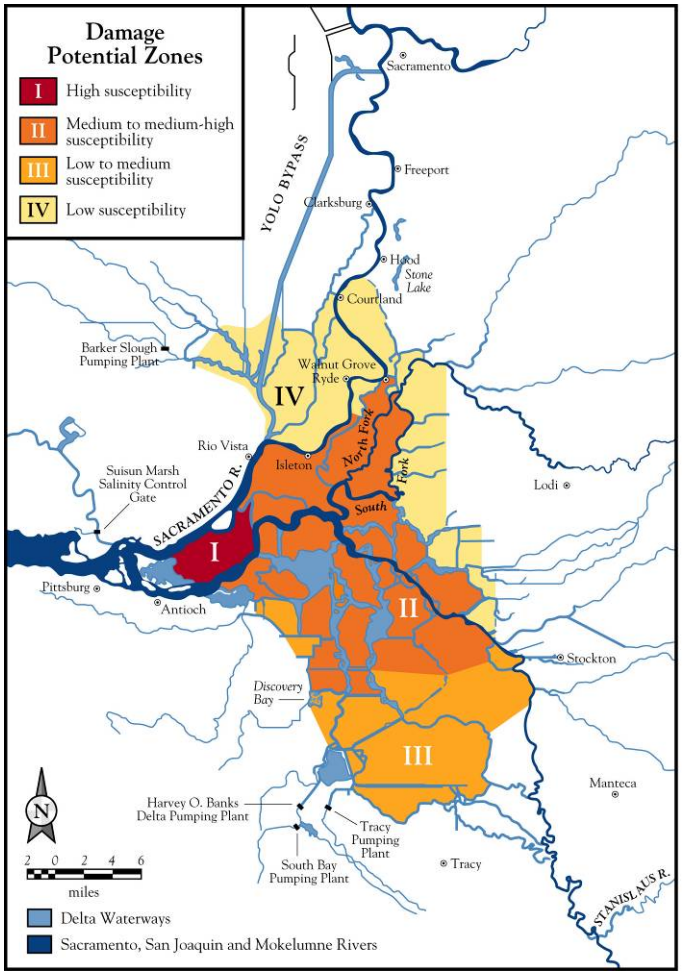
Shift in timing of runoff to winter

Increase in frequency and magnitude