

Threat of strong El Niño raises concern of countywide disasters

Chris O'Neal, Ventura County Reporter, 9-10-15

It's a "good news, bad news" situation this coming winter in Ventura County with the reality of a strong El Niño quite possibly bringing much-needed rain to the Southland. On the other hand, with the rain comes the increased chance of mudslides, debris flows and flooding — and some county residents are getting nervous.

Driving toward the hills on East Lewis Street just off Ventura Avenue, a fissure in the hillside resembles a crude drawing of a seagull, like the kind a child would use to dot the horizon in a portrait of the ocean.

It hasn't always been there, however. Theresa Satterfield has lived in her Lewis Street home with her husband for 15 years and says that she first noticed the crack in the hillside 10 years ago, after the La Conchita landslide.

In January 2005, following the La Conchita disaster that killed 10 people and destroyed multiple homes, Satterfield and the residents of Lewis and Vince streets as well as adjacent streets, including Leighton and Carr drives and El Medio Street, received letters from the city of Ventura warning them of the potential for a landslide, should heavy rains inundate the area.

"The prediction is that if we get a whole lot of rain, that chunk is going to take out part of Lewis, including the first six houses on Lewis and Vince streets," said Satterfield.

The land in question is owned privately and in an unincorporated area of Ventura County. Satterfield says that talks with the landowner, property management firm the Selby Corporation, have been stalled for two years. At the last meeting of city, county and Selby attorneys over two years ago, Satterfield says, "Cards were exchanged" and then "attitudes changed."

"We had a nice rapport," said Satterfield. "For some reason, we don't know why, it just stopped."

As Westside residents work to find a solution — going so far as to convene an entirely new group called the Avenue Hillside Prevention Committee — county and city officials are taking measures to mitigate possible damage.

The Ventura County Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services has begun preparing for the possibility that the worst may occur: mudslides, debris flows and flooding, all threats to Ventura County during any given period of wet weather, let alone in the midst of the potentially strongest El Niño on record.

Kevin McGowan, manager of the Office of Emergency Services, says that there is a "full-fledged planning effort taking place between the different agencies that have some sort of role with winter weather," which includes agencies all the way up to the federal level.

"The basis of our planning effort is to identify hazards and then, if possible, mitigate the hazards and develop a response and recovery plan for if the hazards occur," said McGowan. As far as identifying areas of concern, McGowan says that there is "nothing new in the sense that they are hazards that have been longstanding."

These hazards include the possibility of a landslide or mudslide in La Conchita, a landslide on Ventura's Westside and the potential for a second occurrence of a debris flow in Camarillo Springs. Areas that have

experienced recent fires are more susceptible, says McGowan. Simi Valley's recent so-called Rustic fire is an area of concern, for example.

"We're going to go out there and assess that area to see if there are potentials for debris flows," said McGowan. "But that hasn't been determined yet."

In Camarillo, the area affected by last year's debris flow, Camarillo Springs, will receive hillside improvements to help stabilize the area. Kane GeoTech will complete the design study, which will include a berm to redirect debris flow and other mitigating design features. The contract will be awarded on Sept. 30, with hopes for construction to begin by mid-October.

In Ventura, Satterfield and the Westside Community Council have circulated a petition to persuade city and county officials to take action before it's too late.

"We respectfully request that the Ventura County Board of Supervisors and the Selby Corporation board of directors take the initiative to work with each other, the city, state and federal government, inviting voluntary cooperation between all parties in creating a solution to protect citizens from a preventable life-threatening land slide," the petition reads.

Ventura Mayor Cheryl Heitmann says that a staff report is being developed, including an emergency preparedness plan, which will detail the city's response to various events, and that should be ready by mid-September.

"We're working on preparedness and education and reaction if something happens," said Heitmann, who notes that city officials are inspecting city buildings for potential problems and notifying residents of where and how to get sand bags and other materials.

As far as the Westside hill goes, Heitmann says that it's on the city's radar.

"Those are our residents that live there. Clearly we want to make sure that whatever can be done will be done," said Heitmann. "I think the city does want to be a partner here and I'm looking to see if there is a way to come to a solution."

Representatives from the Selby Corporation could not be reached for comment.

In the event of an emergency, the best way to prepare for disaster is to create a disaster kit, says McGowan, with a minimum of three days' worth of food and medical supplies, but preferably enough for seven days in the event of being cut off from services.

"We live in a county that has the potential for multiple hazards, so we prepare and plan accordingly."

For Satterfield, preparations have already begun.

"We will just be watching the hill," said Satterfield. "The car will be packed, and if we get a lot of rain, we will be ready to go."

For more information on disaster preparedness and guidelines on how to prepare your family in the event of an emergency, there are several resources. Visit www.vcalert.org to sign up for the emergency notification system and www.readyventuracounty.org for tips on how to build an emergency disaster kit.