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GAO Report: FEMA Floodplain Policy Should Change to Lessen Impact on Agricultural Communities

A report from the Government Accounting Office recommending policy changes to lessen the impact of federal floodplain regulations on farming operations and rural communities is the result of advocacy by the Agricultural Floodplain Management Alliance, an organization with its genesis in Sutter County.

AFMA has been working with representatives of rural communities across the United States, with the elected representatives from those communities, and with staff from the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) to change existing policies which threaten rural areas where farming is the chief segment of the local economy.

AFMA is a coalition of local governments, flood control districts, farmers and ranchers, and community groups from across the nation which is working to reform floodplain rules they say are threatening the economic viability of agriculture. AFMA came into being at the suggestion of Sutter County supervisors Stanley Cleveland Jr. and James Gallagher, after it became apparent a new FEMA floodplain designation in the southern third of Sutter County was creating economic difficulty for agricultural producers.

In 2010, Supervisor Cleveland raised the issue with FEMA as a speaker at the California Floodplain Manager's Conference in San Diego.

Supervisor Gallagher, whose district includes the most impacted agricultural communities in Sutter County, is a founding member of AFMA's Board of Directors and was its first chairman.

"This study validates everything we've said in Sutter County: the new regulations and insurance rates will have a devastating effect on agriculture in California and throughout the nation," Cleveland said, noting AFMA was formed as a direct response to the concerns raised in

Sutter County, and praising California Senator Dianne Feinstein, Congressman John Garamendi, and Congressman Doug LaMalfa for responding to the concerns by requesting the GAO study.

“This study confirms that FEMA’s floodplain rules need to be updated and reformed to support agricultural uses. Policy makers agree that agriculture is the safest and wisest use of the floodplain, but we need reforms to make sure that such uses remain viable into the future,” said Supervisor Gallagher.

In 2008, FEMA re-mapped the southern third of Sutter County, east of the Sutter Bypass, into a Special Flood Hazard Area, requiring flood insurance and imposing new building restrictions on almost all structures. FEMA’s action came in response to the state of California’s decision not to certify that its levees in Sutter County could withstand a storm with a one percent chance of occurring in any given year (100-year flood).

As the GAO report noted, the FEMA regulations are particularly burdensome on Central Valley farmers behind levee systems. While the chance of flooding is rare, FEMA flood maps require buildings to be raised to elevations as high as 15 feet in some cases--or made water tight--if they are constructed new or are substantially improved, making the construction or improvement of agricultural buildings unaffordable and impractical.

Sutter County remains committed to providing 100-year flood protection to the entire Yuba City basin to restore less expensive insurance options and more flexible building rules. This is the goal of the West Feather River Levee Improvement Project now underway. However, for communities outside the basin including Pleasant Grove, Rio Oso and Nicolaus, which have already been remapped, and Meridian and Robbins, which are in process of being re-mapped, these reforms are a matter of necessity

"Our rural communities need relief," Gallagher said.

The GAO report recommended FEMA update existing guidance to include additional information on and options for mitigating the risk of flood damage to agricultural structures to reflect recent farming developments and structural needs in vast and deep floodplains. As soon as the report was released, Senator Feinstein and Congressmen Garamendi and LaMalfa co-authored a letter to FEMA requesting policy changes be made within a year.

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