of flood events

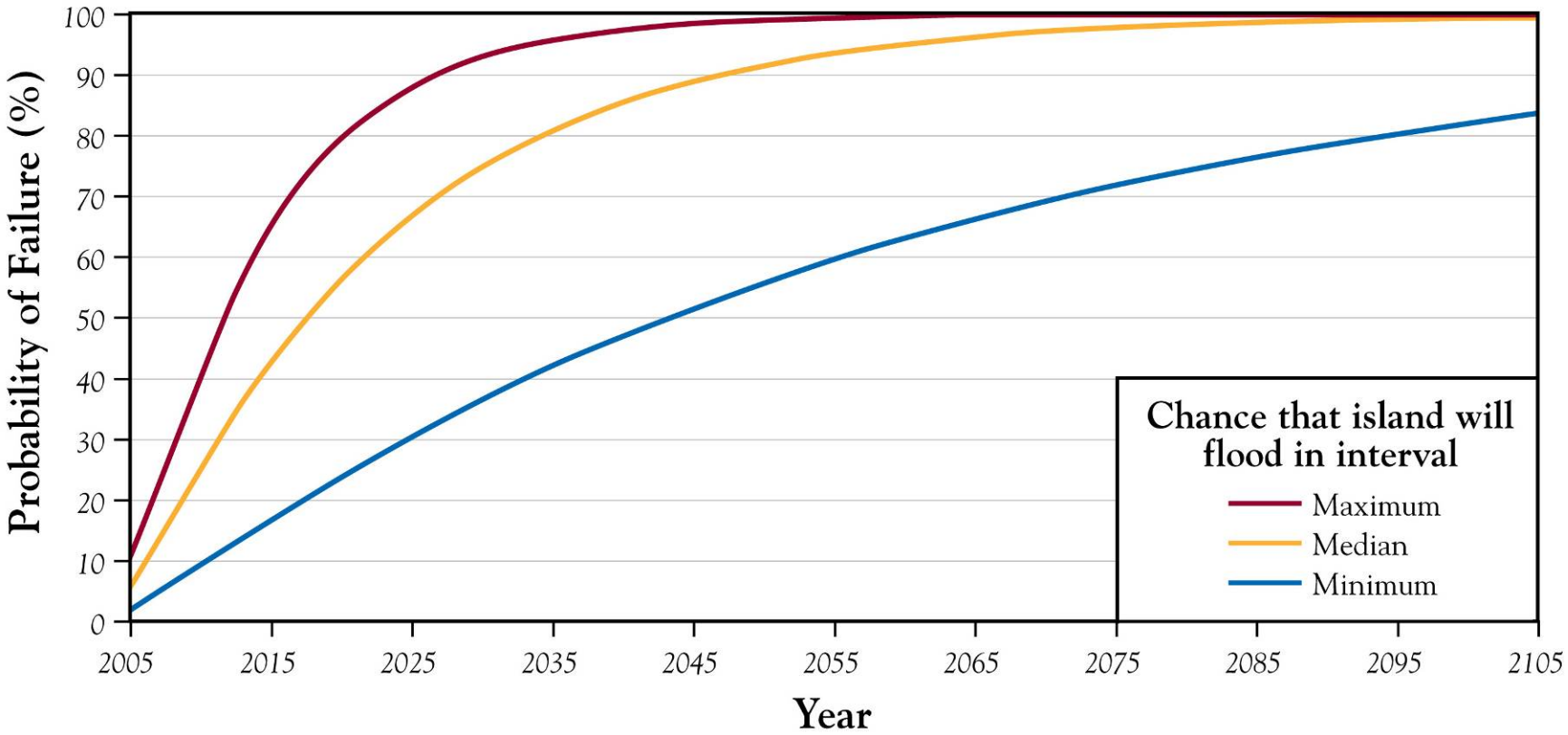
Historical hydrology not a good predictor of future

