

PAJARO RIVER

Flood control project finally breaks ground

Flood Control - Prevention

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JON WEIAND/SENTINEL

Dump trucks make their way along the Pajaro River levee during excavation Wednesday.

New state grant adds \$3 million to complete work

By DONNA JONES

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✓ WATSONVILLE — After seven years of planning, trucks filled with Pajaro River sediment finally are rolling this week.

The \$8.3 million project will remove 320,000 cubic yards of dirt — about 32,000 dump-truck loads — to reduce the risk of flooding and restore native habitat along the river.

The first phase, concentrated in the area between Highway 1 and Salsipuedes Creek, started Tuesday at Judd Road and is expected to wrap up about mid-October.

And there's more good news, said Bruce Leclergue, Santa Cruz County's flood control manager. The state is awarding the county a nearly \$3 million grant to help pay for the second and final phase, extending the project out



JON WEIAND/SENTINEL

A stream of dump trucks flows down Riverside Drive on Wednesday outside Watsonville on their way to the Pajaro River levee.

SEE PAJARO RIVER ON A2



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A dump truck turns onto Judd Road outside Watsonville on its way to the Pajaro River levee where bench excavation work is proceeding.

PAJARO RIVER

Continued from A1

to Murphy Crossing. That work could start next spring.

"The money was unsure," Leclergue said. "Now we can go out to bid."

The county previously received a \$4.6 million grant for the project.

A small fleet of trucks will be hauling dirt between the river and the city's landfill on San Andreas Road during the first phase. Motorists can expect some delays on Judd Road, Riverside Drive, Lee Road, Beach Street and San Andreas Road, according to county Public Works. Officials are asking drivers to avoid the area if possible.

The project, called bench excavation, was conceived in 2005 as a proposed U.S. Army Corps of Engineer's upgrade of the river's decades-old levee became mired in conflicts over plans and funding shortfalls.

But securing permits and funding for

AT A GLANCE PAJARO RIVER PROJECT

WHAT: Removal of 320,000 cubic yards of sediment to reduce risk of flooding and improve habitat

WHEN: First phase now through Oct. 15, second phase could begin in spring

WHERE: 7.5-mile stretch between Highway 1 and Murphy Crossing, with first phase between freeway and Salsipuedes Creek

CAUTION: Delays due to heavy truck traffic could be experienced on Judd, Lee and San Andreas roads, Riverside Drive and Beach Street

what was described as an interim levee project proved challenging.

Rose grower Eugene Tsugi's home and business along San Juan Road sustained about \$1 million in damage when the storm-swollen river punched through the

weakened levee in 1995 and flooded Pajaro and the surrounding farmland. The bench excavation will help by enabling the river to carry more water during storms, Tsugi said, adding he's still wants to see a bigger project.

"We've been so worn down we're pretty much happy to see anything happening," Tsugi said.

The project also aims to improve environmental conditions on the river by allowing it to follow a more meandering course to provide a more natural setting for fish. Native plants will be used to revegetate the river banks after the excavation.

Leclergue said it's gratifying after years of work to finally see the project under way.

"To get this done is something you can look back on and say, 'We're leaving a better river than we inherited in terms of habitat and flood projection,'" he said.

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