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Levees good for 100-year flood, FEMA tells Yuba County

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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 the floodprone communities of Linda, Olivehurst, Arboga and Plumas Lake, where about 3,000 new houses were built in the real estate boom of the mid-2000s.

The work includes upgrades to 29 miles of levees, creating 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 determination by FEMA means homeowners in the Yuba County communities will no longer be required to purchase flood insurance. This burden will likely be lifted in 2011, when FEMA issues final flood hazard maps for the area.

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

In 1997 a flood caused by a levee break on the Feather River killed three people and damaged at least 800 homes. The area also flooded in 1986.

"It left a distinct impact on those who were there to try to fix the levees so that never happens again," Brunner said.

The repairs were accomplished in six years, first relying on \$80 million in developer fees on new homes in Plumas Lake, a strategy criticized by some experts as risky because levees still weren't upgraded at the time.

Then, when the economy soured and developer fees dried up, 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. Construction on that will begin this summer.

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 given year.

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