

Oroville Series, Part Five: Dredging rivers may cause more damage

YCWA releases study findings, DWR still surveying

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It's a question that's asked by some people every time there's a flood or water worry. This year it was the Oroville Dam spillway crisis and fluctuating water flows.

"Why don't they dredge the river?" If the rivers were deeper, they could safely carry away excess water, couldn't they?

But engineering experts and state Department of Water Resources officials believe dredging could cause more damage than good to the Yuba, Feather and Sacramento rivers.

The Yuba County Water Agency asked its consultants, MBK Engineers, to explore the benefits of dredging the Feather River. The consultants responded Dec. 11 with a memo detailing their finding.

"Dredging is not warranted and would not be a cost-effective method of reducing flood risk for the Feather River," the memo stated. "This is because dredging would not measurably reduce the risk of through- and under-seepage deficiencies throughout the system and the system has adequate freeboard."

The memo states the sediment deposits from 2016-17 flooding, which have received much public attention, are mobile and will redeposit regardless of "sediment removal operations," such as dredging.

Erin Mellon, Department of Water Resources spokeswoman, said DWR representatives have heard sediment buildup concerns from local communities and DWR is conducting surveys to better understand how the rivers have changed.

"During high-water events, rivers will respond in different typical ways; some sections will scour (creating pools), some sections will experience deposition, and the river will tend to try and meander around a bit," Mellon said. "These are natural processes and changes in the river system are expected. Trying to correct these naturally occurring changes may cause more harm than good."

If changes threaten a levee, highway or other infrastructure, she said the state would act to prevent damage from flooding.

Brandon Beach, a spokesman with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers San Francisco District, said dredging is typically used for navigational purposes.

"Using dredging as a means of relieving flooding issues could be considered a practice that the Corps could take on," Beach said.

Another option would be widening riverbanks, he said. The Corps conducts studies to find the most cost-effective method based on the river and its condition, he said.

But local Assemblyman James Gallagher said dredging has become increasingly difficult to accomplish because of environmental restrictions.

“The sediment and debris should be removed for a number of reasons,” he said. “For starters, it restricts channel capacity. Just drive over the Nicolaus Bridge and you can see the problem is obvious. Second, the river is less navigable and more dangerous. And the fishing guides tell me the boat ramps are silted in.”

He said a downriver coalition has been urging DWR to remove the silt and debris at 33 key locations. He said he doesn't believe dredging to be too expensive, but is waiting for a cost estimate from DWR.