Clear-cut danger for East Bay levees
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By Mike Taugher

One day this summer, county crews cut down about 25 trees along Wildcat Creek near Richmond as ordered by federal flood inspectors.

It was a mistake.

Contra Costa County officials had been defying instructions to cut down the trees and bushes, but the increasing heat from federal inspectors and a misunderstanding led workers to remove 25-year-old buckeyes, oaks and other trees from about 700 feet of levee.

Now, Bay Area flood control officials and others say that unless levee maintenance rules are changed, clear-cutting is a fate that awaits at least 100 miles of levees along the Bay Area's creeks and rivers, drastically altering the landscape.

"What little damage that occurred out there is something that will be multiplied 1,000 times," said A.L. Riley, a watershed and river restoration adviser to the San Francisco Regional Water Quality Control Board.

Wildcat Creek and San Pablo Creek near Richmond, the Napa River, and the Alameda Creek flood control channel are among the region's creeks and rivers that are subject to the no-vegetation rules. In the South Bay, Guadalupe River and Coyote Creek fall under the rules.

According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, trees and shrubs must be removed from all levees in federal programs. Only grass is allowed.

The vegetation policy has actually been around for decades, but since Hurricane Katrina's aftermath, the corps has been enforcing it more rigorously. And this spring, the corps made clear that exceptions, or variances, would be hard to get and limited in what they would allow.

"We weren't always pushing to make it happen," said Paul Schimelfenyg, dam and levee safety program manager for the corps' San Francisco district. "In the last three or four years, we've been asked to make it happen."

The concern, which intensified after the failure of federal levees in Hurricane Katrina, is that a tree that is toppled by a storm could pull a chunk of the levee out of the ground with its roots, or that inspectors might miss problems obscured by trees and shrubs.

But California flood officials say it does not make sense to apply the rule uniformly. There is evidence that trees can in some cases make levees stronger because the roots can help hold the levee together.

"That is definitely an issue or an area of question," said the corps' Schimelfenyg. "That is currently being studied, but we don't have an answer on that yet."

And a top state levee safety official said enforcing the federal policy could cause more problems than it solves because water can seep into spaces where old roots used to be, eroding the bank.

"By cutting trees down in a very nonstrategic way, you'll start these roots rotting all over the place. That could be very dangerous," said Mike Inamine, manager of the state Department of Water Resources levee evaluation and repairs programs.

Inamine said new levees should not have trees planted on them, but trees on existing levees might be better left alone.

"By wantonly clear-cutting levees, you're asking for problems," Inamine said.

Flood control agencies that defy the policy could lose federal funding to repair damaged levees, and those living behind the levee could be required to buy flood insurance, which could cost $1,000 or more per year, according to a county official.
"If we don't cut the tree down, they'll kick us out of the program," said Mitch Avalon, deputy director of the Contra Costa County Public Works Department and a spokesman for an association of Bay Area flood control agencies.

The irony, Avalon said, is that the Wildcat Creek levees were designed in the 1980s by the Corps of Engineers to include trees and shrubs.

North Richmond, which was established during World War II by workers in the shipbuilding industry, experienced periodic flooding from Wildcat Creek and San Pablo Creek in the 1940s and 1950s, and when plans were developed in the early 1980s for a flood control channel, it was criticized by residents.

Instead, regulators, residents and government officials got together and designed a flood control project that was also good wildlife habitat.

"The Wildcat Creek project has been held out as a national model of how you're supposed to do creek restoration," Avalon said. "It's an example of how flood control projects should be designed and built to be environmentally sensitive."

One Richmond activist and East Bay Regional Park District board member said the clear-cutting was unacceptable.

"We want to partner with them to restore the Richmond shoreline, not destroy it," Whitney Dotson said.

Corps officials said that anyone living behind a levee, even one that is in good condition, faces some risk of flooding.

In California's Central Valley and the Delta, flood agencies have been granted a short reprieve through 2012 to comply with the policies as a separate plan for flood protection is being developed.#