

# San Francisco Chronicle

## To avoid catastrophe, don't build more dams

*By Eric Wesselman and Ron Stork*

*February 15, 2017 Updated: February 15, 2017 5:01pm*

In the wake of the Oroville Dam near-catastrophe, many are asking our organization what the state needs to do to ensure there aren't problems with other dams and what they can do to make sure any problems are addressed.

To ensure a safe and reliable water system that protects communities and the rivers that flow through them, Californians must invest in innovative, 21st century water solutions that diversify our water system and work with nature instead of against it.



Photo: Scott Strazzante, The Chronicle  
Water flows out of the damaged spillway at Oroville Dam in Oroville, Calif., on Tuesday, February 14, 2017.

Twelve years ago, Friends of the River and other environmental groups warned state and federal agencies that the unarmored spillway at Oroville, our nation's tallest dam, was dangerous. We were ignored. This time, we trust our words will not fall on deaf ears.

California has always seesawed between periods of drought and extreme precipitation that can lead to flooding of biblical proportion. Climate change is making these shifts increasingly severe. We can and must shore up unsafe dams and levees — or decommission them if they're no longer serving the public interest. Relying on 20th century thinking such as building new dams simply no longer works.

Over the last century, Californians built a vast network of more than 1,400 dams. Building more would do little to reduce flood risk or increase water supply, but it would add billions of dollars of debt for the next generation and destroy our rivers. Infrastructure planning by the Trump administration and the state of California should prioritize funding for existing structures instead of wasting billions of dollars on new dams that provide little more than ribbon-cutting photo ops for politicians. We can't dam our way to paradise.

We're calling for action on four fronts:

(1) Identify unsafe dams and levees and shore them up or tear them down. The state should review other dams for dam-safety and flood-control performance issues and then mobilize resources to address their deficiencies. Meanwhile, dams such as Daguerre Point on the Yuba River in Yuba County, Searsville on San Francisquito Creek in San Mateo County and four on the Klamath River should be decommissioned.

(2) Invest in flood-control projects that work with nature to maximize public safety, as the Yolo Bypass does — it is the only reason Sacramento wasn't evacuated on Sunday night. Notching or setting back levees reduces flood risk downstream, replenishes our groundwater, and creates habitat for fish and wildlife.

(3) Employ sustainable water supply and efficiency solutions that reduce risks associated with over-relying on dams for both flood control and water supply. The Pacific Institute, an independent water policy organization, found that California could save up to 14 million acre-feet a year of untapped water through water-saving practices, recycling and storm water capture. Realizing just 10 percent of this potential would increase our water supply by twice as much as the proposed new dams.

(4) Stop encouraging development in floodplains below dams or behind levees, and encourage people to move away from unsafe floodplains.

We need the public to make their voices heard. You can start by calling on Gov. Brown to invest in the safe, sound and reliable water future outlined above. Then stay informed by supporting groups such as Friends of the River.

*Eric Wesselman is the executive director and Ron Stork the senior policy advocate of Friends of the River, a statewide conservation organization*

<http://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/openforum/article/To-avoid-catastrophe-don-t-build-more-dams-10935707.php>