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PRESS RELEASE

Delta levees high on priority list, says supervisor

PITTSBURG (March 17) – The safety of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta levees are of high concern to Washington politicians, said Contra Costa County Supervisor Federal Glover.

Glover was in Washington D.C. to meet with lobbyists of Contra Costa and its congressional delegation to discuss reinforcement of the levees and to protect against flood damage.

The supervisor hopes that a fact-finding tour of the levee system by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff March 17 lifts the Delta's profile among Washington's decision makers. Chertoff took the helicopter tour of the Delta as part of a bid by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to persuade the federal government of the risks of a Katrina-type disaster here.

Apparently, the tour served its purpose by giving the secretary a first-hand view of the enormity of the problem but failed to get a promise of more financial aid. "We're going to stand shoulder to shoulder with you and I am going to take this message back to Washington," he told reporters.

"Under the best of circumstances we are not going to fix the levees overnight," he said.

"We have to look at emergency planning," said Chertoff, who came under criticism for the way his department handled the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

After the disaster that destroyed most parts of New Orleans when its levees were breached, California's 1600 miles of levees came under extreme scrutiny after years of neglect.

Experts have warned that the Delta levees could produce a disaster worst than New Orleans if the century-old levees were to break under stress from flood waters or a major earthquake.

"The California levees are high on the priority list of our representatives," said Glover after he returned from Washington March 12. Unfortunately, he was cautioned of being overly optimistic because of the deficits in the federal budget. "Money is tight everywhere," said Glover, noting that a much of the federal funds that would have been available for infrastructure improvements have been diverted to aid the Gulf Coast in its reconstruction efforts.

The system of federal-state levees protect farms and homes throughout the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and along the rivers that flow into it. Although most

levees are under the responsibility of the state, county officials and resources will be required to respond to any Katrina-like disaster, said Glover.

“Farmers and residents of the Delta will first look to the county for immediate aid,” said Glover, “and county workers will be the first responders to help their neighbors evacuate flooded or endangered areas.”

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger asked Chertoff for a federal emergency declaration to speed repairs of the Delta levees but received no commitment from Chertoff.

Chertoff accompanied Schwarzenegger on the aerial tour of the levees. In a news conference afterward, Chertoff said emergency declarations usually are issued right after a disaster has occurred or when one is imminent.

Schwarzenegger declared a state emergency on Feb. 24 to hasten repairs to weakened levees in the Central Valley. That order suspends state environmental and contracting rules that could slow the work.

In a letter to President Bush three days after his emergency declaration, Schwarzenegger said the federal share would be at least \$56 million.

The state needs a federal declaration to ease federal environmental reviews that also could slow down the work. Without it, the governor said, repairs will take three years instead of one.

“We have seen the tragic effects lagging infrastructure can have on our country, and we must guarantee that future generations never have to see them as we did,” said Rep. Richard Pombo, who met with Glover in Washington while the supervisor attended meetings of the national convention of county supervisors last week.

“There is enormous need for federal investment in the Delta levees,” said Rep. Ellen Tauscher in a press release.

Despite warnings from geologists of the imminent failure of the Delta levees, the Bush administration has virtually eliminated funding for Delta Levee System Integrity in the budget submitted last month, noted Tauscher and Rep. George Miller.

“With the White House basically ignoring the Delta threat,” said Glover, “the weight of protecting the Delta falls on the shoulders of our congressional representatives’ efforts to restore federal funding for levee improvements.”

A breach in the Delta levees could kill thousands of Californians, destroy the houses of countless more, cause massive destruction to the Bay-Delta region, trigger a shutdown of the state and federal pumps to avoid sending saltwater to southern California, and cost billions of dollars in clean up, according to the California Resources Agency and other state and federal experts.