

Skagit Valley Herald

Fine tuning Reduced flooding impact

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MOUNT VERNON – The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has done some “fine tuning” to Skagit County’s proposed flood control plan to an attempt to reduce the impact to the Clear Lake/Nookachamps area.

In addition, the Corps has proposed eliminating the somewhat controversial weir structure.

Vernon Cook, Corps project manager, said flood control plan 3E is still the most viable plan, but several new flood reduction measures have been added.

Cook presented the latest proposals to a group of Clear Lake/Nookachamps residents last night. Those present, however, still weren’t convinced they could live with the project. In a vote following the meeting, 39 of 42 voted against the project. No one voted in favor of it.

The major change in the Corps’ plans is a proposal to extend a levee around Clear Lake, providing 100-year protection to that community.

All houses outside the protected area that might be adversely impacted by the project would be raised above the 100-year flood plain, Cook said. This would prevent residences from incurring flood damage as a result of the project, he said.

In cases where it would not be economically feasible to raise the house, the owner would be bought out, he said.

The weir, a cement structure that acts as a metering device to allow a controlled overflow of water, has been deleted from the latest plans. The weir was planned between Burlington and Sedro-Woolley.

In its place would be a constricted opening bordered by rocks to prevent erosion. Toward the Samish area, pilings would be inserted into the ground to control erosion. These measures would accomplish the same purpose as the weir, Cook said.

Although the cost of the project with the new additions hasn’t been determined yet, Cook said. It might be somewhat less than the currently projected \$55 million. Elimination of the weir structure, which would cost about \$5 million, is the main reason for the possible decrease.

“The big picture hasn’t changed,” he said. “There’s just been some fine tuning.”

He added the Corps will continue to make minor adjustments, but thinks the major ones have been taken care of.

But opposition can still be expected from Clear Lake/Nookachamps residents who have fought the project all along.

As originally proposed, plan 3E allows possible increased flooding in the

Clear Lake/Nookachamps area. At a 100-year flood level, the project would increase the water level from zero to two feet above current levels, depending on the location.

Although residents of the Clear Lake community would now be protected by a levee, they chose to support farmers in the outlying areas who still would be impacted.

Residents of the unprotected areas did not savor the idea of their homes being raised any higher. They also noted no flood protection is available for their livestock. Existing livestock mounds would be raised, but local farmer Larry Kunzler said this would affect only one farmer.

The Corps might have been able to sell its plan if some protection for livestock was proposed, Kunzler said.

The Nookachamps group already has retained attorneys to battle implementation of the project.

They weren't satisfied with earlier announcements that the county would have to obtain flowage easement rights from impacted residents. Under this system, property owners would be reimbursed for any reduced property value as a result of the project.

The flood control project would provide 100-year flood protection to Mount Vernon and Burlington, and 50-year protection to rural areas.

The entire project still must be authorized by Congress. Funds also must be appropriated by Congress and raised locally, most likely through a countywide election to sell bonds. This whole process could take more than two years, county officials say.