

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

Editorial: Lungren needs to deliver on Natomas levees

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When we last checked in on the Natomas flood control project, the situation was grim. Because of overly broad restrictions on "earmarks," the U.S. House of Representatives has bottled up federal authorizations for water and flood control projects all over the country, including one in Natomas.

Without such a federal authorization, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will be unable to finish a levee improvement project needed to protect 100,000 people, the Sacramento International Airport and billions of dollars in property.

Yet over the last month, there have been signs of progress in breaking this logjam. Numerous local officials, including Sacramento County Supervisor Phil Serna and Assemblyman Roger Dickinson, have joined U.S. Rep. Doris Matsui in pressing House Speaker John Boehner to change House policies so public safety projects can go forward.

As Matsui wrote in a Nov. 1 letter to Boehner, "Improvements to our nation's levees and other flood protection infrastructure are necessary to create jobs now and to save lives and property in the future."

Another positive sign is the interest of U.S. Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer in resolving the issue. On Nov. 7, Feinstein and Boxer introduced the Natomas Basin Flood Protection Improvements Act of 2011. The bill, a companion to House legislation introduced by Matsui earlier this year, would authorize nearly \$1.4 billion to upgrade Natomas levees.

The Feinstein-Boxer bill is notable in two ways. One, it marks the first time these two senators have teamed up on Sacramento flood control legislation. Secondly, it shows that Feinstein, despite her concerns about development in deep floodplains, recognizes how vital this project is to Sacramento's future.

Unfortunately, this push in the Senate hasn't yet prompted Boehner and the House leadership to budge. U.S. Rep. Dan Lungren, R-Gold River, says he's pushing hard for the Natomas project, but he has nothing visible yet to show for it. Indeed, Lungren may have actually complicated the task of rallying bipartisan action with a letter he sent last month to Supervisor Serna.

In the letter, a response to one sent by the supervisor, Lungren chides Serna for "now engaging in the importance of Natoma (sic) Levee Improvements." That's somewhat interesting, given that Serna lives in Natomas, was active in getting a local tax assessment passed for the levee project and actually knows how to spell the word.

But the most mysterious part of Lungren's letter is his request that Serna, in seeking authorization for the Natomas levee project, join Lungren in supporting construction of the Auburn dam, upstream of the Folsom Dam on the American River.

Auburn dam? Surely Lungren knows that, having twice rejected funding for the dam, Congress is unlikely to do so now. Moreover, even if Congress somehow found the money and support for Auburn dam, Natomas would still need stronger levees, because its most serious flood threat comes from the Sacramento River, whose flows would be unaffected by an Auburn dam.

Due to new redistricting maps, Lungren will not continue to represent part of Natomas after 2012. But voters in his newly redrawn district will nonetheless be watching to see if he uses his status in the House to break this logjam and help a vulnerable part of the Sacramento region. To do so, he needs to act in bipartisan fashion, focus on the task at hand and not engage in side agendas.