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Feds: Yuba County levees meet threshold

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A massive levee project in Yuba County has received notice from the federal government that it meets at least a 100-year safety threshold.

The notice Tuesday from the Federal Emergency Management Agency is a key final milestone in the \$405 million project to protect Linda, Olivehurst, Arboga and Plumas Lakes. The work includes upgrades to 29 miles of levees, and not just bigger levees, but smarter ones. This includes the largest setback levee ever built in California, giving the Feather River a wider path and also creating more wildlife habitat.

"We have really now reached the point where we have some of the best, if not the best, levees in Northern California," said Paul Brunner, executive director of the Three Rivers Levee Improvement Authority.

The region has experienced two deadly floods in the past 25 years and was once known for having among the most vulnerable levees in the state.

The repairs were accomplished in six years, first relying on \$80 million in developer fees on new homes in Plumas Lakes, a practice considered risky because levees still weren't upgraded at the time. Then, when the economy soured, the county sold local bonds to raise more money and also tapped into \$265 million in state bonds approved by voters for flood control projects.

Brunner said a relatively small project remains to be completed on Yuba River levees. But FEMA on Tuesday notified the authority that the levee system meets criteria for a "Zone X" certification, which means the ability to withstand between a 100- and 500-year flood. The levees were designed for a 200-year flood, or one with a half-percent chance of occurring in any give year.

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