

Out with the old (levee) in south county

[By Ben van der Meer/Appeal-Democrat](#)

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An infamous landmark in south Yuba County's history entered its final days today, as the Three Rivers Levee Improvement Authority kicked off a campaign to tear down the old levee along the Feather River.

Actually, that process began a few days ago, but the authority's board of directors symbolically started the levee degradation with a ceremony this morning where longtime south county residents turned a shovel or two of levee dirt.

"This levee has a 1 in 20 chance of breaking," said Yuba County Supervisor and TRLIA board member Mary Jane Griego at the ceremony. She gestured to the east, where TRLIA is building a new levee set to be finished by late October. "The new one has a 1 in 200 chance of breaking."

County residents and officials turned shovels just a few miles from where the old levee broke in 1997, killing three people and causing \$300 million worth of damage when adjusted for inflation.

TRLIA executive director Paul Brunner said from an engineering standpoint, the old levee wasn't up to the task of protecting hundreds of new residents in south Yuba County in communities such as Plumas Lake.

"This one was built out of sand, and built on top of sand, so it doesn't have the structural strength," he said.

The new levee, part of a \$167 million construction project, is built out of dirt and on firmer ground. It is also both taller and wider than the old levee.

The new levee also is set back up to a half-mile east of the existing one, giving water a wider berth to flow down the Feather River without affecting homes or businesses, or creating pressure that could result in a rupture.

For shovel bearers Walt Whitenton, 77, and Duke Griego, 73, there is no sentimentality for the end of a levee that's protected south Yuba County — with a notable exception — for decades.

"This part is fantastic," said Whitenton, a West Linda resident who's lived in Yuba County for 45 years. "I'd love to see them do more like this up in the Goldfields, but we've got to get this done first."

Duke Griego, who's lived for 43 years on Arboga Road and had to evacuate in 1997, said his looks at the new setback levee fill him with optimism that the region will avoid future floods.

"I'm sure it will, unless we have a really hellacious storm," he said. "I don't want to be here then."

The old levee won't be entirely degraded at once, Brunner said, because it can't be fully removed until the new levee is more than halfway completed.

Both benchmarks are in line to happen by the end of the typical construction season in late October, when TRLIA officials are planning a dedication ceremony for the new levee.

Crews will use dirt from the degraded levee to fill in holes left from excavations of dirt used to build the new levee, Brunner said.

Eventually, the area between the setback levee and the river will become a designated overflow area during high-water season, and possibly a recreation area for the region at other times of the year.

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