

SJMN MAR 23, 1995

Pajaro channel to be cleared

Flood-weary farmers finally get wish

Flood prevention & control

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Pajaro Valley farmers who saw their low-lying fields inundated with floodwaters from the raging Pajaro River a week and a half ago have heard what they wanted to hear:

The Pajaro River channel will be cleared of brush, trees and sandbars.

Even though hydrologists, engineers and some politicians insisted that the river would have flooded even if the channel had been cleared, angry farmers blamed the damage to levees on governmental foot-dragging that prevented removal of debris from the riverbed.

At a meeting Monday night at Watsonville City Hall, farmers learned that the flood-control district established by the city and Santa Cruz County will earmark money set aside for environmental studies for river clearing.

Zone 7, the flood-control agency and district, had previously budgeted \$380,000 for a river-management plan. But the contract for the study was canceled Monday night, and the money was allocated for emergency clearing of vegetation from the Pajaro River channel.

Meanwhile, Santa Cruz County Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello reported that removal of

See **CLEARING**, Page 2B

Funds earmarked to clear vegetation from Pajaro River

SJMN MAR 23, 1995

■ CLEARING

from Page 1B

sandbars from the riverbed could cost an additional \$3.7 million. She said she hoped the Federal Emergency Management Agency would help meet that cost.

State Sen. Henry Mello has introduced legislation in Sacramento that would facilitate clearing of debris and brush from the channels of three rivers, including the Pajaro.

The Watsonville Democrat's bill would allow workers clearing brush, willows, sandbars and soil from the beds of the Pajaro, Salinas and Carmel rivers to bypass requirements of the state envi-

ronmental quality and endangered species laws. They hope to eliminate material that could cause more flooding.

Ray Belgard, the supervisor representing the south end of Santa Cruz County, said Tuesday he was pleased that river-clearing work performed by Zone 7 in recent years eliminated most flooding on the north side of the Pajaro.

Although there was one small break in the levee on the Santa Cruz County side of the river, the bulk of the damage occurred in north Monterey County when levees east of Pajaro gave way, allowing water to spill into that tiny town and onto thousands of acres of surrounding farmland.

"I feel for them in north Monterey County," Bel-

gard said, "but that's what happens when you have farming in a flood plain.

"If you ask me, even if the Pajaro River were a cement channel like the Los Angeles River, it still might have overtopped and flooded on the south side of the stream."

Belgard said he believes stream clearing near the confluence of the Pajaro with Salsipuedes and Corralitos creeks did prevent flooding in the Watsonville area, particularly in the Bay Village neighborhood.

On Tuesday, supervisors endorsed legislation that would exempt churches in Zone 7 — which includes Watsonville and most of the rest of the Pajaro Valley — from having to pay assessments to the district.

By a 3-1 vote, with Mardi Wormhoudt dissenting and Chairman Fred Keeley absent, supervisors endorsed Senate Bill 192. The measure would allow local agencies to exempt properties owned by religious organizations from assessments imposed by special districts. Watsonville-area churches, which report they've paid — under protest — almost \$23,000 to Zone 7 and a local mosquito-abatement district, asked for the legislation.

Wormhoudt said she favored the concept but asked unsuccessfully that the exemption be expanded to include non-profit organizations.

Keeley was hospitalized with pneumonia and unable to attend Monday night's Zone 7 meeting or Tuesday's supervisors' meeting.