

Salamanders slowing plans for clearing Pajaro River bed

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WATSONVILLE — Will the long-toed salamander stand in the way of Watsonville's attempt to get the Pajaro River cleared of heavy brush and shrubs before next year's rainy season?

State Fish and Game biologist Randy Benthin says no — at least not to any life-threatening extent.

"We're not going to stand in the way of flood-control projects that won't affect the salamander's critical habitat," Benthin said.

But before any heavy equipment can be allowed in to bulldoze the shrubbery, Benthin said Fish and Game or the U.S. Wildlife Service will have to do a study to determine whether the Santa Cruz long-toed salamander — an endangered species under federal and state laws — uses the river or adjacent wetlands area as a breeding ground.

Until the evaluation is done, some time after the rains begin, Benthin said Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service won't let heavy equipment in to clear the brush.

For the past four or five years, the city has attempted to have the Pajaro Valley Storm Maintenance District (which is administered by the county Board of Supervisors) clear the Pajaro River of large

shrubs to prevent flooding.

The issue arose again this summer, when Mayor Betty Murphy asked Board Chairman Joe Cucchiara to start clearing the channel.

"The city is really concerned because it's been through enough floods," said Murphy. "It's been a long-term problem. And we can't be taking the older people out on canoes all the time."

In the floods of 1982, elderly residents of Bay and Pajaro Villages had to be evacuated by boat because the Pajaro River jumped its banks, Murphy said.

Area farmers also have written the mayor, asking that the riverbeds be cleared to prevent flooding on their crops.

At a meeting this summer with county, city and Fish and Game officials, a biologist from Fish and Game suggested the Pajaro River might be an ideal place for the shy salamanders to breed.

Fish and Game then decided to do a study to determine the presence of the creatures before letting the bulldozers in. Until the permit is given, only hand tools will be allowed to clear the brush.

Murphy says that's hogwash. "We'll be here until the turn of the century cutting back that brush with hand tools," she said.

It's not the first time the long-toed salamander has changed the course of history. In the early 1970s, a proposed trailer park in Valencia Lagoon in Rio del Mar was derailed by the salamander. Then in 1973, the state bought the 30-acre lagoon and set it aside as a salamander preserve.

While the Rio del Mar site has been well-established as a breeding ground for the endangered salamander, the creature has never been found in the Watsonville area.

But now that it is suspected in Watsonville, extra precautions will have to be taken, according to Benthin.

"Fish and Game doesn't object to the cleaning of the channel. If the county wanted to go in with crews and hand tools, it wouldn't be a problem," he said.

"One of the hang-ups is that we don't have a project to evaluate. Until we have a project, we can't suggest any alternatives," Benthin said. No agency has yet submitted a plan of what it would like to do to the riverbed. Until then, there is nothing but speculation about what can and can't be done.

"If it is a breeding ground, we'd have to protect it since it is an endangered species," said Benthin. "It would be nice to show that people and endangered species can get along."