



For new levees, 900 trees must go

mweiser@sacbee.com

Published Tuesday, Jan. 27, 2009

Sacramentans soon will understand just how massive the region's biggest modern levee project is as workers this week begin removing 900 trees to make way for construction along the Sacramento River. About 800 of those trees are native oaks – mostly valley oaks – including some more than 60 inches in diameter. They may come to symbolize the tightrope that California walks between flood safety and habitat protection. The trees must go because they're in the footprint of a \$619 million project to build giant new levees encircling the Natomas Basin. The project was required by a 2006 U.S. Army Corps ruling that existing levees don't adequately protect the basin's 70,000 residents.

The Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency designed new levees up to 300 feet wider to accommodate another Army Corps rule that forbids trees and structures on levees. This "piggyback" levee design reinforces the existing levee from behind and effectively moves the regulatory profile of the levee away from the river, preserving thousands of trees and allowing more than 100 homes along the water to remain in place. But because the new levee is so wide, trees must fall on its inland side: 900 in this first phase, stretching 4.5 miles south from the Natomas Cross Canal along Garden Highway; then perhaps 2,000 more as work continues on the remaining 37 miles of Natomas levees.

In effect, to preserve shade and habitat along the water-side of the levee, SAFCA had to sacrifice it on the other. "Obviously, it's sad and it's difficult for us," said Ray Trethewey, Sacramento city councilman, SAFCA board member and executive director of the Sacramento Tree Foundation. "On the other hand, SAFCA is very progressive when it comes to public safety and balancing that with vegetation on or near levees."

The Garden Highway Community Association, however, may seek a court injunction to stop the tree removal. Its president, Doug Cummings, said SAFCA should not cut trees until it has the \$90 million

it needs to build the levee. Most of that money is expected to come from the state, but has been delayed by California's budget woes. Cummings said this means hundreds of mature oaks could be cut prematurely. "I'm very opposed to taking any trees, especially when there's no good reason to do so at this point," Cummings said.

SAFCA aims to start building the new levee in April, assuming a funding deal with the state is in place by March 19 so it can hire a contractor. City and county officials on SAFCA's board are under pressure to build the project quickly. Until the work is finished, a building moratorium has halted further development in Natomas, and residents must purchase flood insurance.

SAFCA has the money to remove the trees and build environmental improvements to atone for removing them. No matter when levee construction starts, said SAFCA Executive Director Stein Buer, the trees must be removed first. The work will be disruptive to scenery and wildlife that depend on the trees, including the threatened Swainson's hawk. But SAFCA maintains the end result will benefit wildlife. "What we're trying to do here is create a woodland community as opposed to just a linear grove of trees," said Peter Buck, SAFCA's natural resources manager.

About 15 acres of tree canopy are being removed, and SAFCA aims to triple that number when finished. This will be done by creating two woodland habitat sites, totaling 45 acres, near the north and south ends of the 4.5-mile project area. A woodland corridor, along the base of the new levee, will connect them. The agency will plant as many as three new trees for every one it removes. And Buck said about 25 percent of the existing trees will be dug up and transplanted.

It is paying Roseville contractor Trees on the Go \$115,000 for the work. Typically, only trees smaller than 10 inches in diameter can be successfully relocated, said Buck. But when SAFCA's board meets Thursday, it may hire another contractor with special equipment to move trees up to 20 inches in diameter. Larger trees will be cut. Garden Highway resident Patricia Nealon said some of the oaks are among the state's largest because they've benefitted by living near the Sacramento River. Some sprouted long before the Gold Rush.

"I truly cannot imagine not having these trees as you drive along the Garden Highway," she said. "It's bothered me tremendously to think they would take these out."