

'EVERYBODY LOVES IT'



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Work begins next month to revamp the Salsipuedes Creek levee protecting the Watsonville neighborhood of Bay Village.

Dual Purpose

Flood + Flood Prevention

PAJARO RIVER LEVEE PROJECTS PROTECT PEOPLE, AID WILDLIFE

By DONNA JONES

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✓ WATSONVILLE — For people living along the Pajaro River and Salsipuedes Creek, two flood protection projects getting underway are cause for celebration.

But wildlife in Elkhorn Slough also stands to benefit as dirt excavated from along the river to increase its carrying capacity during winter storms is sent south to help rebuild rare marshland habitat.

Dirt from the river project also will shore up the levee along Salsipuedes Creek, which has settled in places since it was built in 1949, increasing the danger of flooding.

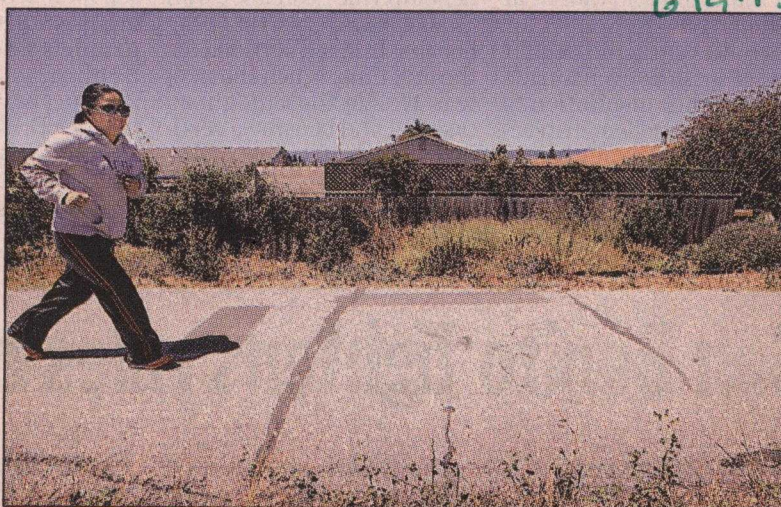
"That's the nice thing about this project," said Bruce Leclergue, Santa Cruz County flood control manager. "The dirt is getting used in two publicly approved fashions. Everybody loves it."

What's known as the bench excavation project along the Pajaro River started last summer, with the removal of 140,000 cubic yards of dirt between Highway 1 and just east of the Main Street bridge in Watsonville. Phase two, scheduled to start July 1, will remove more than 150,000 cubic yards between Watsonville and Murphy Crossing.

Officials and residents praised the projects at a meeting Monday night.

"I am very glad you are taking the initiative to work on this project so when the rains come we don't have to live with flooding," said Hector Solis, who lives in the River Park neighborhood, east of Main Street.

Monique Fountain, project



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Work is set to resume July 1 on the Pajaro River bench excavation project. Dirt from the project will shore up the Salsipuedes Creek levee, which is commonly used by neighbors for recreation and exercise.

director for the Elkhorn Slough tidal wetland project, said wildlife, particularly sea otters, will be pleased as well. She said plans call for restoring 100 acres of land near the southern edge of the slough, once diked and drained, but now under water due to subsidence or sinking to a lower level. The dirt provided by the river project will be enough to lift from 18 to 36 acres 5.8 feet above sea level, increasing marshland now and protecting it against anticipated sea level rise in the future.

Fountain said half the area's 2,000 acres of marshland are gone, making it one of the rarest habitats around. It's also one of the richest environments, and one of the few places where Southern sea otters can get out of the water and rest. Because they can rest, the otters don't have to eat as

much, and when they're ready to feed, there's plenty of crabs living nearby to provide a snack. That's made the marshland home to the biggest group of mothers caring for pups in the entire sea otter range, she said.

The excavation will take six weeks to two months, and the dirt will be delivered to Elkhorn via San Juan, Salinas and Dolan roads and Highway 1, Leclergue said. Less intensive work at the river and at Salsipuedes Creek will continue through the summer.

The flood protection projects were estimated at \$8.3 million, but are coming in about \$1.5 million below budget. Low bidder Pavex, a division of Granite Rock Co., is the contractor.

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