

## Consultant rips into levee clearing

*Flood prevention + control*  
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**WATSONVILLE** — The city of Watsonville is backing proposed legislation that would ensure continued maintenance of the Pajaro River, while a consultant who developed a river maintenance plan denounces the recent clear-cutting of levee banks in the wake of last month's floods.

Mitchell Swanson, a Santa Cruz hydrology and environmental consultant hired by the county to do hydraulic studies on the Pajaro River between 1989 and 1995, said he created the Pajaro River Corridor Management Plan to resolve conflicts between environmental and flood control interests.

The near-complete removal of vegetation on levee banks and benches between Highway 1 and south of Murphy Crossing Road, however, does nothing for either side, he said. Not only does the county's action reduce wildlife hab-

itat, Swanson said, but it does not prevent future flooding.

Mitchell argues four points in a letter to the county Board of Supervisors dated March 30:

- Removing deeply-rooted trees and shrubs along the levee weakens the earthen banks and increases erosion. Vegetation, he argues, strengthens the loamy banks and absorbs hydraulic force. That is why permits issued under his 1989 plan focused on removing vegetation in the channel bed, which Mitchell says is the greatest threat to water flow.

- Removing vegetation will not increase the channel's capacity to hold flood waters. Mitchell argues that according to his studies and those done by the U.S. Army Corps, removing all vegetation reduces the likelihood of flooding only slightly — from a 6 percent chance to a 4 or 5 percent chance each year.

- Removed vegetation will grow back denser than before, especially if it is not continually removed. Such a program could cost the county hundreds of thousands of dollars a year for "marginal improvement" in flood control, he predicted. The shade from tall trees also inhibits the growth of vegetation, he said.

- The overall capacity of the levee system is too small, he said. Real flood control would come from expanding levee walls to allow for 100-year flood protection (the Pajaro River levees are built for 25-year protection, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers). The costly project would need to be paid for locally, Swanson said, since federal contributions for such improvements are small, and could be eliminated in the future.

In a reply from the board of supervisors dated April 3, Fred Keeley said members of the county's Zone 7 Flood

Control District voted to remove vegetation immediately to "safeguard life and property along the Pajaro River."

Meanwhile, the Watsonville City Council asked Mayor Tony Campos Tuesday to send a letter of support for three bills to be introduced by state Sen. Henry Mello, D-Watsonville.

They would reinforce the governor's emergency order allowing local governments hit by floods to bypass laws to remove river vegetation; require state, federal and local agencies to sign a memorandum of understanding on developing a river maintenance plan; and establish a system for local agencies to financially support projects along the river levee.

The Watsonville City Council also voted to support the county's application for an Army Corps permit to remove sand bars in the river channel. A public comment period on the permit application ends April 18.