Our Ocean Backyard

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Gary Griggs

Floods Keep Coming

This is the winter that just keeps on giving, and if someone would have asked me in late December if I thought that we could go from drought to flood in two weeks, I probably would have said “I don’t think so”. Yet, this is exactly what happened, and some of the Monterey Bay area’s residents are still suffering from the flooding of the San Lorenzo and Pajaro Rivers.

Many of the approximately 3,000 residents of the small Monterey County community of Pajaro, mostly farm workers, were evacuated as the levee break on the Pajaro River brought the river into their homes. Along the San Lorenzo River a short distance above the city of Santa Cruz, and a few feet above the river, lies Paradise Park, a community of mostly retired people. Some homes here have been flooded this winter and residents have been evacuated; but this isn’t the first time this has happened. Further up the river a group of about 50 homes at Felton Grove sits adjacent to the historic covered bridge in Felton. This is perhaps the most flood-prone development along the entire course of the San Lorenzo River. It’s not on the 100-year flood plain, which might be tolerable, but closer to the three-year flood plain, or on average this neighborhood is flooded about every three years and sometimes multiple times in a single year.

Sentinel accounts have regularly described the flooding in Felton Grove.

December 25, 1955: “Felton Grove, near Felton Road, was nearly wiped out. Twelve persons were taken out of the flooded area in boats. Five cabins were carried away, some 20 were destroyed, crushed by the rushing current”.

April 3,1958: “Felton Fire Chief Ted Toft said this morning that about 18 were evacuated from Felton Grove, and some 20 from Gold Gulch park last night.”

January 22, 1967: “Felton Grove was awash and some people reportedly left their homes”.

And then there was more recent flooding in 1969, 1973, 1978, 1982, 1983, 2017 and now 2023. Felton Grove is not alone, however. Many of the county’s communities were built all, or at least in part, on the natural floodplains of the rivers and creeks: downtown Santa Cruz, parts of Felton, Soquel, Capitola, Aptos, Rio Del Mar and Watsonville being examples in Santa Cruz County.

Overbank flow or flooding is how all natural streams deal with the runoff from sustained rainfall that can no longer be contained within the stream channel. Almost no stream or river can carve and maintain a channel large enough to carry all floods; big floods don’t occur often enough to create or sustain a very large channel. Instead a creek or river will erode a channel which will contain a certain flow, about the maximum that will occur every year or two. Flows greater than this will overflow the banks where the water will then slow down, drop out sediment, and over time build a relatively flat and fertile floodplain. The Salinas Valley is the nation’s salad bowl because of the overflow and sediment deposition of the Salinas River over thousands of years. Without these regular, replenishing, although sometimes damaging floods, we wouldn’t have the fertile soils and the productive farmland.

The Native Americans in the Monterey Bay area observed and understood these flood patterns and landforms and consciously chose not to live permanently along any of the region’s streams. They learned quickly that they were going to get wet if they did. If the new immigrants from the east ever did figure it out, they disregarded the flood hazard for the most part.

Most of the early development of the city of Santa Cruz took place well above the river bottom on the bluffs to either side of the San Lorenzo’s flood plain. The area along the river occupied by the downtown today was avoided for about half a century. But around the time of the California Gold Rush, encroachment of the first building (a blacksmith shop built by Elihu Anthony in 1848) took place on upper Pacific Avenue in the area near the present town clock. Once this bold but somewhat foolish step had been taken, the development of the city on the river’s floodplain followed relatively quickly. The attraction of fertile soil near the river, easy access to fresh water, and the presence of a few businesses, led to progressively more home and commercial construction on the flats.

In 1866, the decision was made to build the new county courthouse on Cooper Street rather than on Mission Hill. Consciously or unconsciously, the die was cast to build the city center on the floodplain directly in the path of the San Lorenzo River, barely a trickle in many years, but a raging torrent in others. A few feeble efforts were made in attempts to control the path of the river. Bulkhead Street, for example, which runs diagonally one block behind the town clock, was named after a former timber bulkhead built in this area in an effort to divert the course of the river away from the developing city center. And while our awareness and understanding of atmospheric rivers and their significance for both California’s water supply and flooding is quite recent, Santa Cruz County has felt the impacts for over 150 years.