Katrina makes delta-dwellers look twice at preparedness

Experts warn of possibility of flood disaster within 50 years if no action taken

By JUANITA BARBASSA

STOCKTON — The earthen levee looming over Jeff Long's backyard stands as tall as his roof. It was just an unsightly detail until Hurricane Katrina broke through levees and swamped New Orleans.

Now Long and residents of neighboring banks of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers and their tributaries are taking a hard look at the aging flood protection system.

They are wondering if the 6,000 miles of levees in Northern and Central California can survive a major earthquake, a prolonged winter storm or an unusually warm spring.

"This is all floodplain," Long said. "There's always a chance of flood, but I'm more concerned now with what happened in New Orleans."

Experts warn that over the next 50 years, there is a two-in-three chance that a catastrophic event—an earthquake or a storm—will damage the delta's levees enough to cause destruction of the kind that engulfed New Orleans. Some farmland here has dropped as much as 26 feet below sea level—three times deeper than in New Orleans.

Multiple levee failures in the delta could leave 5 million people without reliable drinking water, contaminate the irrigation water that the San Joaquin Valley uses to grow much of the nation's produce, and cause untold devastation in neighborhoods near the rivers, said Jeffrey Mount, a geology professor at the University of California at Davis.

"Levere failure is not an 'if', it's a 'when'," Mount said. "There seems to be a willingness to tolerate the human suffering and property loss that might come with these events."

Settlers have been altering the delta's landscape here since the 1850s, fencing in marshland and building up riverbanks, leaving 300 square miles under water. That caused $1.8 billion in damage, killed 49 people and drove 120,000 residents from their homes along the Sacramento River's tributaries.

Experts have calculated that the levees protecting Long's neighborhood, as well as much of Stockton and Sacramento, are capable of resisting any storm from the past 100 years, said Ron Baldwin, director of San Joaquin County's Office of Emergency Services.

But that calculation doesn't take into account the chance of a catastrophic earthquake breaking the levees, and it may underestimate the danger, since the Federal Emergency Management Agency based the 100-year storm estimate on decades-old models that don't account for today's more intense storms and increased urbanization.

"We're getting bigger floods now, and the level of protection is probably less," Baldwin said.

Evacuation plans envision as many as 400,000 people fleeing their homes along the delta. Most would have more escape routes than Louisiana's highways, but public transportation is minimal, and in Sacramento alone, 1.5 million people live without a car.

Some residents remain confident their government will do what it takes to keep them safe.

"I imagine a lot of effort is being put into making sure the area is protected," said Edith Holbert, one of Long's neighbors.