



Floodplain ag coalition pushed in Yuba-Sutter

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Hoping to show strength in numbers, several counties and farming groups, including Yuba and Sutter, are forming a regional coalition to make federal policies more flexible for those in flood-prone agricultural areas.

Yuba County supervisors will consider a proposal next week to formally join the coalition, called the Agricultural Management Floodplain Alliance.

And Sutter County officials, who raised the idea of such a coalition last year, are drumming up more support and trying to put the group's resources to work.

"We're at the first step of making it a national push," said Sutter County Supervisor Stan Cleveland, who is attending a national conference of county officials in Washington, D.C., this week.

Membership is limited to counties, reclamation districts and farming groups from flood-prone regions around Sacramento. But because Federal Emergency Management Agency regulations on building in floodplains apply nationally, getting members from the Midwest, for example, is a logical expansion.

The alliance, which began forming last month, is focused particularly on FEMA's mapping revisions in recent years finding a special flood hazard for some areas where levees aren't much more than mounds of dirt pushed up decades ago.

Such a special hazard flood zone has been applied to south Sutter County and the District 10/Hallwood portions of Yuba County, heavily agricultural areas.

Yuba County Agricultural Commissioner Louie Mendoza said the practical effect of such designations is to force farmers who want to expand a building, or add something new, to put them on mounds, above the floodplain.

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Tara Bocker, president of the Yuba-Sutter Farm Bureau, said such requirements as putting all electrical components above flooding level, for example, are impractical.

Even if the engineering is possible, she said, the cost is beyond what most farmers can afford.

"We represent agricultural interests in the Yuba-Sutter region, so we really wanted to be on the forefront of this," she said. "To work and find solutions."

Charlie Mathews, a longtime rice farmer in Hallwood, said the cost can be between \$3,000 and \$10,000 for proving to FEMA that the property isn't at special risk for flooding.

"And if you don't go through the costs to get them to say you're not, you have to pay for special flood insurance," he said.

Under the alliance's proposal for how a special hazard area should be defined — changes requiring legislative approval — such zones should allow replacement or reinvestment of buildings with adequate flood-proofing without elevation and allow federal flood insurance to take some safety measures into account rather than assuming there are none.

U.S. Rep. John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove, has sponsored a bill to give farmers some breaks on federal flood insurance premiums along similar concepts, Mendoza said. The bill's fate is uncertain.

But if the coalition's voice carries enough weight, he said, it can make a difference.

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