



**US Army Corps  
of Engineers** ®



**Sacramento  
Area Flood  
Control  
Agency**

Media Communiqué

## **California Levee Vegetation Policy: Next Steps**

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### Background

The devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 has focused national attention on levees and public safety concerns.

As a result, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) has determined that existing levee maintenance standards must be more rigorously enforced across the nation. In April 2007 the Corps released a draft white paper on the "Treatment of Vegetation within Local Flood Damage Reduction Systems" that called for the removal of wild growth, trees, and other encroachments which might impair levee integrity or flood-fighting access in order to reduce the risk of flood damage.

The Corps has proposed that levees which fail to meet these existing standards be rated as unacceptable, with the consequence that they could lose eligibility for federal assistance in post-flood levee rehabilitation as well as certification under FEMA's National Flood Insurance Program.

Due to the unique history of the flood control system in the California Central Valley, levee slopes often contain brush and trees that are the last remnants of a vast riparian forest which once extended across the valley floor adjacent to the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers. Much of this vegetation provides important environmental, recreational, and cultural benefits that would be impacted by the stricter enforcement of Corps regulations.

In order to learn more about how levee safety goals can be met while protecting these environmental assets, the Corps, the State of California, and the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency sponsored a levee vegetation symposium in Sacramento on August 28-29, 2007. The symposium brought together over 500 scientists, engineers, and policy-makers who shared important information about the risks, benefits, and methods to manage vegetation on and near levees.

### Proposed Vegetation Management Approach

Following the symposium a group of senior leaders representing both flood management and resource protection agencies - including the Corps, the California Department of Water Resources, the State of California Reclamation Board, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, Reclamation District No. 2068, and the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency - met to discuss how they could cooperate in achieving better levee safety while protecting and enhancing the environmental values that levees also provide.

The agencies agreed to work together to draft a phased system-wide plan, with short-term and long-term elements, that will include vegetation management requirements for Central Valley levees and adjoining channels. Participants also agreed that levee-maintaining districts should defer any substantial vegetation removal along levees while this plan is being developed.

In drafting this phased plan the Agencies will be guided by the following fundamental principles:

- Public safety is the top priority;
- It is urgent that levee integrity and maintenance concerns be addressed as rapidly as possible;
- Levee deficiencies not associated with vegetation issues will require corrective action, with the most urgent and cost-efficient actions implemented first. In the short-term, vegetation-related deficiencies will be addressed through this collaborative effort;
- The plan will be collaboratively formulated, focus on public safety, and respect the public trust responsibilities of all the involved agencies;

This plan may include bio-engineering techniques that could allow for the retention of stream bank riparian vegetation; the retention of vegetation on the landward side except where site-specific removal of brush and trees that compromise levee safety and emergency response access is required; and mitigation for any required levee slope vegetation removal. These actions would be phased in over a presently-undetermined time period combined with more intensive trimming and monitoring of existing vegetation. The plan will be comprehensive, in that it will also address other maintenance and engineering concerns that affect levee safety and use.

Consistent with the Corps' interim guidance, the State of California will take the lead in developing this phased plan, working closely with affected local levee-maintaining agencies. A draft framework for the plan will be available for stakeholder review in early 2008.

The Corps and the State of California will continue to conduct joint levee inspections this fall, rigorously applying the Corps' existing maintenance standards. Portions of the Central Valley levee system may receive consideration for a variance from the Corps' vegetation standard provided [1] that vegetation management meets the requirements of the inter-agency plan described above; and [2] the variance retains the safety, structural integrity, and functionality of the flood damage reduction system. The participating agencies agreed that preliminary 'unacceptable' ratings regarding vegetation would not cause levees within the Corps levee rehabilitation program to be classified as 'inactive' while this plan is being collaboratively developed and vegetation management progress meets the requirements of the plan. However, vegetation issues that are deemed by the joint inspection teams to significantly impair levee integrity or operations will require immediate attention.

This phased approach will give the State and local levee-maintaining agencies time to plan, design, and finance more intensive levee maintenance and vegetation management programs; apply the best available science; and deal with habitat mitigation on a system-wide basis. A phased approach will also ensure that public safety is not compromised and will allow flood risk to be reduced by addressing the most urgent problems first.