



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

The 1995 flood unleashed hundreds of barrels from the Smuckers plant on Salinas Road and left them strewn about the area.

P.V. flood protection still years away

Floods + Flood Prevention
Ten years after levee break, residents live in fear

By **DONNA JONES**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

PAJARO — By the time Tony Yepiz woke his family in the early hours of March 11, 1995, the water in his neighborhood near the railroad tracks was a foot high and rising fast.

Within 30 minutes, the family — Yepiz, his wife, his two daughters and their husbands — were fleeing their home as the Pajaro River surged through a break in

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the levee near Murphy's Crossing.

Yepiz, now 61, no longer remembers the exact escape route they took that night as floodwaters

turned a vast swath of North Monterey County into a lake. He only recalls being told the main route, Salinas Road, was no longer passable.

"We were all so scared," he said. "We didn't know what to do. We didn't take nothing. We just got out."

As dawn broke, the damage became clear: Thousands of acres of farmland under water, millions

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The Flood

In the early morning hours of March 11, 1995, water gushing from a 100-foot break in the Pajaro River levee drowned the town of Pajaro and 3,000 acres of farmland.

About 2,700 people were evacuated, and damages were estimated at more than \$200 million.

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of dollars in crop damages and, in Pajaro, businesses soaked in muddy crud and hundreds of families homeless, at least temporarily.

The home the Yepiz family left behind was under 5 feet of water, and it would be months before they could return to live. They lost pretty much everything, Yepiz said, furnishings, fencing, carpeting, a car, even the ice cream truck that provided his living. They spent months cleaning up, and years more getting over the fear they felt every time it began to rain.

And 10 years after the flood wreaked havoc on the town and the surrounding farmland, Yepiz still has good reason to worry.

A plan to upgrade the aging levee has been mired in bureaucracy and politics, and though there have been recent breakthroughs, permanent flood protection is still years away.

"If the river breaks, they haven't done much," Yepiz said. "We came out of it, but we're still concerned for them to work on the river."

Early warning

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers first warned 40 years ago that the levees that had protected Watsonville and Pajaro from the Pajaro River and its tributaries since 1949 would fail if they weren't strengthened.

Plans to shore up the levee before the 1995 flood floundered amid concerns about the cost and the loss of farmland and wildlife habitat.

The situation has grown worse. For years, local officials have complained they can't maintain the system due to increasingly tough environmental regulations aimed at protecting wildlife like steelhead. Dredging had been discontinued in the late 1970s, and sediment has built up. Vegetation has grown thick.

Meanwhile, more and more people have moved into harm's way as Watsonville's population more than quadrupled during the past 50 years. Among the growth were dozens of homes built in the 1970s for senior citizens in the flood plain at the eastern edge of Wat-

sonville.

By 1995, conditions were ripe for disaster. Then it started to rain.

A series of storms that began in January saturated the Pajaro River's 1,300-mile watershed. Unable to absorb any more water, hills and streams in four counties poured the surplus into the Pajaro. The levees were soaked, too, and taking a beating from an increasingly swollen river.

"The analogy is having a three-quarter full bathtub and then turning on the spigot," said Bill Phillips, deputy general manager of the Monterey County Water Resources Agency.

Late on March 10th, the river was close to spilling over the levee, and officials evacuated thousands of residents in Watsonville and Pajaro.

But instead of pouring over the top, the levee gave way on the Monterey County side of the river near Murphy's Crossing, about four miles east of the two towns.

Federal officials said rodent holes and plant roots undermined the levee, causing the 100-foot break.

The plan

After the flood, the Corps of Engineers received federal support to expand a levee improvement project proposed for Salsipuedes and Corralitos creeks, tributaries which enter the Pajaro on the Santa Cruz County side, to include the river itself.

The idea is to rebuild a 12-mile stretch of levee, from the river mouth at Pajaro Dunes inland to Murphy's Crossing.

To provide 100-year flood protection — reducing the chance of

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Kate Falconer/Sentinel

Chano Figueroa, with daughter Vania near the Pajaro River levee, is worried about flood protection.

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flooding in any one year to just 1 percent — sections of the levee would be pushed 100 feet farther from the river, and the height would be increased 4 to 5 feet. The estimate of flood protection currently is eight years.

