

The Major Problems with Flood Response

Problem #1: While we may “liaise” or “coordinate” we respond essentially as independent jurisdictions; reclamation districts, cities, counties, State. We respond as much to our own internal command structure and budget issues as to any common multi-jurisdictional understanding of the situation. We end up competing to buy the same materials, we operate independent logistical systems, and take too long to make mutual critical decisions. The CalEMA role has historically been to just get resources for local jurisdictions, each dealing with just its own local problems. The concept of a truly “regional” response with an element of “command” guiding response over a multi-county area has not been developed, much less implemented.

Problem #2: A good response system empowers and encourages the lowest level of command that can deal with a problem to deal with it. Our current system (RDs, local government, DWR, and other State agencies) disempowers the lowest level of government “command” for the flood fight and forces decisions for relatively modest levee problems to higher levels of government. The lowest level of command is the people on the scene of a levee problem; the reclamation district officials and their engineers along with the County, DWR, and Federal officials in the field. These people have the best information and can act more quickly due to their proximity to the problem. However, for problems that go beyond sandbags, we have an upside down funding system where the RDs quickly throw up their hands due to lack of funds and local representatives of those agencies that may have the funds have to go through internal hierarchies to get permission to act. Response is delayed due to the need to transfer information to these higher levels of command which are subsequently overwhelmed in a major, regional, flood.

Problem #3: We have not been taking the opportunity before the flood to collect critical missing information, pre-plan interagency flood fights, determine response options to foreseeable levee failure scenarios, make agency pre-assignments, and develop response plans in a more useable format suited to the characteristics of our responders. We go into floods in an ad hoc manner. Too often we figure out what should be done if a levee fails at the time under horrible time constraints, the worst political pressure, and lacking key information to make rapid and effective decisions. We act as if floods are mysteries that can only be understood when they arrive. We won’t make commitments to a pre-assigned role in responding to a levee failure because we haven’t 1) done the needed detailed pre-planning, and 2) are afraid that such effective pre-planning would “commit us” and have a budgetary implication that we want to ignore until we can’t, when the flood arrives. As far as the public safety functions of evacuation, etc. we have not been developing plans that are easily usable and geared to our responders, who are competent and resourceful but are probably going to go into these large emergencies without much knowledge base or experience.

The Bold Vision for Future Delta Flood Fight Response

1. Complete Flood Contingency Maps and related Preliminary Engineering Designs for the entire Delta.
2. All levels of government officially approve the maps and agree to agency/jurisdiction pre-assignments for general flood fight support missions and for implementing elements of identified response options to foreseeable levee failure scenarios.
3. Establish local unified flood fight commands and the Delta multi-agency coordination group as legal entities through legislation or agreement that would give these unified commands legal authority and jurisdiction to respond to levees. Disaster claims can be processed through the unified command and not through each agency's budget and separate bureaucracies. All jurisdictions would supply the personnel to staff these commands. DWR, RDs, and/or County would provide unified commanders.
4. Establish a Levee Emergency Response Fund that will empower local unified commands to act on levee problems at their level. This fund would be outside of agency budgets and thereby avoid internal budget quandaries. The fund would be initially established with Delta bond funds (probably less than 2% of the bonds). The fund would be maintained by putting FEMA disaster reimbursement from major disasters back in the fund. Shortages would be made up through a "10-year contribution plan" by all levels of government.
5. Establish local and regional evacuation and shelter systems using the more user friendly mapping format to display response cues, critical information, and space for recording real time decisions.
6. Establish a Delta regional flood response authority independent of any one agency (through the Delta Protection Commission or independent JPA?) that would maintain regional (multi-county) plans, oversee administration of the Emergency Fund, and support the regional response systems when activated.