

Board refuses to review river clearing

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SANTA CRUZ — Environmentalists unhappy with the emergency clearing of Pajaro River banks unsuccessfully pressed Santa Cruz County supervisors Tuesday to back off and review the work.

"We're concerned this is going through without the proper studies," said Marilyn Hummel of the Sierra Club, one of several groups who showed up to protest the clearing. Decades-old cottonwoods are being cut down, she

said, along with the wildlife habitat that goes with them. "We should look at it longer."

County supervisors said the time for such discussions was past, voting unanimously to accept staff recommendations to suspend county codes long enough to finish clearing trees and brush on the Santa Cruz County side of the river.

Hummel and other environmentalists had argued the "immi-

nent threat" of flooding is past. They questioned whether it was wise to hand-write a blank check for wholesale clearing of the levees and benchlands.

"There is no flood risk any more," said Jim Van Houten of Watsonville's Wetlands Watch. Van Houten said he was sorry about the damage suffered by flooded-out residents and farmers, and sympathetic to their plight. "But doing the wrong

thing now is not the way to address these concerns."

Cutting the trees and clearing the brush along the river banks during the spring nesting season could harm many already threatened migratory birds, said David Suddjian of the Santa Cruz Bird Club.

"It's not a ditch, it's a river," Suddjian said. "Rivers have trees that grow along them. Trees are not debris (to be removed)."

Van Houten and other Wetlands Watch members suggested

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that clear-cutting should stop until a plan has been worked out that addresses how both counties will maintain the river after years of neglect; deepening the channel or seeking other ways to increase water flow; and how to prevent the loss of wildlife and riparian habitat.

"There ought to be a whole lot of public discussion on what to do about it, rather than just go in there and say, ... 'Let's get it done,'" Van Houten said.

The process is too far along to backtrack now, said Supervisor Jan Beautz. She wondered where the protesters were when hundreds of flooded-out residents showed up at a March 20 flood-control meeting.

"If the debate was going to be held, it should have been at the Zone 7 meeting," Beautz said.

Hummel and Van Houten said they hadn't heard about the meeting.

"Somehow the word got out,"

Beautz retorted. "At least to the people in the South County."

Aptos Supervisor Walt Symons said environmentalists should make their case "to those people dramatically affected" by the flooding.

Wormhoudt asked county officials how long the clearing would take place and how extensive it would be.

"There's a lot of rumors around about what kind of wholesale work will be done," she said. "... I think people have legitimate concerns that we don't over-react to an emergency and do things that aren't environmentally responsible."

Work crews are leaving a five-foot wide buffer zone above the water as they clear vegetation that lines up to the levees and benchland above the river.

The work started Sunday, said John Fantham, head of the county Public Works Department, and is 30-35 percent finished. State Fish and Game officials are

marking significant trees to save, leaving one about every 75 feet, he said.

The work is confined to the six-mile stretch between the highway bridge and Murphy Crossing, Fantham said, and extends from the levee to five feet above the waterway.

County codes governing the work will be suspended only for the duration of the state of emergency. The supervisors voted unanimously Tuesday to extend that by two weeks.

The emergency is by no means over, said the county's top administrator, Susan Mauriello. With the soil saturated, and rain in the forecast for this weekend, Mauriello said the county does not consider the emergency will be over until the rainy season ends.

"You have to respond when the earth is just saturated to the possibility of another storm," Mauriello said. "To not do so would be a dereliction of responsibility on our part."