

Birders decry river clearing

By JOHN BESSA
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WATSONVILLE — Vegetation clearing in the Pajaro River will drive out up to 5,000 birds that used to call the thick greenery home, county bird watchers say.

Members of the Santa Cruz Bird Club say the clearing plan, which left single trees every 75 feet on the Watsonville side of the river and every 50 feet on the Pajaro side, was an attempt to appease people flooded out in March, and allowed too much cutting too soon.

"There's lots that we're going to lose. This whole clearing process is really like trying to stop all the anger that's occurred — it's not really something that has to be done (immediately)," said Jo Ann Baumgartner, Santa Cruz Bird Club member.

"They didn't have to take out all the habitat," she said.

Pajaro residents, business owners and farmers have blamed the thick brush and trees that used to be in the river as one cause of March 11's disastrous flooding.

Crews have finished clearing most of the vegetation along the river from the Highway 1 bridge to Murphy Crossing and are now burning the slash.

The Santa Cruz County side has been cut and should be cleared within two weeks, said Brian Turpen, county assistant director of Public Works.

More than half of the Monterey County side has been cleared, said Mike Armstrong, general manager of the Monterey County Water Resources Agency.

According to David Suddjian, president of the Santa Cruz Bird Club, anywhere from 3,500 to 5,000 birds called the Pajaro River home. Others stopped there while migrating, bringing the annual number of birds along the six-mile section of river to 10,000.

Clearing the middle of the river channel for flood control while leaving the benchlands — the stepped sections between the river bed and the levee tops — for vegetation would have saved habitat while improving water flow. It would be a "win-win"

situation for farmers and wildlife, Suddjian said in a news release this week.

Turpen had no estimate of how much water the river could carry with or without the vegetation, but suspects the capacity has grown with the clearing.

"It's kind of like clogged arteries. If you were ever out there and saw it, you have trees and brush and vines — it's just a big, solid mat. There's no way you could say there's no effect on flow capacity," he said.

Turpen said the flood channel, which was built in 1949, was designed to have only grass on the benchlands.

Armstrong defended the clearing.

"We believe we're doing the correct thing. Our goal is to restore the original flood protection capacity of that channel. We believe that the trees that we are leaving will not present a flood control problem and we believe the trees that we are leaving will do something for the habitat," he said.

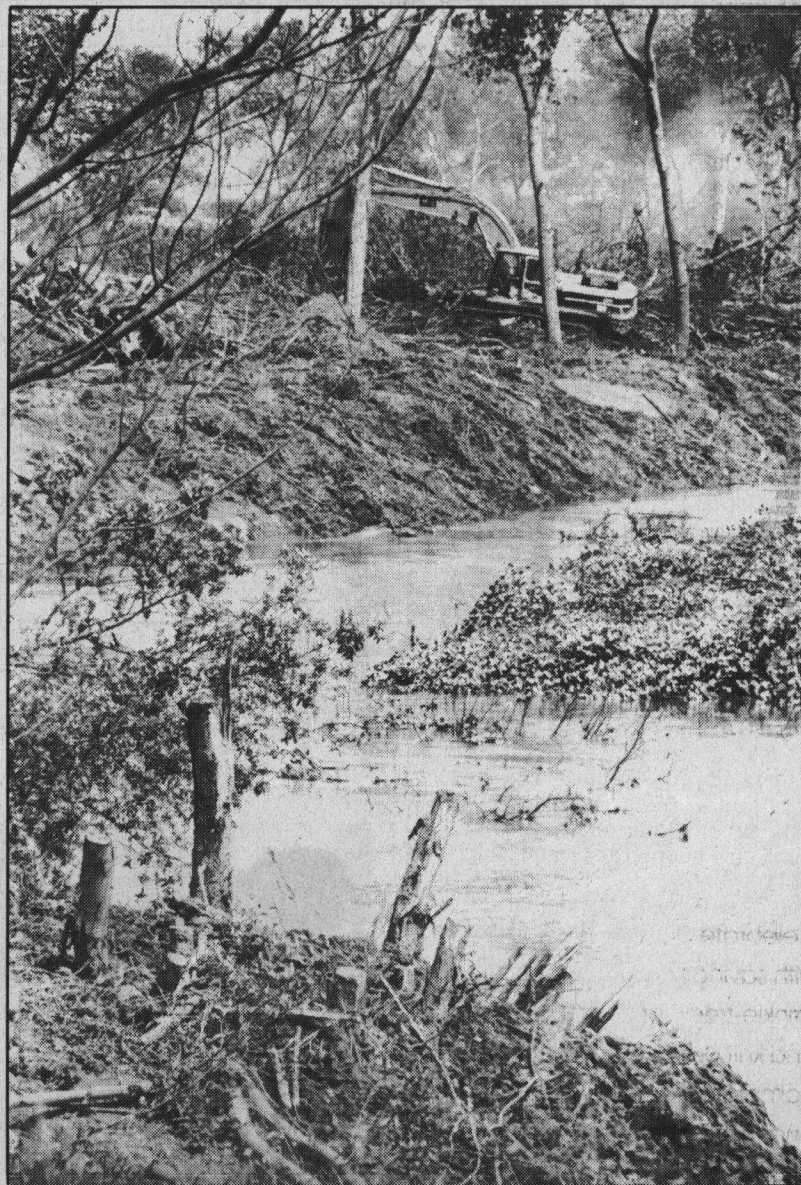
According to Sentinel files, a consultant hired by the county to develop a river maintenance plan said removing vegetation would have little effect on water flow.

Mitchell Swanson, a hydrology and environmental consultant, said removing brush and trees would only reduce the chances of yearly flooding from 6 percent to 4 or 5 percent.

Turpen said Monterey and Santa Cruz counties were quick to remove the foliage while both counties were under a state of emergency because they did not have to undergo a time-consuming permit process with the state Department of Fish and Game.

Meanwhile, bird buffs predict problems for the birds that nested in the trees and bushes of the river.

"Monterey County is touted as one of the best places in the world to ... bird watch and then here we are, with a river called 'bird (pajaro) river,' and we're annihilating the birds. It's kind of ironic," Baumgartner said.



Crews continue clearing vegetation from the banks Wednesday.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel