

# Auburn dam talk revived in Katrina's wake

## Congress would pay for a feasibility study, lawmaker tells panel hearing.

By David Whitney -- Bee Washington Bureau  
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WASHINGTON - A new dam at Auburn was suggested Thursday as something that should be among the options to reduce flood-control risks for Sacramento in the wake of Hurricane Katrina levee failures in New Orleans.

Rep. George Radanovich, R-Mariposa, who headed the House Resources Committee hearing on water supply vulnerabilities, said the flood protection Sacramento will get from improvements to Folsom Dam that have been authorized by Congress is insufficient.



Rep. George Radanovich

He said he thinks Congress will fund a new feasibility study for an Auburn dam, which could double the city's protection. "I'd like to see it," Radanovich said. "There's an interest in doing it. If it's not done this year, it would be next year."

Thursday's hearing focused on a bigger problem than American River flooding in Sacramento.

Witnesses for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Reclamation, the state and other water interests described heightened concern about the chances of a massive, sudden flood if an earthquake were to crumble levees in the Sacramento River Delta.

The witnesses said they were rapidly trying to put together a list of priority projects that could include not just strengthening some levees but also knocking down others and perhaps returning some of the 60 or so islands in the Delta to wetlands.

"The levees were designed to protect agricultural lands," said [Mike] Chrisman, California secretary of resources. "Now there are a million people and 200,000 structures there. We need a comprehensive plan to make strategic investments."

The common appeal of the witnesses was for more federal money, adding that they need to act now to get it because of the heightened anxiety in Congress about levees and flood control after Katrina.

The California congressional delegation is seeking more than \$90 million in earmarks for flood-control work in Sacramento and the Delta this year, but much more will be needed.

Several lawmakers said, for example, that among the most pressing needs is communications equipment for emergency workers trying to handle massive evacuations and positioned equipment for repairing levees as quickly as possible.

Over the longer term, Kirk Rodgers, mid-Pacific regional director of the Bureau of Reclamation, cited the need to look for "additional water storage areas wherever we can" to deal with disruptions caused by levee failures.

Reps. Dan Lungren, R-Gold River, and John Doolittle, R-Roseville, zeroed in on their concerns about dams and the need to reopen discussions about them.

"Dams are politically incorrect, even though levees are inherently unstable," Doolittle said.

Radanovich quizzed Rodgers about whether Sacramento's goal of 200-year flood protection is sufficient given the experience that New Orleans went through after Hurricane Katrina.

Katrina was fiercer than New Orleans was prepared to handle. Many believe that California could be facing a similar situation as sea levels rise and storms become more severe because of global climate change.

Rodgers said that with the modifications to Folsom Dam that have been authorized by Congress, there's not much more that can be done to significantly boost flood protection.

"We'd have to look for other features," he told Radanovich.

When Radanovich then asked about the protection potential from an Auburn dam, Rodgers said past studies had identified several configurations, "all of which would increase substantially flood protection for Sacramento."

After the hearing both Rodgers and Brig. Gen. Joseph Schroedel, commander of the South Pacific Division of the Army Corps of Engineers in San Francisco, said that decisions about what is appropriate flood control for Sacramento are for Sacramento to make and should be part of a larger plan.



Rep. Dan Lungren

"Auburn would bring more protection, but the question is: Is it feasible?" Rodgers said. "It would be extraordinarily challenging to get agreements and funding, but I would not rule it out."

**About the writer:**

The Bee's David Whitney can be reached at (202) 383-0004 or [dwhitney@mcclatchydc.com](mailto:dwhitney@mcclatchydc.com).

# Katrina, Folsom Dam cost overruns renew interest in Auburn Dam

By ERICA WERNER, Associated Press Writer

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WASHINGTON (AP) - Earthquake fears stopped work on the Auburn Dam decades ago, but the project north of Sacramento never completely died. Now it's getting new attention thanks to cost overruns on Folsom Dam improvements and a revived focus on flood control in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

At a hearing Thursday on water supply vulnerabilities in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta - the source of drinking water for 22 million Californians - Rep. George Radanovich noted that Folsom Dam improvements would result only in 200-year flood protection, compared with the 400- or 500-year level common in other urban areas. The numbers refer to how often a major flood can be expected.

"What would it take to bring Sacramento up to that level? Hint: Auburn Dam," Radanovich, R-Mariposa, told witnesses from the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers.

After the hearing, which Radanovich convened as chairman of the House Resources Committee's water and power subcommittee, he said he hoped a feasibility study on the Auburn Dam could be conducted soon.

It would be just the latest chapter for the Auburn Dam. Congress approved the project on the American River in the 1960s, but an earthquake in 1975 halted work, and the discovery of a fault beneath the dam site led to a redesigned structure whose cost was estimated at upward of \$1 billion.

The dam might have gone away, but Rep. John Doolittle, R-Rocklin, championed it tirelessly. Still, Congress defeated funding proposals twice in the 1990s.

Finally, two years ago, Doolittle struck a deal with then-Rep. Bob Matsui, D-Sacramento, to abandon Auburn Dam in favor of a package of improvements to the 50-year-old Folsom Dam on the American River south of Auburn. The deal also gave Doolittle millions of dollars for district water projects.

Then this summer, the Corps of Engineers revealed that the cost of a key Folsom Dam improvement - increasing the size of the water outlets on the dam's face so the reservoir could drain more quickly - would cost as much as three times the original \$215 million estimate. That led Doolittle and others to start talking again about the Auburn Dam, especially when Hurricane Katrina reminded officials of the need for good flood control.

The 200-year flood protection offered by Folsom upgrades is a long-sought goal for Sacramento, which now has only about 100-year protection - the lowest of any large urban area in the nation, according to testimony Thursday. But Auburn Dam could offer 400-year protection.

"I think it would be extraordinarily challenging to get agreement on (Auburn) and find the funding for it, but I wouldn't rule it out as being a viable option," Kirk Rodgers, a Bureau of Reclamation regional director, said after testifying Thursday. "If the public decision is 200-year flood control isn't enough, we better be looking for what way is enough."

Auburn opponents say it's better to move forward with a project that's already been approved by Congress and is within reach - as Folsom is - rather than fight the Auburn Dam fight all over again. A task force is working to come up with cheaper, better ways to improve Folsom Dam that wouldn't require new congressional approvals.

"We can't afford to be stalled by another divisive debate about an Auburn Dam when we have a path identified that would significantly improve our level of flood protection in the near term," Roger Dickinson, chairman of the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors and vice chairman of the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency, said in a phone interview.

# Auburn Dam may offer option for flood control

Contra Costa Times – 10/21/05

By Erica Werner, Associated Press staff writer

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