

Pajaro River flood control in thicket of trouble

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WATSONVILLE — What red-shouldered hawks, red-and-yellow-legged frogs and other birds and amphibians may call home, the counties of Santa Cruz and Monterey see as flood control for the Pajaro Valley area.

When the Army Corps of Engineers built the Pajaro River levee in 1949 to give 50-year flood protection, Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties agreed to maintain it.

But for decades, maintenance has been minimal. Trees and shrubs removed more than 40 years ago have grown back, reducing flood protection to about a 15-year capacity — meaning a potential flood every 15 years, according to the Army Corps of Engineers.

The overgrowth drew more wild creatures to the river's bank at the



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Watsonville city engineer Marcella Tavantzis says flood-control woes are result of neglect.

same time more restrictive environmental regulations were adopted. Now the trees and shrubs cannot simply be removed. Under new regulations, the state Department of Fish and Game requires that

any damage done to a riparian, or river bank, habitat be mitigated by dedicating land for wildlife.

"We definitely want to maximize flood protection of the levee, but we understand Fish and Game's

concern," said Watsonville Senior Civil Engineer Marcela Tavantzis.

"The counties allowed the riparian habitat to be redeveloped," said Fish and Game Senior Fishery Bi-

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ologist Keith Anderson. "Today, environmental laws require examination of habitats, and then mitigation. That area has high wildlife value."

The root of the problem, for both maintenance and restoring flood control, is money.

Steven Stiles, responsible for flood control in Santa Cruz County, said neither Santa Cruz nor Monterey county has enough funds to clean the levee.

The county created "Zone 7" last December to collect money from residents in the area to fund upkeep and repairs, as well as levee clean-up, Stiles said.

Ken Lewis, city senior engineer, said the problem came to a head three years ago when county crews tried to take a bulldozer into the levee for clean-up and were stopped by the Fish and Game warden.

Because routine maintenance was put off, the cost of cleaning the levee has grown into a "massive" project, Watsonville Assistant City Manager Gary Smith said. And trimming brush and trees would bring the river only to 25-year flood protection.

To return the levee to 50-year flood capacity, the Army Corps of Engineers would have to do a "major engineering project," Councilman Todd McFarren said, and that would take about eight years to complete.

The Corps of Engineers sent a letter threatening to rescind its offer of assistance in cleaning the levee because it was not maintained by local agencies once it was constructed, Smith said.

According to Army Corps of Engineers spokesman Michael Keuss, the county has the responsibility of removing the vegetation.

"After a levee is constructed, it's the responsibility of local jurisdictions to keep it maintained along the banks," Keuss said.

Smith said the refusal was the Army Corps' way of "getting people off the dime," and starting some serious negotiation over le-

vee clean-up.

Since the letter was received, city, county and state administrators have agreed to develop a plan for the levee by May 1.

The Corps of Engineers then will consider constructing additional flood control for the river. But a construction plan takes about five years, and construction itself could take another five years.

Whether or not the Corps of Engineers proceeds with a flood-control project, the agency is requiring the counties to clean shrubs and tree branches to the height of the levee, leaving the river banks bare.

Aerial photos will be taken today and Tuesday to locate where vegetation must be removed, Keuss said.

But because the levee is a riparian habitat, mitigation requirements will hit both counties with a bill they weren't expecting.

"Cleaning out the levee would be dramatically reducing the environmental value there. It's a tremendous habitat for bird life," Anderson said. "It will be a very, very expensive price tag. We're talking about big dollars."

Anderson said mitigation will probably require that land elsewhere be dedicated to wildlife, since very little preservation of trees and shrubs is possible while maintaining flood control.

Senior wildlife biologist Bruce Elliott of Fish and Game doubted that any amount of money could replace the habitat.

"It would be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain a riparian habitat (such as the one on Pajaro River)," Elliott said. "Where are they going to be able to develop a replacement? They would literally have to recreate a new stream."

Elliott said the city of Santa Cruz clears only half of the San Lorenzo River levee and allows growth to create a habitat, and then clears the other half.

Fish and Game wildlife biologist Jeanine DeWald described a riparian habitat as an area where trees and shrubs grow along rivers and

streams. Typical vegetation includes willow and sycamore trees, as well as tule and cattail brush, she said.

Though DeWald could not say which species have made the Pajaro River home, she said typical riparian dwellers include hawks — particularly the red-shouldered hawk — and amphibians. Red-and-yellow-legged frogs, also found in riparian habitats, are candidates for the federal endangered species list, she said.

Stuck in the middle is the City of Watsonville, which has no authority over the levee, but which would suffer if a flood occurred.

Watsonville council members voted unanimously Tuesday to have city staff present at meetings of the Pajaro River task force, which has been negotiating solutions for the levee. They also voted to send a letter to U.S. Rep. Leon Panetta regarding funding for establishing mitigation and paying for potential construction by the Corps of Engineers.

City Manager Steve Salomon said Panetta's assistance may help negotiations between the interested parties.

"He can get all the players in the room, and he gets them to agree," Salomon said. "He has influence with Fish and Game, and he has an interest in this."

Keuss said a meeting is planned for Nov. 25 between the county of Santa Cruz and Watsonville, as well as environmental agencies, to discuss a plan of action for removing vegetation. A second meeting of the Pajaro River Task Force will be held at the Santa Cruz County Government Center Dec. 10 to explain the plan to the public.

Councilman Parr Eves said that if the levee had been maintained, conflicts with Fish and Game and other parties never would have occurred.

"We've got to push the county. If they'd done their work we wouldn't have to deal with this," Eves said.