

Restore the Delta
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A Vision for the Delta

Restore the Delta

Delta communities deserve a healthy environment, water for their economic prosperity, and strong stewardship of resources for protection with a changing climate. In a system that promotes a “beneficiary pays” model, Restore the Delta supports cooperative planning and funding support from the state, water agencies and community members because the survival and well-being of the Delta is in the interest of the Delta, its communities, economy and ecosystems, and the security of California’s water supply.

Restore the Delta engages with several research organizations, including Just Transitions and COEQWAL, to develop comprehensive solutions for the Delta. The below statements are Restore the Delta’s own position.

The Revitalization of the Delta Economy

Home to 4 million Delta County residents, the Delta supports an annual economy well over \$7 billion, including \$5 billion in agriculture, \$1.5 billion in commercial salmon fishing, and \$780 million in recreation. Revitalization of the ecosystem and protecting Delta communities, Tribes and agriculture is the first step in revitalizing the Delta economy and reconnecting communities to their waterways.

Delta Levees

Due to the complex nature of levee maintenance and lack of prioritization and adequate funding from the Department of Water Resources (“DWR”), coordinated and comprehensive upgrades have been difficult to achieve. The proposals below would require coordinated efforts across communities, water agencies, the State of California, and the US Army Corps of Engineers.

If the Delta levees were to fail, it could result in major damages to Delta agriculture, communities, and State Water Project (“SWP”) infrastructure.

- **Estimated Cost:** A major failure of several islands could result in over \$22 billion in asset damages and \$5 billion in annual economic losses, according to the LAO and DSC.¹
- **Community Impacts:** Levee breaches may result in significant loss of life, property and agricultural land damage, and disruption of SWP water supply.
- **Cultural Impact:** The Delta is home to numerous cultural and tribal heritage sites. A breach could lead to the destruction of these sites, and the loss of irreplaceable cultural resources, artifacts and sites.

¹ See Legislative Analyst Office. Achieving State Goals for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. https://lao.ca.gov/reports/2015/res/Delta/sac-sj-delta-011515.aspx?utm_. Accessed 13 May 2025; Delta Adapts: Creating a Climate Resilient Future. Draft Adaptation Plan, Delta Stewardship Council, Nov. 2024, <https://deltacouncil.ca.gov/pdf/delta-plan/2024-11-18-delta-adapts-draft-adaptation-plan.pdf>.

Pathway for a Sustainable Future

Levee Upgrades

- **Freshwater Pathways Project (Metropolitan Water District of Southern California)**
 - **Proposal:** Levee upgrades on Metropolitan’s four islands to meet the 200-year standard
 - **Cost:** \$400 - \$700 million
 - **Timeline:** This could be implemented immediately
 - **Benefits:** Reduced impact of sea level rise and seismic risk. Fortify and secure the SWP water supply. Protection of communities and agricultural land.

- **Comprehensive levee upgrades**
 - **Proposal:** Levee upgrade for all Delta levees to meet the 200-year standard
 - **Estimated Cost:** The Delta Stewardship Council estimates critical updates would cost between **\$3.24 to \$3.34 billion**.² Comprehensive upgrades would cost at least double this amount.
 - **Timeline:** The Delta Stewardship Council (“DSC”) proposes critical updates over a 25 year-period. If upgrades were prioritized and adequately funded, comprehensive upgrades could be implemented via a phased approach over a 25-30 year-period (i.e. high priority to low priority).
 - **Benefits:** Levee setbacks for floodplain restoration can reduce flood heights and velocity flows, reconnecting wetlands and enhancing key ecosystem functions.

Regulatory

- **Updates to the Bay-Delta Water Quality Control Plan**
 - 40%-60% adaptive unimpaired-flow standard
 - Harmful Algal Bloom standard
 - Inclusion of Tribal Beneficial Uses

Floodplain + Habitat Restoration

- **Comprehensive levee upgrades also present the opportunity to integrate broader restoration**, including: incorporation of hiking and walking trails into the levee designs, promoting recreation and tourism; habitat restoration paired with adequate flow standards to support fishery recovery; and floodplain reconnection, reducing Delta flood risk, improving water quality, and supporting groundwater recharge.
- **Cost:** The DSC estimates restoration costs to range from **\$2.51 to \$5.19 billion** depending on targeted acreage. Comprehensive review and cost assessment outside of the Voluntary Agreements process is still needed from the State to further evaluate these benefits.

Infrastructure

- **Fortification:** Rebuild the Clifton Court Forebay to Sea Level Rise standards
- **Estimated Cost:** Between \$1 and \$4 billion

Fish Passage

- **Technology Solutions:**
 - Operable Gates + Barrier Removal
 - Satellite or Drone Technology with real-time fish passage
- **Cost:** Further State analysis is needed to understand the full cost of upgrades and new technological solutions

² See Delta Adapts: Creating a Climate Resilient Future. Draft Adaptation Plan, Delta Stewardship Council, Nov. 2024, <https://deltacouncil.ca.gov/pdf/delta-plan/2024-11-18-delta-adapts-draft-adaptation-plan.pdf>.