Increasing likelihood and consequences of levee failure/island flooding



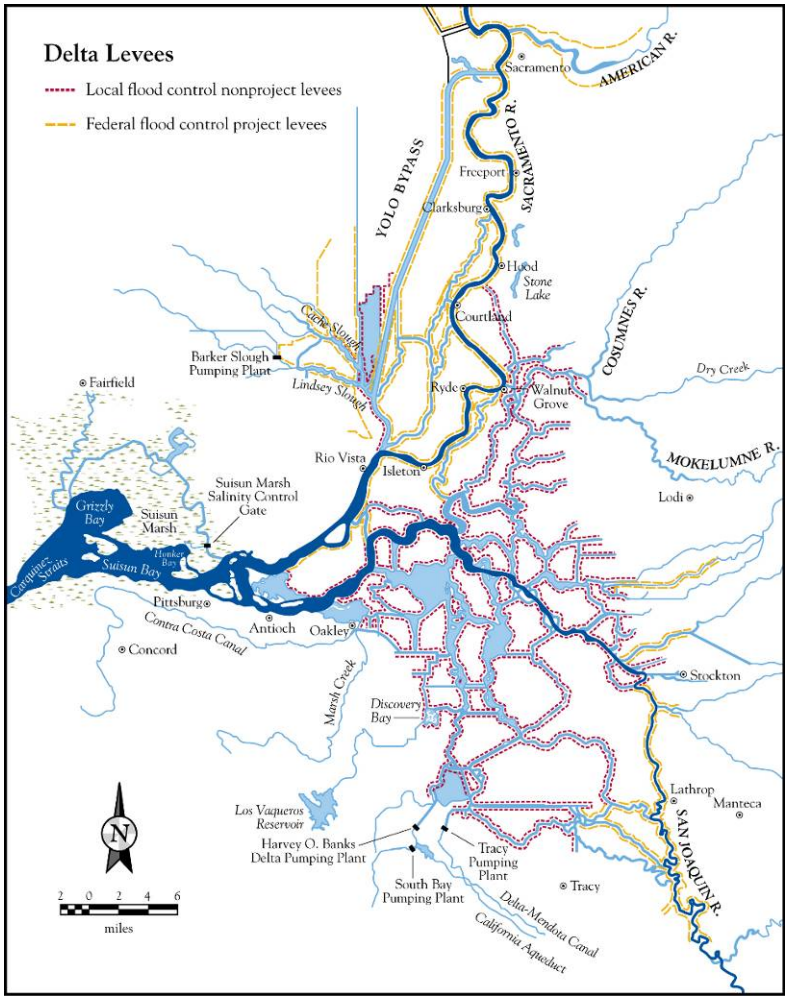


Flooding Inevitable



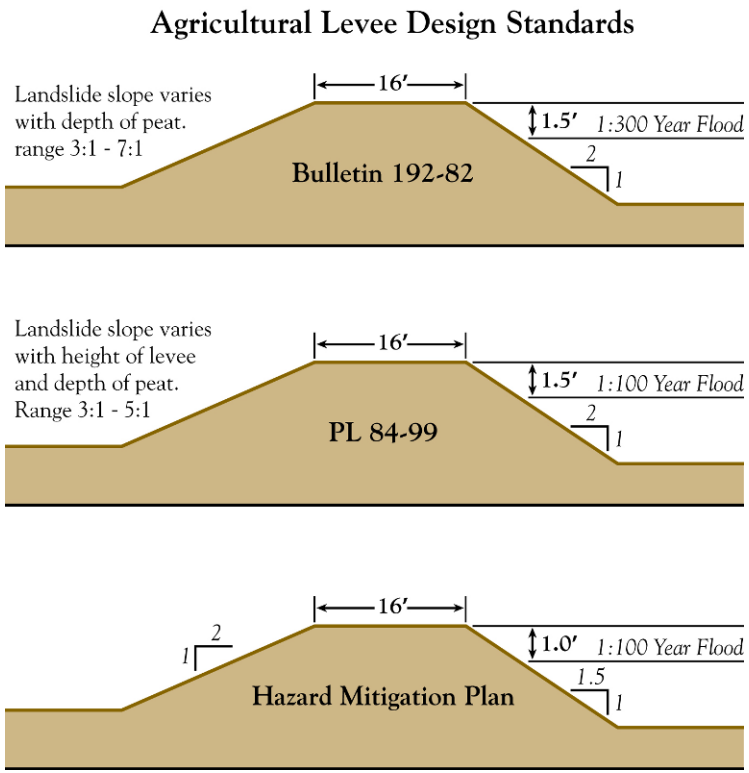
Cumulative probability of levee failure/island flooding due to earthquake OR flood for a given interval of time (based on DRMS draft data)

