

California Levees Roundtable



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California's Central Valley Flood System Improvement Framework

The California Levees Roundtable, a collaborative partnership of federal, State, and local officials, has developed a framework for the improvement of the State-federal levee system in the Central Valley. The State is already aggressively pursuing flood system improvements over the next 25 years to improve public safety. The purpose of the Framework is to document the many ongoing and planned system improvements, set aggressive milestones that can be used to track progress, protect and conserve riparian habitat values, and demonstrate a commitment to flood system improvement that allows California to maintain eligibility for federal rehabilitation aid for levees under Public Law 84-99 while improvements are implemented in the long-term.

The Framework, including its interim criteria for vegetation management, will be particularly useful during the next few years while the Central Valley Flood Protection Plan (CVFPP) is being developed. The CVFPP is a system-wide strategic plan for improved management of flood risk in the Central Valley, and is scheduled to be completed and adopted by the State by July 2012. Levee erosion, channel capacity, seepage, encroachments, vegetation maintenance, structural instability, seismic loadings, and environmental concerns are all important factors that must be considered to improve system reliability.

Vegetation growing on levees may restrict the ability to detect defects and distress and may also impair flood-fight activities during a flood event. There are also concerns that decaying tree roots or upturned root balls from fallen trees can lead to levee failures. However, depending on management techniques, waterside vegetation can provide important erosion protection for floodplains and levees. Riparian vegetation provides habitat important to many species of fish and wildlife, including some protected by State and federal laws, and provides important recreational and cultural benefits.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has national standards that limit vegetation on levees. As an interim step in meeting these national standards, the Department of Water Resources prepared interim levee vegetation management criteria for trimming and thinning of vegetation for use until 2012. In the long-term, the State will seek to conserve and enhance riparian habitat on the waterside of levees and aggressively pursue compliance with the national levee standards through the use of improved maintenance inspections, phased vegetation management practices, regional variances, and other management tools that would be consistent with a multi-species and floodplain conservation strategy for the ecosystem.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has agreed that the flood system will be allowed to remain “active” in the PL 84-99 program and will continue to receive federal levee rehabilitation assistance in the event of a flood if the State is demonstrating positive progress and meeting the milestones outlined in the Framework. This eligibility shall be reviewed annually for renewal in accordance with Corps policy and remain in effect until 2012, at which time the eligibility criteria will be reconsidered based on the contents of the CVFPP and the results of research into the long-term effects of vegetation on levee integrity.

The Framework is a living document – a work in progress – that provides general guidance for helping the State move forward while the system-wide CVFPP is being developed. The participating agencies recognize that many of the specifics needed for this framework have to be worked out together during the next four years, including the necessary environmental permitting associated with specific actions or programs. Therefore, details in the document should be viewed as supporting a good-faith effort to make progress in the interest of public safety improvements over time.

The California Levees Roundtable is comprised of senior level officials representing the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Headquarters, South Pacific Division, and Sacramento District); National Marine Fisheries Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Central Valley Flood Protection Board, Department of Water Resources, Department of Fish and Game, Reclamation District No. 2068, and the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency. These agencies have agreed to continue collaboratively working together as partners in upcoming years during implementation of this Framework and the CVFPP to improve public safety and environmental sustainability.

The Roundtable understands and reminds everyone that no matter how much the levee system is improved, people who build and live behind levees will always have substantial residual risk of flooding.

For a copy of *California's Central Valley Flood System Improvement Framework*, see the Central Valley Flood Protection Board web site: <http://www.cvpfb.ca.gov/> or call Jay Punia, Executive Officer, CVFPB at (916) 574-0609.