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## Editorial: Partial reprieve for river greenery

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For once, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers got it right. But it hasn't gone far enough in reconsidering draconian rules that could lead to many, many trees being unnecessarily chopped down in the cause of levee safety.

The corps announced Friday that it has given the Natomas levee project an exemption to its grass-only policy for levees. It is the first such waiver nationwide, it allows the urgently needed \$640 million project to move forward and it will spare thousands of trees along 40 miles of the Natomas levees.

The exemption, however, likely won't set much of a precedent elsewhere in California. Instead of enlarging existing levees, the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency (SAFCA) is building bigger "piggyback" levees next to the current ones. In essence, the new Natomas levees are being built so wide – 20 feet wide – that, in the corps' eyes, the trees on existing levees are outside its jurisdiction.

Friends of the River, the Sacramento-based nonprofit advocacy group, says there are few other places where there's enough space – not to mention few flood control districts with enough money – to build such wide levees.

So while 80 to 90 acres of vegetation will be preserved in the Natomas basin, trees and habitat elsewhere are still at risk.

The policy bans any woody vegetation more than 2 inches in diameter within 15 feet of levees and flood walls. The corps declared in 2007 that the policy would be more strictly enforced in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, though it's not proven that uprooted trees played any role in the breaches of levees and flood walls that inundated New Orleans.

The argument for the policy is that trees can weaken levees if their roots get embedded, decay and allow water to seep through. The corps also says that without

vegetation covering them, levees are more easily inspected.

But many scientists question whether removing trees makes levees any safer, and some say that trees, in certain situations, actually strengthen levees by preventing erosion. Also, the rules don't adequately consider the potential environmental damage.

Because of the blowback, the corps is doing more research. Closer to home, a consortium that includes the corps, SAFCA, state water and wildlife agencies and others is trying to find a way to guarantee levee safety while preserving what remains of the riparian forest in the Central Valley. That two-year study will be part of a new Central Valley flood protection plan in 2012.

The corps should take the study's findings to heart.

Col. Thomas Chapman, commander of the corps' Sacramento District, says the Natomas exemption is a model for valuing natural resources. "I think it may open the mind of the corps a little more," Chapman told The Bee.

Let's hope so.

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