Economic Drivers of Change



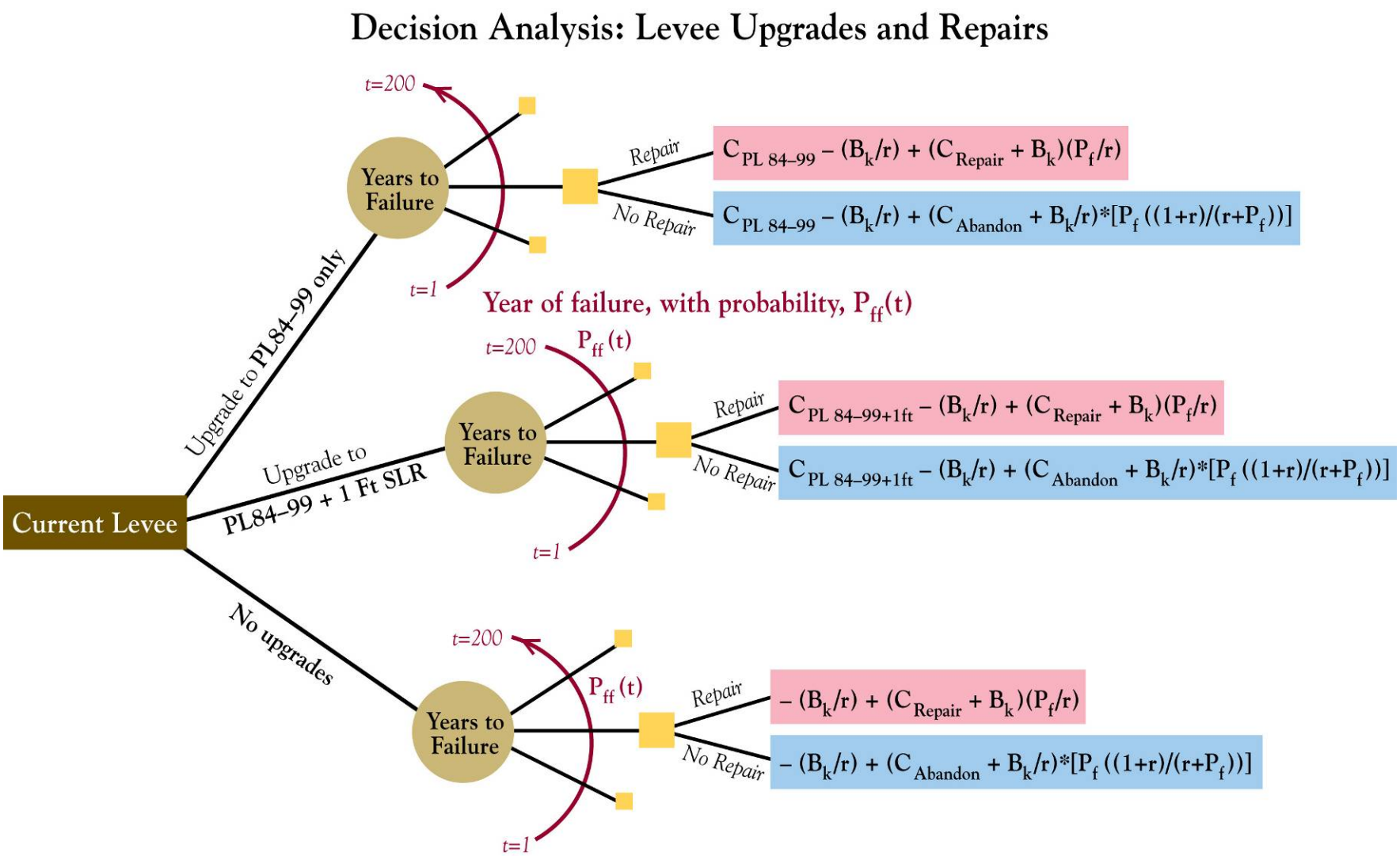
- A measure of resiliency of the Delta is the ability or willingness to repair levees and restore islands
- Evaluated net present value of upgrades and repairs for 34 non-urban islands

