

News

CORPS OFFICIAL, OTHERS MELD MINDS ON LEVEES

By **Alex Breitler**

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STOCKTON - More than 400,000 people in San Joaquin County are protected by levees.

And while flood risk isn't at the top of most people's minds in mid-August, a group of local, state and federal officials gathered this week to talk about strengthening those levees and making the public more aware of the risks.

The occasion was a visit by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Brigadier General Scott F. "Rock" Donahue, who oversees Corps operations in 10 western states from his San Francisco office.

The Corps is one of many agencies involved in flood protection, but it has a key role to play in the county. Local officials are working with the Corps on a plan to reduce flood danger on the San Joaquin River upstream of Stockton, including a possible bypass to divert part of the river should a surge of water imperil the city.

The Corps also is charged with inspecting local levees and finding any weaknesses.

Donahue said he wants to make sure the voices of area officials are heard in Washington - "so that you're at the table, not on the menu," he said. Improving relations among agencies and making the public more aware of the inherent threat of living behind levees also were themes of the two-day meeting in Stockton.

"I'm really encouraged by what I'm hearing and seeing," Donahue said Tuesday.

San Joaquin County faces two kinds of flood threats. One is the rivers and streams that drain from the Sierra Nevada, including the San Joaquin, which can swell during winter and spring runoff. The second threat is the Delta, which can flood just about any day of the year - as illustrated by the 2004 sunny-day levee breach at Jones Tract.

Flood-control officials are trying to maintain or bring levees up to 100-year standards - that is, make them capable of withstanding the kind of flood that might occur just once in a century.

State law, however, requires counties to soon plan for 200-year protection - a more rigorous standard that would require more costly upgrades.

Local officials emphasized the importance of better communication with state and federal agencies. Those relationships have, at times, been strained.

"We should try and get closer together as partners to achieve what we want, and that's a reduction in flood risk," Stockton water attorney Dante Nomellini said.

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By the numbers

In San Joaquin County:

- 13,400 parcels valued at \$2.5 billion are considered to be in high-risk flood zones.
- More than 140 miles of levees protect businesses and homes.
- 1,842 homes and businesses were damaged during the last major floods in 1997, including both San Joaquin and Stanislaus counties.
- Homeowners spent \$70 million in assessments getting Stockton-area levees up to standard in the 1990s. Now, more rigorous requirements are on the horizon.