

SJMN MAR 24, 1995

# Pajaro River clearance work triggers wildlife concerns

BY LEE CHAMBERS FROM Mercury News Staff Writer

Flood Prevention + Control

As crews began clearing willows and brush from bench lands along the northern edge of the Pajaro River on Thursday, a California Department of Fish and Game official said he was not certain the flood-control efforts would be effective at anything but harming wildlife habitat.

Meanwhile, the Sierra Club blasted Gov. Pete Wilson for his decision to exempt flood cleanup work from provisions of the state's version of the Endangered Species Act.

Granite Construction crews hired by Santa Cruz County on Thursday began clearing the bench lands that sit above the Pajaro River's bank but inside the levee separating the channel from adjacent farmland. The clearance project is aimed at removing willows and other vegetation that farmers believe impedes the flow of the Pajaro, which overflowed its banks almost two weeks ago and spilled onto thousands of acres in north Monterey County.

But the emergency stream-clearance work has not received the blessing of Fish and Game.

Bruce Elliott, senior biologist supervisor in the agency's Monterey office, was skeptical Thursday that removing the vegetation would have any benefits were the Pajaro to flood again.

"We have no desire to impede effective flood-control projects," Elliott said.

"But our department's contention at the present time, at least, is that some work they have done so far will have no impact on flood control but will have a serious impact on wildlife" such as birds and amphibians that live at the river's edge. Elliott noted that the rare and endangered Santa Cruz long-toed salamander does not live within the river corridor and has never entered Fish and Game's permit process along the Pajaro.

Hydrologists from his agency and Santa Cruz County will meet at the edge of the Pajaro today for a look — and, they hope, a decision — on whether the work is doing any good.

County Public Works Director John Fantham said Thursday the crews were leaving a 5-foot-thick buffer strip of willows growing along the 4-to 5-mile stretch of bench land being cleared. He said he would not be able to determine how long the clearance work will take until early next week.

Last week, Governor Wilson said he was providing California farmers relief from some environmental regulations as they clean and restore their fields flooded by recent rains. The governor issued a "blanket permit" exempting farmers from state endangered-species regulations as long as a state of

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emergency remains in effect. The present state of emergency was declared in most California counties in January and will be lifted after the severe storms and flooding ends, according to a governor's spokesman.

This week, the Sierra Club of California denounced the governor's decision as misleading, saying the exemption would extend far beyond the present flood-relief efforts and would extend until the year 2000.

That statement was in turn blasted as "paranoid and misleading" by Paul Kranhold, Wilson's deputy press secretary.

While agreeing that the exemption from the state endangered species act will be in effect for five more years, he said it would only apply to periods when the governor had declared states of emergency.

State Sen. Henry Mello said Thursday he has yet to see a copy of the governor's 30-page executive order exempting flood cleanup from endangered-species rules and from air-pollution regulations. The latter order will make it easier for farmers and others to burn debris that washed onto their fields during the flooding.

Mello, D-Watsonville, will soon introduce a bill that will further ease cleanup efforts. The measure will exempt river-clearance work to remove vegetation and sandbars from the provision of state law requiring environmental impact reports.

"We need to get something done in the short-term," said Mello, "and we need long-term authorization to keep the stream beds clear." He said his

bill would provide such authorization along the Pajaro, Salinas and Carmel rivers.

Mello noted crews probably would not be able to get into riverbeds to begin clearance work until water levels recede in June.

He also said he was concerned about Fish and Game's reluctance to approve Santa Cruz County's work along the Pajaro River bench lands.

"If they're making unilateral actions out in the field," said Mello, "they're giving farmers a different message than the governor has given them."

Meanwhile, Monterey County Environmental Health Director Walter Wong warned again Thursday that a sewer line in Pajaro was still broken. Residents should use chemical toilets located around the flood-ravaged community, he said, and should either use bottled drinking water or boil water before using it.

Wong said beaches at the mouth of the Pajaro, Salinas and Carmel rivers were still posted because of high fecal coliform counts from sewage that spilled into the waterways.

But, said Wong, crops that were growing near flooded farmlands in the fertile Pajaro and Salinas valleys have been tested and can now be harvested because they were not contaminated when nearby areas were covered with water. Crops that were inundated cannot be harvested and sold, he pointed out.

As Pajaro residents returned in greater numbers to their homes, American Red Cross officials said the number of the town's residents sleeping at a temporary shelter at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds dropped to 352 Wednesday night, less than half the number sleeping at the shelter on nights right after the flood.