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Bear River flood control project saluted

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It's never too late to salute a stellar flood control and environmental project.

So two years after completing a \$62 million project on the Bear River 30 miles north of Sacramento, state and local agencies met at the site again.

This time, they helped River Partners, a Chico-based nonprofit, observe its 10th year of restoration efforts in the state.

The site of the ceremony, which included River Partners' millionth tree planting, was no accident. Portions of Yuba County were hit hard by floods in 1986 and 1997, and the Bear River project eased those concerns with what is being hailed as a model for the rest of the state.

Instead of a narrower river channel, now there is a half-mile-wide levee setback along a two-mile stretch on the north side of the Bear River.

The project, supported by state grants and development fees, blended flood protection with 600 acres of new habitat for native wildlife, including the Swainson's hawk, a threatened species, and chinook salmon.

And it gave the river a wider berth during periods of heavy flow, reducing potential for backup and flooding upstream.

"It's really, in my opinion, the crown jewel of the levee systems being built today," Paul Brunner, executive director of the Three Rivers Levee Improvement Authority, said in a telephone interview.

The Riparian Habitat Joint Venture, a coalition of state and federal agencies and nonprofits, gave the Bear River project and its creators its Flagship Award on Wednesday.

The award designated the project as a model within the state, said John Carlon, president of River Partners, which also did the main restoration work at the Bear River site.

To avoid seepage problems common to levees, the Bear River project uses less porous, clay-like soils.

For the past two years, River Partners has been irrigating and maintaining the site as part of its multiyear commitment.

"It's a project that improves public safety and creates wildlife habitat and is also cost-effective," Carlon said. "It will reduce operating and maintenance costs on the levees for years to come."

The Bear River setback and restoration constitute the first of three area river projects galvanized by flood threat.

The Three Rivers Improvement Authority broke ground in May on the largest, the Feather River setback and restoration just north of the Feather's confluence with the Bear.

That setback will bring the levee up to a half-mile east of its current location along a six-mile stretch as part of a \$192 million endeavor. It is set for completion next year.

Design work has begun for the Yuba River project, which will involve levee improvements but not a setback. Construction is expected to begin next year.

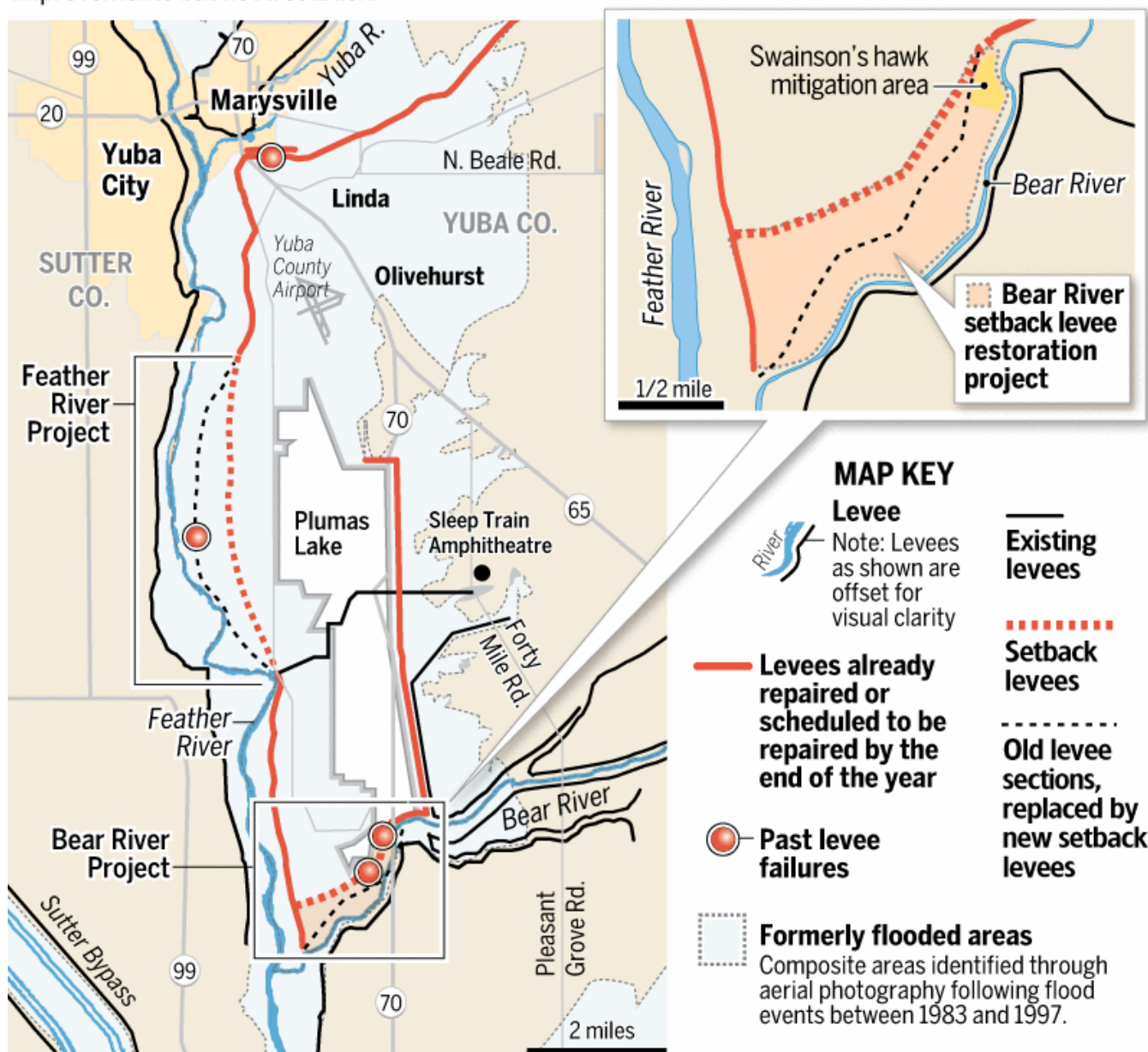
When finished, the region so long vulnerable to flooding should enjoy 200-year flood protection from the three rivers.

That translates into an ability to withstand a storm that has a half-percent chance of striking in any given year, well above the 100-year FEMA certification threshold.

Call The Bee's Loretta Kalb, (916) 478-2860.

FIGHTING YUBA COUNTY FLOOD THREATS

The Bear River levee setback and restoration, completed two years ago, is being hailed as a model for combining flood protection and habitat support. The effort is being mirrored along the Feather River, where work began in May. Design work has begun for the Yuba River, which will involve levee improvements but not a setback.



Sources: River Partners; Three Rivers Levee Improvement Authority

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