Table 6.2B – Flood Types in California

Flood Type	Problems
Alluvial Fan	Alluvial fan flooding occurs in the steep arid or semiarid mountains found throughout the state. Alluvial fans are fan-shaped deposits of eroded rock and soil carried out of mountains and into valley floors by landslides, mudslides, mudflows, and surface runoff (sheetflows and streamflows.) At the beginning of the valley, alluvial fans are steep and narrow with boulders and other course material. The deposited material becomes increasingly fine as the gradient decreases and the material, mainly gravels, sand and mud, spreads. When rain falls, runoff from the canyon walls flows as a high-velocity sheet that channels into rivulets, and then to natural drainage courses. The rapidly moving water often carries large boulders and other material from the watershed depositing them into runoff channels, blocking the flow of water. Floodwater then spills out onto the fan, with each event finding a new channel that soon fills up with deposits and overflows. Flooding in alluvial fans often can cause greater damage than clear-water flooding.
Coastal	Coastal flooding and erosion present some of the most complex and serious high-risk problems. In California, coastal erosion is most often caused by a combination of factors: winter storms, rising sea levels, tidal action, currents and waves, and high winds.
Flash	Flash floods are quick events, particularly where the topography enhances rainfall from Pacific or Gulf storms and thunderstorms. Flash floods are caused by the rapid buildup of runoff after high-intensity rainfall. The precipitation is often so intense that both perennial streams and dry watercourses are rapidly transformed into torrents, sweeping away whatever lies in their path. Loss of life in such a flooding is common because of the suddenness of high flows. A flash flood can occur in mountainous regions and urban areas. In the mountains, a stream level may rise quickly in a heavy rainstorm. Dry desert washes, especially those near mountains, can reach flood stage within minutes as a result of thunderstorms miles away. Urban flash flooding can occur in any terrain. It is particularly aggravated where natural cover has been removed to construct buildings, roads and parking lots. Streets become rivers, inundating vehicles and causing heavy damage to residential and industrial properties situated along stream channels.
Fluvial	California rivers generally flow west to the Pacific Ocean and may fall as much as 5,000 feet within the first 20 miles. This relatively steep slope creates a high-velocity flow that carries eroded material. As the slope of the river flattens, the velocity slows and the material is deposited. As a result, the lower reaches of many streams pass through the sandy alluvial plains they have formed. Flood flows can cause these streams to migrate, resulting in a higher and wider floodplain. Developed areas on land originally outside the defined floodplain can later flood.

Flood Type	Problems
Lake	Lake level fluctuations primarily concern shoreland property owners, but impact local, state and federal agencies with regulatory or financial responsibilities for water and related land use associated with lakes. Both natural and human actions cause changing lake levels. Natural factors include direct precipitation, surface runoff, evaporation, ground water inflow, ice formation, aquatic growth, meteorological disturbances, and, in larger lakes, tidal and crustal movement. Human factors include dredging, diversion, consumptive uses and intruding structures.
Levee	Levees are a basic means of providing flood protection along rivers and waterways in regions where development exists, or is planned, and in agricultural areas. Levees confine floodwaters to the main river channel or protect inland areas from high tides. The causes of levee problems are structural failures, foundation failures of underlying soils, and overtopping by flood flows, tides and waves. Contributing factors include poor construction materials, erosion by current and wave action, seepage through or under the levee, burrowing rodents, and improper repairs. Lack of adequate and regular maintenance to correct these problems also contributes to levee failure. Most failures are composites of several of these factors.
Mudslides	Mud floods and mudflows cause several types of flood damage that are not characteristic of clear-water flooding. These include: • The force of debris-laden water, which can be tens or hundreds of times greater than that generated by clear water, destroys retaining walls and other protective works; • Mud and debris may fill drainage channels, river or stream channels, and sediment basins, causing otherwise normal runoff to suddenly inundate areas outside the floodplains; and • Sediment and debris are more damaging to houses and their contents than clear water. Frame structures are often total losses, and if they remain intact, sediment and mud must be removed and washed out. Stains, mildew and dry rot often result. Major floods almost always involve heavy intrusions of mud, sediment and debris. Such conditions are caused or worsened by forest and brush fires. Once the hills have been denuded of vegetation, there is more runoff and less infiltration. Even light rainfall can develop into rapid runoff with severe erosion occurring in such areas.
Riverine	Riverine flooding, the most common type of flooding in the state, occurs when a stream channel fills with more water than it can carry. The water rises and flows over the channel banks onto the adjacent floodplain.
Seiche and Tsunami	Tsunamis, or seismic sea waves, are usually created by undersea earthquakes or landslides. Seiches are similar, large waves in lakes. Waves are generated by a crustal disturbance giving a vertical impulse to the sea surface. These are long-period waves that travel long distances at speeds of up to 600 miles per hour with little or no loss of energy. When tsunami waves approach a coastal region in which water depth decreases rapidly, their height is increased by refraction, shoaling, and local bay or harbor conditions, and speed is creased. Tsunamis frequently arrive in a series of spaced intervals.