

Congressman Wally Herger

"We Don't Have the Luxury to Delay Levee Repairs" (October 12, 2007)

It's hard to think about flood protection at a time when California's rivers are running at such low levels. But as many Yuba-Sutter residents know, Northern California weather can change drastically from year to year. In 1986 the Yuba River unleashed a furious flood on Linda and Olivehurst, but the previous water year, ending just months before that devastating event occurred, was one of California's drier years on record.

Indeed, the threat of flooding is as much a part of the California landscape as is a looming drought. And just as we should prepare today to mitigate the negative consequences of drought, we must also be vigilant in our efforts to prevent the next major flood. Fortunately, significant progress has been made recently to shore up levees that protect lives and property in our area. And importantly, action is being taken in tandem by all levels of government to get the needed protection in place.

The threat of flooding in our area is certainly no secret, but the overwhelming damage that occurred in 1986, and again in 1997, created a new sense of urgency to strengthen the region's levees. The Corps of Engineers soon confirmed that many levees in Sutter County were weaker and more susceptible to strong currents than previously thought. Some critical reconstruction work has occurred in response to these findings, but a larger system-wide overhaul is still needed to ensure a more reliable level of safety.

Over the last several years, I've worked with local officials to secure congressional funding to develop a blueprint for just such a fix. With additional federal funds, this effort will advance to a point where Sutter County can begin to implement the repair work identified by the Corps. I look forward to continuing to work with Senators Feinstein and Boxer to see that the needed federal funds are made available.

The '86 and '97 floods also led to congressional authorization of the Yuba Basin project, a 40-mile levee rehabilitation and reconstruction effort in Yuba County. Vital repair work identified through this project and undertaken by state and local agencies has been proceeding at an unprecedented pace and scale. Advanced funding has already led to the completion of levee improvements on the Yuba River and Western Pacific Interceptor Canal, and an entirely new levee along the Bear. Local leaders should be commended for their recent success in securing additional funding commitments from the state to begin levee reconstruction work along the Feather River.

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A critical next step must be taken at the federal level to put the Yuba Basin project in a position to reach completion and provide a roughly 200-year level of flood protection for vulnerable county residents. That step is the enactment of the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) and with it a key legislative provision which will accelerate financing and construction of a pivotal element of the Yuba Basin effort - urgent levee repair designed to protect the City of Marysville. With my support, Congress recently passed the WRDA legislation. But as many readers know, the President has pledged to veto it.

While I agree with the President's concern about the overall authorization level of the final package approved by Congress, the legislation's Yuba provision is a crucial component of the flood protection strategy for Yuba County. And timing is of the essence. WRDA legislation has already been delayed since 2002. Further delay will likely push back the construction start of the Marysville improvements - something I believe should be avoided at all costs. After all, Yuba County's levees protect an area that has been ground zero for two federally-declared disasters over the last twenty years.

The value of a strengthened levee system, working together with upstream reservoirs, cannot be understated. And as levee improvements continue, it is imperative that environmental laws and regulations are implemented in a way that ensures that public safety comes first. We cannot allow the threat of appeals and litigation to force a focus on details and box-checking when the larger goal of getting critical protection in place is within reach. Our region suffered enough when red tape needlessly delayed crucial levee repairs from occurring near Arboga. Bureaucratic "process" stalling on the ground progress is simply unacceptable.