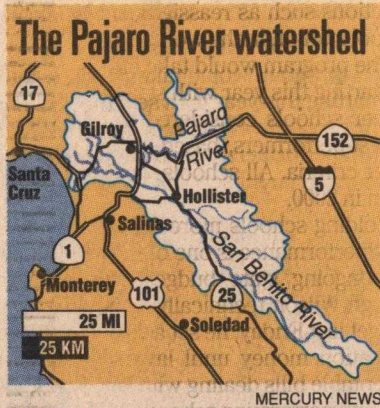


Flood-prevention deal on table

Floods & Flood Prevention

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■ Pajaro Valley: Santa Cruz, Monterey supervisors to consider plan.

BY LEE QUARNSTROM
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With upstream politicians reluctant to formalize any agreements with downstream peers to prevent flooding along the Pajaro River, an informal agreement to seek solutions is now in the works.

Today, supervisors in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties are expected to join officials in San Benito

and Santa Clara counties in an effort to prevent any more disastrous floods like those that have devastated parts of the Pajaro Valley in recent years.

The worst floods occurred in March 1995 when a levee on the south side of the river broke east of Watsonville, sending a slurry of water and mud across strawberry fields and through the tiny working-

class community of Pajaro in north Monterey County. Afterward, engineers said the runoff from the river's 1,200-square-mile watershed was too much for the crumbling levee to contain.

Previous attempts to enroll officials in the inland counties of San Benito and Santa Clara in flood-control efforts have failed. A 1996 measure by former state Sen. Henry Mello, D-Watsonville, was withdrawn after Republican Assemblyman Peter Frusetta said his San Benito County constituents feared

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any such moves would only raise their taxes to benefit no one but property owners and farmers downstream in the Pajaro Valley.

The present deal to establish a somewhat informal task force to

study the causes and seek solutions to Pajaro River flooding can be traced to the work of Assemblyman Fred Keeley of Boulder Creek in picking up where Mello's unsuccessful efforts left off. Earlier in this year's legislative session, Keeley introduced the Pajaro River Watershed Flood Prevention Authority Act. It would order the four counties and their respective flood-control and water-conservation districts to cooperate in a joint effort to find solutions.

See **FLOOD**, Page 4B

Flood control on table

■ FLOOD

from Page 1B

But like Mello before him, Keeley, D-Santa Cruz, received a less-than-enthusiastic reaction from politicians in San Benito and Santa Clara counties. They said they'd rather reach an agreement on their own instead of being told to do so by the state Legislature.

Keeley subsequently challenged officials from the four counties "to reach agreement on how best to proceed toward resolving the flooding issues" without being directed to do so by the state, according to John Fantham, Santa Cruz County's director of public works.

Keeley said Monday he has given the counties and their flood-control or water districts until Wednesday afternoon to sign the informal agreement. If they fail to do so, he said, he will continue pushing his legislation mandating the counties and districts to work together.

The Santa Clara Valley Water District sponsored a meeting of representatives from the affected agencies, as well as the Army Corps of Engineers, in Gilroy in late July, Fantham said. He said Monday it took "a couple of hours" for those at the meeting to agree on language in a resolution they have taken back to their bosses for consideration.

Keeley said he, too, has met with representatives from the four counties, once in Sacramento and twice in his 27th District bailiwick — which includes the western end of the Pajaro Valley.

The resolution, which has been adopted or will be considered today by supervisors and water agency officials in the four counties, creates "an intergovernmental working group" to face the problems of flooding along the Pajaro.

Santa Clara County and the Santa Clara Valley Water District approved the resolution last week. The San Benito County Water District signed the deal on Aug. 13. Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito County supervisors are expected to approve the agreement today, as are directors of water and flood-control districts in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties. The resolution also has been approved by city councils in Hollister and Morgan Hill. Watsonville council members are expected to approve it tonight. Gilroy council members will consider the resolution next month.

The four counties and water agencies, if they all approve the deal as expected, would study flood risks throughout the Pajaro River watershed. That study, according to the resolution drafted at the Gilroy meeting, would be the basis for future agreements regarding financing for any flood-control projects.

The study would begin by December.

Keeley said he is "very pleased" with the deal struck at the Gilroy meeting and hopes he can drop his legislation as the four counties and their water agencies work cooperatively to solve the flooding problems.