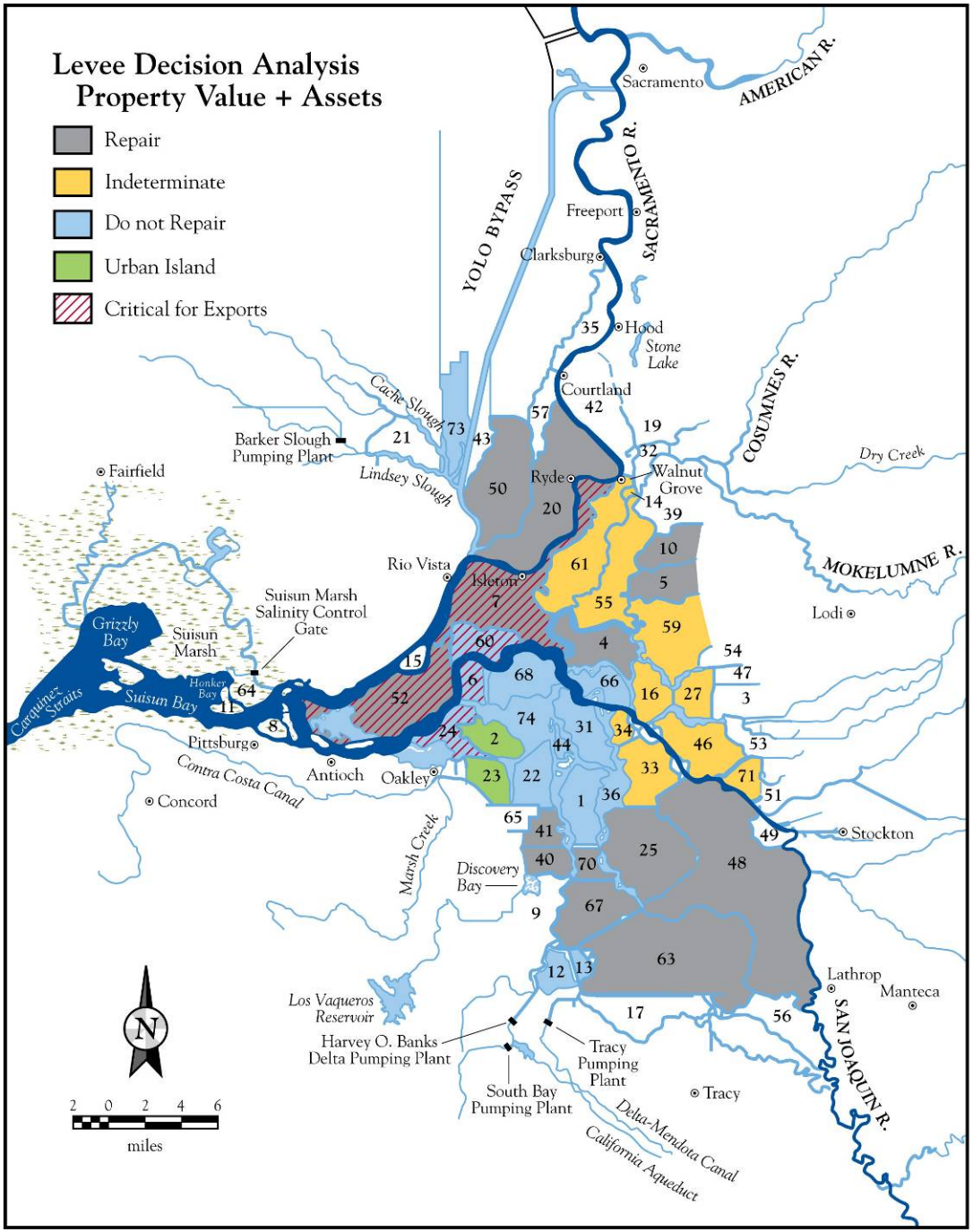
Upgrade and/or Repair Levees?



Option Number	Current Upgrade Policy	Future Repair Decision
1	No Upgrade	Repair
2	No Upgrade	No Repair
3	PL 84-99	Repair
4	PL 84-99	No Repair
5	PL 84-99 + 1ft SLR	Repair
6	PL 84-99 + 1ft SLR	No Repair

Island levee decision analysis tree for assessing whether to upgrade levees and to restore islands following flooding



