

‘ More has been done this evening than in the past 20 years.’

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✓ Riverbed cleanout *Flood prevention + control* promised

By MARIANNE BIASOTTI
Sentinel staff writer

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WATSONVILLE — In a rarely seen display of coordination and speed among governmental agencies, Santa Cruz County's flood control board was assured Monday that dredging of the Pajaro River would begin soon, despite failed efforts to do so for two decades.

The announcement, made by U.S. Rep. Sam Farr and members of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, state Department of Fish and Game and a letter from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, left several in the packed Watsonville City Council Chamber stunned.

By May, the board expects to have the promised permits, and by June expects to begin dredging the river from Murphy Crossing Road to Highway 1.

Many believe the trees, bushes and sand that have been allowed to accumulate in the channel were responsible for clogging raging storm waters, which broke through a river levee March 11 and flooded the town of Pajaro and hundreds of acres of crops.

“More has been done this evening than in the past 20 years,” said Ed Kelly, chairman of the Santa Cruz County Flood Control and Water Conservation District, Zone 7.

“We will diligently move forward to see this never happens again,” said Kelly, a longtime proponent of river maintenance and a farmer whose fields flooded last week.

But after the announcement, several speakers stood before the governmental representatives and bitterly recounted the human misery they said resulted from failure to prevent the disaster.

“Often times, it takes a disaster to get people moving,” said John Fantham, director of the county Public Works Department.

Now that the red tape is cleared, farmers and others who say money was never the issue that blocked river maintenance face their next big challenge.

Clearing the sandbars alone from the channel will cost an estimated \$3.7 million, said Farr. Costs to remove vegetation in the targeted area have not been determined. County Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello said matching funds that would pay for half the clean-up costs might be available through the Federal Emergency Management Agency. “I think with assistance from the Zone 7 board, we'll be in a very competitive position,” Mauriello said.

Kelly sounded confident: “We can overcome that — we always said we can do it if they get out of our way.”

On Monday, the Zone 7 board approved \$380,000 toward the dredging. The money was transferred from a Pajaro River study ironically approved by the Zone 7 board only four days before the flood.