But so far, backing for the Corps of Engineers' latest proposal is tepid at best. Growers don't like the fact that the plan pushes 100 feet into agricultural land. Environmentalists don't think it does enough to restore habitat.

Then there's the cost, estimated at about \$200 million. The federal government has agreed to pick up 75 percent of the tab, but Santa Cruz and Monterey counties would be responsible for the rest. A bond measure would be required to finance the local share, and that means a two-thirds voter approval. As long as significant opposition exists to the project, the chances of success at the polls are slim to none.

"We've been endeavoring for a number of years to design a project that is supportable," said David Patterson, the Corps of Engineers project manager. "If the public is not in support of the project, we won't be able to build it."

Lisa Dobbins is well aware of that fact. The project was unraveling two years ago, when as executive director of Action Pajaro Valley, a nonprofit land-use group, Dobbins launched an effort to help various interest groups reach consensus on a plan they could back. "It's a painfully slow process working together and talking through ideas," Dobbins acknowledged.

But she said the Action Pajaro



Strawberry farmer Karen Miller finds young strawberry plants struggling to grow through a thick layer of mud that covered fields after the 1995 flood in Pajaro.

Bill Lovejoy/
Sentinel file

Valley task force has helped keep the project alive, and there has been progress. She hopes in the long run, the time spent building backing will pay off.

"Is it fast enough? No. Is it gratifying to tell someone in Pajaro that we're working on it? But the community may only give us one more shot," Dobbins said. "Right now we're in the queue for 75 percent of the funding. If we go sideways again, Washington may put us on the bottom of the heap."

Moving forward

Some see a reduction in federal support already.

The Army Corps of Engineers expects to get \$477,000 this year to finish environmental studies. But Bruce Laclergue, Santa Cruz County flood control manager, said the federal agency could have used \$600,000 more to move seamlessly into the design phase.

Though the money has been promised, Congress slowed the

appropriation timetable to give itself more control over spending. That means the Corps of Engineers will have to wait for elected officials to review environmental studies before they send additional money.

Laclergue said that could delay the project 18 months. He doesn't anticipate construction starting before 2010, though Patterson said his agency could be ready to go by 2008.

Meanwhile, pressure is building on local officials, Laclergue said.

"They can't stand the liability and risk delays leave us with," he said.

A lawsuit filed after the 1995 flood cost the two counties about \$20 million each. The court found the counties didn't maintain the levee properly.

Santa Cruz County took out a loan to cover its share and will pay more than \$1 million annually for 30 years to pay it off.

Not all the news is bad, Laclergue said. Santa Cruz County recently received preliminary

approval from state Fish and Game officials to remove 300,000 cubic yards of dirt between the river and existing levees, he said. An interim solution, the excavation would increase the capacity of the current system, buying time until the long-term fix can be constructed.

Frustration rises

In Monterey County, Supervisor Lou Calcagno is frustrated. Santa Cruz County's interim project will be a help, he said, but after 10 years it's too little.

"It's not what we need to guarantee the safety of the people," Calcagno said. "From a political standpoint, I should tell you everything is great, but I won't."

There's been too many meetings, too much talk of steelhead protection, he said.

Santa Cruz County Supervisor Tony Campos said county officials are doing the best they can to expedite the project. A year ago, over the objections of some, county supervisors approved the Corps of Engineer's plan.

But Campos said naysayers who don't live in the flood plain remain an obstacle, he said.

"If nothing gets done, you can blame all those people who have been negotiating, every single one

of them," he said. "If we'd get the people directly affected by any disaster (involved), we'd have a decision."

Chano Figueroa is one of those people. He is raising his four children in the Fremont Street house where he grew up. Though he didn't live there in 1995, his elderly mother did.

The water climbed the four steps to the house, but stopped at the threshold. Good luck, he said, adding the tenant who lived in a small unit out back wasn't so fortunate. The rental was lower and flooded, he said. Figueroa and his wife spent more than a year settling insurance claims and getting the rental cleaned up.

When it rains, Figueroa said he gets nervous. He said he should probably get more involved in pushing for the levee project and that he's willing to pay his share of the cost for flood protection.

But Monday, with the first week of March behind him and sun pouring into the living room, he said the worst of the rainy season appears over and the town has made it through another year.

"I guess I'll wait until next year, and hope it's OK again," Figueroa said.

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