

Contra Costa County begins flood prevention work

Wildcat creeks. (KGO-TV)

Tuesday, August 29, 2017 05:11PM

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY, Calif. --

As families in Houston seek shelter from the flooding left behind by Hurricane Harvey, local officials in North Richmond are gathered in a creek bed, where they appear to be gardening.

"It's gonna be bit by bit to remove these," said Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, as he snipped thick vines with a large pair of shears.

The two places seem to be worlds apart -- but they're closer than you might think.

"This whole area used to be covered with ivy," said the county's deputy public works director, Mike Carlson. "Ivy is an invasive species, so it's restricting the flood flow."

Removing the ivy is the first step in a levee improvement project designed to prevent flooding like what's happened in Houston, and also like what happened last winter in San Jose.

"As we see what's happening on the gulf coast, it makes us realize that this preparation is so important," Gioia said. "We're gonna see more of these extreme events because of climate change. It's already beginning to happen."

Over the next two years, Contra Costa County will raise the levees a foot and a half across a two-mile stretch of Wildcat and San Pablo Creeks.

"It may not seem like a lot, but it's \$1.7 million worth of work to get that

done," Carlson said.

Gioia added, "That 18 inches could provide the difference between a house or property being flooded or not. So that's a huge impact on the lives of people who live here."

Some of those people have lived in North Richmond all their lives, and remember the floodwaters that wrought havoc here in the 1950s and 1960s.

"The poorly constructed levees, which gave way each year under heavy rains and floating debris," recalled one longtime resident. "The North Richmond streets became rivers of rushing water that lasted for days."

Neighbors and local leaders spoke at a groundbreaking near the spot where the two creeks meet, at the Urban Tilth North Richmond Farm. Urban Tilth is a non-profit organization that employs at-risk youth and also grows fresh produce to feed the community. Urban Tilth says it plans to recruit 12 teens for living-wage jobs restoring the watershed around the improved levees -- a state requirement to offset the project's environmental impact.

"It's a win-win situation," said Urban Tilth's executive director, Doria Robinson. "Instead of contracting out to people from other communities, we're actually going to re-invest that money in our local youth."

Local leaders say the wheels for this project were set in motion when regulators ordered a re-assessment of levee systems in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. According to FEMA's revised flood maps, some residents of North Richmond would be required to pay higher flood insurance premiums unless the levees are raised.

Although the project will cost taxpayers \$4 million to complete, county officials estimate it could reduce the community's insurance bill by as much as \$500,000 a year.