

The Riverbank News

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Brendan Murphy knows that it's coming.

It could be the massive earthquake that scientists predict could hammer California within the next century or a massive flood caused by multiple levee breaches.

Either way, the Assistant Secretary for the California Emergency Management Agency had no problem telling the Chairman of a House subcommittee that oversees FEMA and a pair of observing congressmen Thursday morning that the next catastrophe involving the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta could be just around the corner.

"It will happen - the old saying is that it's not a matter of if but a matter of when," he said when addressing Subcommittee Chairman Jeff Denham Thursday morning in a field hearing at the San Joaquin Council of Governments chambers.

As the Chairman of the Committee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management - which oversees the Federal Emergency Management Agency and portions of the Department of Homeland Security - Denham asked Congressman Jerry McNerney, who represents Stockton, to sit in on the hearing.

Pennsylvania Congressman Bill Shuster was also invited by Denham to participate.

Murphy was part of a panel that outlined a variety of issues facing the Central Valley and one of its most valuable resources - the Delta - when it comes to preparing for the next disaster situation that may arise.

He was joined by the General Manager of the East Bay Municipal Utility District, a Commissioner from the California Public Utilities Commission, the former Director of Emergency Operations for San Joaquin County and the Assistant Administrator for Response from the Office of Response and Recovery at the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

But it was another congressman - Walnut Grove's John Garamendi - that drove one of the most important points of the day home for his three colleagues on the dais.

Garamendi, the former Insurance Commissioner and Lieutenant Governor, was adamant about

getting out in front of making the necessary repairs and upgrades to existing levees that he says have far exceeded their life.

"We're going to pay now or we're going to pay later - if you pay later it's going to be a lot more expensive," Garamendi said, speaking metaphorically. "The levees are old - they were built for agricultural purposes and were never supposed to handle the kind of pressure that they've been subjected to.

"We could have a major breach at one of the islands, and I just want to make sure that another Katrina doesn't happen."

Denham pointed out that House Resolution 2903 - the FEMA Reauthorization Act of 2011 - which he sponsored was voted out of committee earlier this year and will be sent to the House for a full vote.

The combination of Federal oversight and State-sponsored examinations at how best to secure the valuable resources the Delta provides - utilizing the legislature-approved Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Multi-Hazard Coordination Task Force - helped to create contingency plans for everything from evacuations to rescues.

Formed under Senate Bill 27, the task force - led by the California Emergency Management Agency - includes representatives from the Delta Protection Commission, the Department of Water Resources and a single representative from each of the five Delta counties.

And that doesn't even take into account when FEMA gets involved.

"Our plans address a wide variety of potential hazards and unite emergency managers through an intensive and collaborative planning process, while our exercises bring together thousands of emergency responders across the nation to practice and assess current plans and procedures," said Robert Fenton, the Assistant Secretary for Response in FEMA's Office of Response and Recovery. "The agency continues to create cooperative policies that assure adequate, safe and dependable water supplies for California and the nation at-large."

While things like earthquakes might be unpredictable, making sure that levees are strong enough to contain the waters within them is something that McNerney believes is instrumental for the protection of both lives and property in and around the Central Valley.

In the vein of "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," McNerney laid the groundwork that Garamendi would later follow when he talked about how repairs and reinforcements were a lot cheaper than emergency stopgap measures during a full-scale flood.

"Levee safety and stability is at the core of preventing floods," McNerney said. "That not only protects the livelihood of residents in our area but benefits the State Budget as a whole."