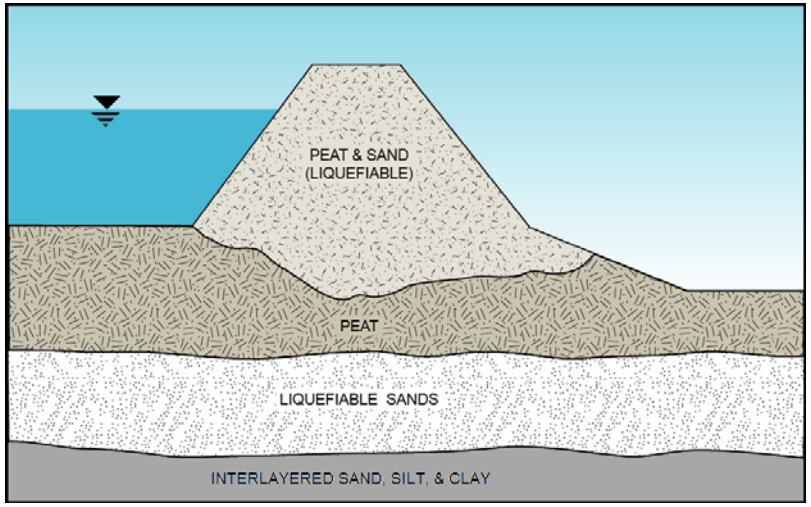


Conclusions

- **10-19 of the 34 islands analyzed do not warrant repair following failure**
- **It is not economically viable to invest in upgrades due to low overall performance**
- **These results are robust. Increasing land values or levee performance does not significantly change upgrade/repair choices**
- ***Most of the Delta IS viable for agriculture for the next century***

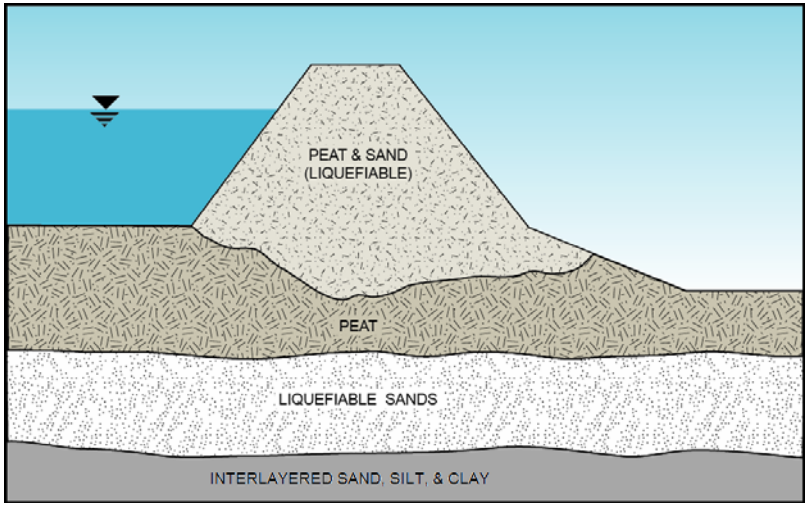
Concerns About Flooded Islands

- **Habitat** -
  Better or worse?
- **Water Quality** -
  salinity increases, but may improve conditions for native fishes
- **Surrounding Levees** -
  wave action & seepage



Concerns About Flooded Islands

1. **Water Code Section 12981 and AB 955**
2. **Federal & State Clean Water laws**
3. **Endangered Species Acts**
4. **CEQA and NEPA**
5. **Takings Clauses and Nuisance**



Key Conclusions

- Sea level rise will increase Delta salinity, no matter what
- Island flooding will increase in frequency and consequence with time
- Low resiliency (willingness to pay) means permanently flooded islands
- Delta of the past is gone; Delta of the present is unstable and at a tipping point; Delta of the future is going to be very different and irreversible
- “Restored” aquatic habitat in abundance, but unseen historically.
- No policy in place to deal with this, but essential as part of a Delta conveyance and ecosystem restoration solution.

19th Century Delta

20th Century Delta

21st Century Delta

"If a man neglect to strengthen his dike and do not strengthen it, and a break be made in his dike and the water carry away the farmland, the man in whose dike the break has been made shall restore the grain which he has damaged."

-The Code of Hammurabi (circa 2250 BCE), translation by Robert Francis Harper (1904)