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**FEBRUARY FLOODS CAUSE \$1.2-MILLION LOSS TO NORTH BAY FARMERS***By Norm Yenni, North Bay Agriculture Alliance.*

Muddy waters -- overtopping the levees and breaking some -- flooded over 50 per cent of low-lying farmland in the southernmost parts of Sonoma County and have caused an estimated \$1.2-million loss to the farmers this winter, according to a recent survey by North Bay Agriculture Alliance. Although the unusually heavy rainfall was certainly a factor, many of the farmers surveyed believe that the damages would have been much less or, in some cases, totally avoided, if they had a free hand in maintaining their levees and if there were less silting and runoff from upland development.

The survey was directed to some 16,000 acres of land in active farming in the low-lying area between the Petaluma River and Skaggs Island. The responses came from fourteen farmers representing 11,116 acres, or about 70% of the total acreage. Of the 11,116 acres, 5887 acres, or 53%, were reportedly lost to flooding.

Crop loss was the leading category of damage. While there is replanting done as well as some salvage value to the flooded fields, the loss of gross crop income is still expected at about \$330,000.

Trailing closely behind it was damages to levees, flood gates, pumps, etc., costing these farmers nearly \$325,000 beyond the comparable figure in a normal year. The third major expense item was the pumping and drainage costs. The respondents collectively incurred an extra \$99,600 (above the normal year figure) for PG&E bills and diesel fuel to pump out the flood water. There were other expenses such as extra crews and supplies called in to fight the flood and clean up the washed up debris. All told, the aggregate loss of those who responded to the survey came close to \$900,000.

The North Bay Agriculture Alliance estimates the total loss to the farm land in the entire area to be in excess of \$1.2 million. These figures do not include the farmers' own extra time working through days and nights in the rain, nor do they include the loss sustained by the drowned mice, ground squirrels, rabbits, red foxes, snakes, and countless number of birds who lost their nests. As the flood water receded, there came hundreds of sea gulls to feast on the dead wildlife.

So, what will happen next winter? All but one of the survey respondents stated that urgent repair work was needed before next winter. The levees are now in considerably worse shape than they were last year.

Levee repair permit applications (Clean Water Act, Section 404) are processed by bureaucrats in San Francisco who have little understanding of the urgency that farmers face. Permit applications are sometimes lost or misplaced at their desks, as the Alliance found out recently after repeated inquiries and finally by an intercession from Senator Feinstein. A 'blanket' ditch maintenance permit for the area, which is supposed to take about ninety days to come through, has been awaiting U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' approval for the past thirteen months, and is still on hold. The individuals of the regulatory agencies all express sympathy with our plight, but their desires differ from that of other agencies. The farmer is stuck in the middle, and the clock is still ticking.

The State Dept. of Fish and Game, whose levees are in poor condition and have in fact contributed to the flooding of the adjacent farms, claims that it doesn't have enough budget to maintain its own levees, and even mentions that it may be better for the wildlife to let the levees deteriorate. For farmers in the lowlands, as well as for the wildlife on their land, the condition of the levees is another matter -- maintain the levees and ditches in sound conditions, or risk losing their income and assets altogether.

Salt marsh harvest mice, clapper rails, farmers, and other endangered species in the area are nervously watching the sky and the levees, hoping that Section 404 won't mean feasts only for sea gulls and other out-of-town scavengers.

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