

Food plants here should be home free on sewer costs

By KEN McLAUGHLIN

A year ago Watsonville food processors and city officials were worried that an obscure amendment to the federal Clean Water Act could shut down many of the city's food-processing plants.

After thousands of hours of work aimed at beating down the so-called Stafford amendment, however, City Hall is on the verge of total victory.

Even if the amendment is left intact — something that appears extremely doubtful — Watsonville has beaten a crucial deadline, Chris Kahr, the city's consulting engineer, said today.

The amendment itself may be amended, but Watsonville and its food processors appear to be out of the woods.

The amendment, written by Sen. Robert Stafford, R-Vermont, eliminated sewage-plant construction grants to industries that discharged more than 50,000 gallons of wastewater per day. That law would have

affected all of the city's food-processing plants, which would have been required to cough up about \$15 million out-of-pocket to pay for the proposed \$30 million, federally mandated project aimed at upgrading the city's sewage plant on Beach Road.

The city, Ms. Kahr said, has been awarded a \$4 million construction grant for the 1980-81 fiscal year. That's only a drop in the bucket in relation to the \$30 million estimated cost of the new sewage treatment plant — AND the level of future funding is still up in the air. But Ms. Kahr said, it means the city won't be affected by the Stafford amendment as now written.

When Congress passed the amendment last October, she said, it set a Nov. 15, 1981, deadline, saying that projects that had been awarded construction grants by that date would not be affected by the new law.

The Regional Water Quality Control Board realized Watsonville's

predicament, so it awarded the \$4 million grant, according to Ms. Kahr. "They knew we had to beat the deadline," she said.

The law has been fought by city officials — most notably Ms. Kahr, Mayor Bill Johnston, City Councilman Frank Osmer and City Manager John Radin — on bureaucratic and political levels.

Osmer flew to Washington, D.C., five times to lobby senators and congressmen and let the Environmental Protection Agency know the devastating effects the Stafford amendment would have on Watsonville. Johnston and Radin flew to the

capital twice, and Watsonville Canning owner Mort Console flew there three times, according to Osmer.

Because of pressure from Watsonville and other cities, the House of Representatives earlier this year voted to repeal the Stafford amendment on a voice vote. The repeal was co-sponsored by Congressman Leon Panetta, who has helped guide city officials through the Washington bureaucracy and power structure. Although the Senate hasn't indicated that it will repeal the law, Ms. Kahr said, the Senate's Committee on Public Works and the Environment this week decided to greatly modify the law.

"Our people had a lot to do with the way the Stafford amendment was rewritten," said Ms. Kahr.

Indeed, Councilman Osmer said this morning, the wording of the amended Stafford amendment approved by the senate committee (chaired by Stafford) is "exactly what we (city officials) asked them to do."

Under the proposed amendment to the amendment, if a city got a so-called "planning grant" to build a federally mandated sewage plant by May 15, 1981, then its industries would be eligible for grants. Since Watsonville had its first planning grant in 1976, the city would be in the clear.

Osmer said he won't feel completely safe until the full Senate approves the committee's version of the amended amendment. Once that happens (Osmer says it may be as early as next week), the bill will go to a House-Senate conference committee to iron out the difference in the bill.

Since the House bill would repeal the amendment altogether, Osmer feels confident that the final bill will be favorable to Watsonville and its food-processing plants.

"We feel very safe," Osmer said this morning.