



The Sacramento Bee

Several thousand trees may be cut About 5,100 violate corps' levee policy, partial survey finds.

By Matt Weiser - Bee Staff Writer

Published 12:00 am PDT Thursday, August 30, 2007

Story appeared in METRO section, Page B1

A cursory survey found that about 5,100 mature trees could be headed for the chopping block on just two urban levee sections in Sacramento if the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers goes ahead with a new levee maintenance policy.

The findings, from a survey commissioned by the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency, were presented Wednesday at a conference on the issue.

The survey of Sacramento River levees in the city's Natomas and Pocket areas provides a window on the potential consequences of a corps levee maintenance policy being enforced in California for the first time.

The nationwide policy conflicts with decades of practice in California, where levee vegetation offers the only remaining riverside habitat for a host of endangered species.

The surveyed levees represent only about 25 percent of Sacramento levees, and a tiny fraction of the 1,600 miles of Central Valley levees affected by the policy.

"We believe there would be major ecosystem-level effects by implementing the policy," said Michael Hoover, assistant field supervisor at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The corps in February notified 32 Central Valley levee districts that their levees don't meet national maintenance standards -- in most cases because of too many trees and shrubs.

The corps is preparing a new national policy, which it promises will be more flexible to accommodate local environmental needs. In the meantime, those 32 local districts have until March 30, 2008, to comply with the existing policy or lose federal funding to rebuild levees after a flood.

And starting this fall, more Valley levee districts will be inspected under the national criteria. Many are likely to fail, including those in Sacramento.

Ken Rood, an engineer at Northwest Hydraulic Consultants in Sacramento, which surveyed the levees for SAFCA, said an estimated 3,800 mature trees would have to be cut along the Sacramento River adjoining Natomas and 1,300 along Sacramento's Pocket neighborhood.

In many cases, these are mature oak, cottonwood and sycamores that shade public roads, bike trails and private yards.

"You're probably looking at significant reconstruction of levees to remove these trees and then restore the levee," Rood said.

The corps also inspected 1.5 miles of American River levee east of Watt Avenue as a pilot project according to the national criteria. It found the entire distance would require tree removal and partial levee rebuilding.

"There are a lot of people that will be very upset if the trees are removed," said Meegan Nagy, emergency manager at the corps' Sacramento district.

The cost of tree removal and levee rehabilitation is likely to be huge, said Les Harder, deputy director of the state Department of Water Resources. There are also costs to comply with environmental laws.

"Local agencies are going to be looking for the state to pay for some of this," Harder said.

But the state may not have the money. Flood-control bond measures approved last year raised \$5 billion but were intended to build certain projects, not to pay for levee maintenance.

Similarly, a \$326 million local property tax assessment approved by Sacramento voters this year is intended to build specific flood control projects.

"We may end up spending a great deal of money to comply with policy, when the actual risk factor may not be that great," said Stein Buer, executive director of SAFCA, which organized the conference.

Buer and other state flood-control experts said they have never heard of vegetation causing a levee failure. Rick Burnett, a flood fight specialist at DWR, said dense shrubs may hinder levee inspection. But he said plants don't affect repairs in a flood because they can be quickly stripped away by emergency crews.

About the writer:

The Bee's Matt Weiser can be reached at (916) 321-1264 or mweiser@sacbee.com.