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County OKs emergency flood plan for Sacramento International Airport

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Sacramento International Airport on Tuesday became the first major national airport with an emergency plan to move operations in case of flood.

Mather Airfield will become the Sacramento region's emergency commercial airport should the Natomas area flood, county representatives concluded after a flood contingency analysis.

Officials chose Mather over Sacramento Executive Airport and McClellan airfield because of Mather's runway capabilities, instrument landing system, active air traffic control tower, parking and mass transit access.

The flood threat in Natomas is real, officials said, but unlikely. The 41-year-old airport has never closed because of flooding, they said.

The plan is "for what we hope will never occur," airport operating chief Michael La Pier said.

Should levees fail along the nearby Sacramento and American rivers, it would take only 12 to 18 hours for all paved roads to Sacramento International Airport to be covered by a foot of water, forecasts show. Floodwaters also likely would inundate runways and airport grounds.

"Sacramento International would be impacted to the point it would not be able to function," La Pier said.

The airport is a major transportation hub for Northern California, carrying 10 million passengers a year, as well as freight.

The county uses Mather as a cargo shipping airport. Those operations have been a point of contention for Mather-area residents and officials. Local officials have expressed concerns about the added activity, should Mather be used for emergency commercial flights.

An analysis shows it could cost the airport department \$1 million to transfer minimal operations to Mather, allowing up to four flights per hour. That may involve using a nearby hotel ballroom as a passenger ticketing and screening site.

To operate for an extended period, and 10 to 12 flights per hour, the set-up cost could be \$11 million, including the cost of new infrastructure and temporary buildings.

Sacramento International handles up to 29 flights in its busiest hour of the day, 6 a.m. to 7 a.m.

"Hopefully, this (contingency plan) will never have to be used," county Supervisor Roger

Dickinson said.

The airport contingency plan, which was approved Tuesday by the Board of Supervisors, comes just one month before federal officials are expected to remap the Natomas basin as a floodplain, signifying that the area is at higher risk of flood than previously thought.

That remapping will require flood insurance for many homeowners until local officials are able to strengthen surrounding levees to provide 100-year flood projection, or the ability to withstand a flood that has a 1 percent chance of striking in any given year.

Upgrades on 25 miles of levees around Natomas are expected to be done by 2011, bringing the area back to 100-year flood protection.

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