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## Work to begin on setback levee for flood-scarred Yuba County

By Matt Weiser - [mweiser@sacbee.com](mailto:mweiser@sacbee.com)

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Construction starts Wednesday on the largest setback levee ever built in California, a levee designed both for the environment and to end generations of fear in Yuba County.

Few places in California have flooded as often or as painfully as Yuba County's Plumas Lake basin. A levee break on the Yuba River in 1986 flooded the basin, destroying hundreds of homes and businesses. A break on the Feather River in 1997 flooded the basin again, killing three people.

On Wednesday, the Three Rivers Levee Improvement Authority breaks ground on a nearly \$192 million project to shift six miles of that same Feather River levee farther from the testy flood flows.

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To honor the strife residents endured, six survivors of the 1997 flood will wield ceremonial shovels.

"I'm nervous about it because it's kind of an emotional issue," confessed Yuba County Supervisor Mary Jane Griego, who also chairs the levee authority. "We know what a flood can do to the morale of a community. People lost much more than just couches and their homes. It was the emotional strain they had to go through, and the community suffered for it."

The project will move the Feather River levee up to a half-mile farther from the river's edge. Engineered soils will replace the seepy, sandy material that has made the current levee so troublesome.

The setback area will eliminate a choke point on the river that forced river levels higher for miles upstream. It will also open up about 1,600 acres along the river, restoring a type of riparian habitat that is in precious short supply throughout California.

"It's pretty historic," said Ron Stork, a senior policy advocate at Friends of the River in Sacramento. "The levee setbacks on the Feather are a good thing, in particular because they help restore the river and the riparian vegetation around it. And they also make the community safer behind it."

All Californians have a small stake in this project. Proposition 1E, the flood control bond measure approved by the state's voters in 2006, provided \$138 million to fund the project. The rest, about \$53 million, comes mostly from county funds.

The project is the final step in a larger four-phase project to upgrade all the levees protecting the basin. The levee authority has already improved the berms lining a canal on the eastern border of the basin. Last year, two miles of levee on the Bear River were set back.

A portion of the basin's Yuba River levees have also been improved, although some work remains to be done there this year.

The overall cost of the four-phase project, including the Feather River levee improvements, is about \$360 million, said Paul Brunner, the authority's executive director. Much of this funding came from a \$29,000 developer fee imposed on every home built at Plumas Lake, a new subdivision.

The agency hopes to complete construction this year, though Brunner said it's possible some work will be delayed into 2009.

A major share of the cost – about \$60 million – goes to purchasing land for the setback area, which will become vital new habitat for fish, birds and other wildlife. The state altered its grant funding methods to cover this expense upfront, rather than reimbursing the levee agency later, which Brunner said was key to building the project quickly. "Without the change I don't know how the locals would have ever come up with the money to do the land purchases," he said.

The finished project is designed to provide 200-year flood protection, or the ability to survive a storm with a half-percent chance of striking in any given year. That's at least double what the basin has ever had before.

The groundbreaking is set for 10 a.m. Wednesday at 1000 Anderson Ave. near Arboga, a location in the middle of the new setback levee's path.

Handling one of the ceremonial shovels will be Griego's father, Duke Griego, 71. His Duke's Diner restaurant in Linda flooded in 1986. Then his home in Olivehurst flooded to the ceiling in 1997. He suffered a heart attack that year from the stress.

"These were very devastating things to me," he said. The levees "will bring people back to Yuba County. We won't have to worry about floods anymore. At least I'm hoping we won't have to."

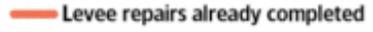
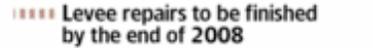
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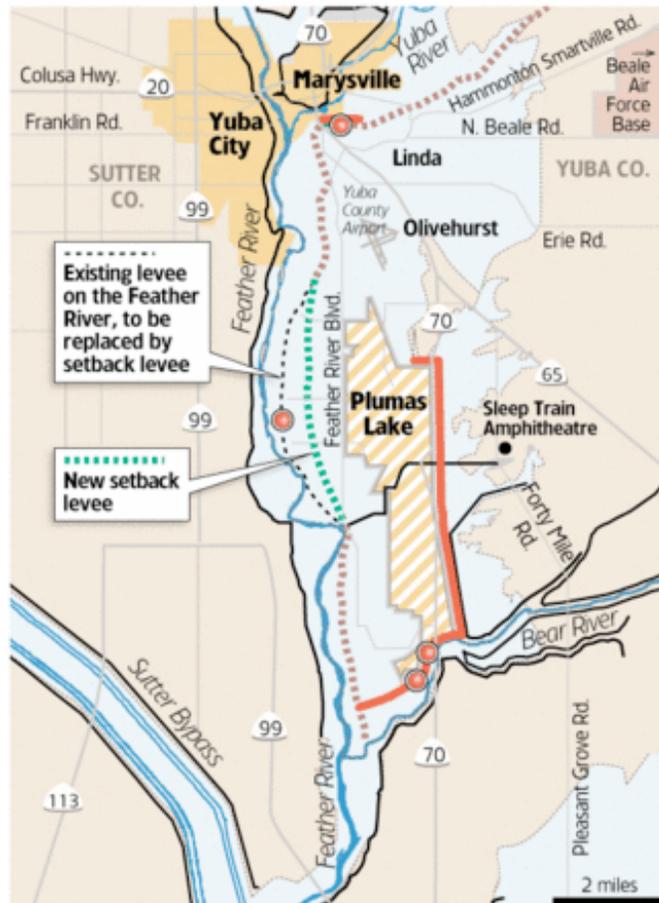
- Call The Bee's Matt Weiser, (916) 321-1264.

# More room for a river's flow

The largest setback levee ever built in California, a six-mile stretch along the Feather River in Yuba County, begins construction Wednesday by the Three Rivers Levee Improvement Authority. The \$192 million project is designed to provide more space for the river during times of high water, eliminate seepage problems and create more habitat for plants and animals.

### MAP KEY

-  **Levee**  
Note: Levees as shown are offset for visual clarity.
-  **Formerly flooded areas**  
Composite areas identified through aerial photography following flood events between 1983 and 1997.
-  **Past levee failures**
-  **Existing levees**
-  **Levee repairs already completed**
-  **Levee repairs to be finished by the end of 2008**



Source: Three Rivers Levee Improvement Authority  
Sacramento Bee

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