

Map lowers floodplain and raises concern

BY FRANK ROBERTSON

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A newly revised floodplain map that will lower the official 100-year floodplain in Sonoma County may also worsen future flooding in the lower Russian River, according to county water officials.

Critics say the revised Flood Insurance Rate Map that was released by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) fails to designate the Laguna de Santa Rosa as a "floodway." Such a designation would protect the wetlands from any filling, encroachment, or development that could increase flooding elsewhere.

FEMA's action comes despite a recommendation for a floodway designation from the county and the Army Corps of Engineers, said Helen Libeu, a Sebastopol environmentalist active in efforts to preserve the Laguna.

"This leaves the whole Laguna vulnerable to filling in," said Libeu. "It sinks."

The new map, expected to get final approval next year, was prepared by the Army Corps of Engineers to guide development and flood insurance requirements in the floodplain. The lowered floodplain reflects the added storage capacity of Warm Springs Dam.

Despite the flood of 1986—the River's worst in recorded history—the new map drops the 100-year floodplain level by two feet along the lower river. The 100-year mark is the cutoff point at which mortgage lenders require flood insurance and county building codes require houses to be elevated above the floodplain.

FEMA officials said that the Laguna did not "meet the criteria" to be designated a floodway. The decision disappointed River residents as well as county water agency engineers, who say development in the Laguna floodplain could gradually contribute to higher flood levels downstream.

"Over the long haul, that would be the concern," said Bill Stillman, a county water agency engineer.

Floodway status for the Laguna, a major floodwater retention area that can hold 80,000 acre-feet of water during storms, was also considered a key component for preventing higher downstream flood levels resulting from rapid development in Windsor.

Bobby Mayes, an engineer with the Sonoma County Water Agency, said the key to the effectiveness of a recently completed drainage plan for development in Windsor is to prevent filling in the Laguna.

"As long as that's done, the actual effect [of added storm runoff in Windsor] would be insignificant. You couldn't measure it," said Mayes, who had urged Army engineers to call the Laguna a floodway.

"The key to protecting the River is to protect the Laguna," said Mayes.

"If the Laguna was allowed to fill in, those waters would not have a place to rest. That would have a tremendous effect downstream,"

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said Mayes. County officials took a final look at the map last week during an informal meeting with representatives from the FEMA and Army engineers.

A public hearing on the revised map will be held Monday night, Dec. 4, at 7 p.m. in the county board of supervisors' chambers in Santa Rosa. Following the hearing there will be a 90-day appeal period.

Copies of the new map and the studies it's based on may be seen at the Sonoma County Water Agency, the county Public Works Department, the board of supervisors' offices, the building department, and the Guerneville public library.



Photo by Tom Roth

NOT A FLOODWAY—The Laguna de Santa Rosa does not meet the criteria that would give it protection against filling in, said federal officials recently.