

Opinion: A way forward in California's water wars

Publisher's note: *This editorial is from the July 8, 2012, Los Angeles Times*

Southern California's most important lake is located in a distant part of the state and has a name most of us wouldn't recognize. Clifton Court Forebay, between Oakland and Stockton, forms the manufactured headwaters of the manufactured river known as the California Aqueduct, which over four decades has supplied millions of residents from the Bay Area to the Mexican border with drinking water and thousands of growers from Santa Clara to Santa Maria to San Diego with irrigation. Engineers warn that in the event of a major earthquake, Clifton Court could fail and the aqueduct could run dry, leaving much of the state without that water for three years or more.

Even without a big quake, though, the forebay, the aqueduct and the water they bring are under threat.

Clifton Court is at the southern end of the remarkable region known as the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, where the snowmelt from the western Sierra drains into the San Pablo and San Francisco bays and forms the briny heart and lungs of the state. For thousands of years the delta was intermittently marsh and dry land, shallow sea and freshwater wetland, changing with the daily rise and fall of the tides, the annual patterns of mountain precipitation and the more mysterious rhythms of drought, flooding and seismic upheaval. The delta we know today was created in the 19th and early 20th centuries when Chinese laborers began building levees of dirt and tule, letting dry land appear and allowing farmers to grow asparagus, grain and fruit trees.

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