

Eroding walls in Goldfields along Yuba River a flood threat

Ben van der Meer, Marysville Appeal-Democrat, 9-20-11

The Yuba Goldfields represent a potential flood threat to much of south Yuba County, according to a study presented at a special workshop of the Three Rivers Levee Improvement Authority on Monday afternoon.

Because a wall along the Yuba River is eroding significantly in some places, and because practices by mining companies in the Goldfields have inadvertently created natural paths for water to follow, a 100-year flood event could cause flooding from the Goldfields, though more slowly and less deeply than a levee breach elsewhere in the county.

"What we've found is no one's really maintaining the ... walls," said TRLIA Executive Director Paul Brunner, in a briefing before the workshop. The walls were built over a century ago along the north edge of the Goldfields to keep debris from going down the Yuba River and impeding boat traffic, not for flood control, he said.

The original agency ordering the wall's construction was folded into the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1986, but two corps studies found no reason for concern over Goldfields flooding outside a 200-year flood event.

"It leaves a hole in the whole picture of what we should do," Brunner said, because the land in the Goldfields is owned by the corps, the Bureau of Land Management and private entities.

Ten points in the wall have eroded by as much as 176 feet, and three not only are especially degraded, but have areas behind them where water could naturally flow through and out of the Goldfields.

In his presentation to the TRLIA board as well as the county Board of Supervisors and Reclamation District 784's board of directors, Brunner said a four-phase plan could address the problem.

The first phase, which could begin over the next half year, would have TRLIA work with mining companies to create barriers at the edge of the Goldfields where water from the potential breaches would flow out.

In future phases, TRLIA would determine how else to meet 100-year flood protection relative to the Goldfields, come up with a plan for 200-year protection and implement it.

TRLIA's board would have to approve moving ahead, though the first phase could go before its members this month, Brunner said.

Costs for those phases would be shared between the state and local sources, with leftover money from levee work on the Yuba River project available, he said. The first phase should cost about \$200,000, with costs for later phases to be determined.

Neither assessments residents currently pay for levee maintenance, or flood insurance premiums, would be affected by the need for Goldfields work.

Those who heard the presentation had a variety of opinions, with TRLIA board member and Yuba County Supervisor John Nicoletti saying he was concerned the U.S. Army Corps was being let off the hook.

But others said the Goldfields, long a sore spot with flood-control watchdogs, was overdue in being addressed.

"The thing that worries me most is not who's responsible for the original problem," said Jerry Crippen, of TRLIA's board. "My main worry is when is it going to get fixed?"