

For a Flood-Weary Napa Valley, A Vote to Let the River Run Wild

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A good 64 inches of rain has pelted this valley of fine wine and pursuers of the sublime since last July. So last month, in the middle of yet another El Nino-driven storm, Napa Valley residents went to the polls and decided to do something about it.

By a two-thirds majority, Napa County voted to raise taxes to pay for ripping out its flood-control system, allowing the near-dead Napa River to return to life and run wild for much of its 55 miles. After suffering 27 floods in less than 150 years, with flood controls, the Napa Valley now will take a chance with unfettered nature.

In a state where virtually every major river is shackled by a dam, pinched by levees or siphoned for use by distant cities, the vote in Napa amounts to a call for revolution in the nation's war against high water.

By voting to let the river run free, reclaiming much of its own meandering path, Napa residents have also steered the Army Corps of Engineers, an agency that usually acts like the orthodontists of nature, on a new path.

"What we will be doing in Napa is radically different from anything we have ever done before," said Jason Fanselau, a Corps spokesman in Sacramento. "It's going to totally change the way we do business."

Under the Napa plan, some of the dikes and levees built to keep the river in a straight channel -- largely without success -- would be lowered or removed. Bridges that block the flow of high water would be raised or torn down. People living in areas that regularly flood would be bought out and asked to move. About 600 acres of low-lying land would be given back to the river, as wetlands. The river's water will go where it usually goes in floods, but in the future nobody will live there.

In Napa, the change is coming from voters; three times in the last 22 years, the county has voted down Corps proposals for expanding its traditional concrete-walled flood control system. But the engineers are also undergoing a rethinking of their own.

Since the epic Mississippi River floods in 1993, the Corps has taken a long second look at its century-old efforts to hold back flooding rivers with dams, levees, diversions and drainage ditches. A levee system unrivaled by anything but the Great Wall of China has not only failed to keep the Mississippi between its banks, but also made floods downriver more severe by blocking natural outlets for the rising waters.

Rather than rebuilding old, flooded structures, Federal authorities have been buying up property in the Mississippi flood plain. But the new philosophy has yet to penetrate all of Congress -- where the California delegation has been trying to get money for at least one new billion-dollar dam -- nor until the Napa vote had it been tested at the ballot box.

The Napa plan is the most systematic effort in the country to try what is known as the "living rivers" approach to improve flood control. In South Florida, the Corps is similarly dismantling dikes and dams, but in an effort to restore the Everglades.

The Napa Valley's existing network of braces, dikes and levees, while protecting some people from flooding, sends so much water downstream so quickly that it always manages to spill over somewhere.

The plan now is to combine ecology and engineering. Some dikes and reservoirs will be strengthened to slow the river in crucial places. But dredging and straightening the riverbed will be largely abandoned, and in other sections, the river will be allowed to widen during floods, filling the marshlands south of the city of Napa. These restored wetlands will work as a sponge, the thinking goes.

The cost, over 20 years, will be \$220 million, half paid by the Federal Government, and half coming from a half-cent rise in the county sales tax and from the state.

To many who live in Napa, the most famous wine-growing region in the United States, the price is a bargain. Floods from the last 40 years have cost more than \$500 million in property damage.

"For over a century, we have fought a losing battle against the Napa River," city officials wrote in a voters guide published before last month's election. "We have failed because we didn't respect the river's natural tendencies."

California requires a two-thirds majority to raise the local sales tax. The vote in Napa just made that threshold, getting 68 percent, or 308 votes more than needed, out of more than 27,000 cast. Opponents of the measure, who did not mount an organized campaign, worried that the plan would not offer enough certainty for future years.

The plan seems radical because it calls on people to trust that a raging, chocolate-colored river, if allowed to reclaim its old floodplain, will ultimately provide more protections than the existing network of levees, decades of dredging or a plan once backed by the Corps to line the river with concrete.

"It will require us to go wider instead of deeper," said Paul Bowers, the Corps of Engineers official who will co-manage the project with the county. "That was the biggest issue: Will people be able to give up that much land to restore a river?"

Napa County officials say they will buy out several businesses, a trailer park, some warehouses and about 16 houses. They will raise bridges that

have served as blockage points to high-charging rivers. Most of the farmland, from high-quality vineyards on down, will stay just that, subject to floods in the dormant season in winter, but dry in California's typical eight rainless months.

But some farmland will be bought. Joe Ghisletta 3d, whose family has owned farmland in Napa Valley for nearly a century, will sell 68 of the family's 192-acre hay farm to the county; it will revert to a marsh.

"I think over all the whole plan is going to be a blessing for this valley," Mr. Ghisletta said.

Tourism is big business in the valley, which gets about five million visitors a year. The constant television images in recent years of couches floating down the Napa River, or people taking rowboats to flooded homes, are not considered the best advertising.

"Image is everything in this valley," said Moira Johnston Block, president of Friends of the Napa River, a citizens group that was instrumental in bringing the living river plan to the table. "The floods have been the most ongoing, negative image. Some of the winemakers saw this plan as image protection."

During the campaign, most of the vineyards promoted the plan. But despite the weekend traffic jams of limousines touring the wine country, Napa is much more than the gilded valley that tourists perceive, Ms. Johnston Block said. The city of Napa, where 70 percent of the voters live, is largely blue collar, and the county is full of fifth-generation farmers who live by the whims of weather.

David Prewitt, who lives in a trailer park that is to be moved, said he had to abandon the park in January and February because of high water. A 20-year resident of Napa, he said he generally favored the plan.

"They had to do something," Mr. Prewitt said, sitting in the bright sunshine of a day when Napa's hills were brilliant green from the rains. "They've dredged this river time and again, and put up flood walls, and still it always seems to go over its banks."

Whether other communities will adopt the Napa plan is uncertain. To the east, the Sacramento River and its side creeks are lined by more than 1,000 miles of levees, protecting much of the city of Sacramento. But new housing developments are planned for areas that have seen frequent floods over the last two decades, and business leaders are promoting a large dam for the American River, saying it will allow the Sacramento area to grow.

Nationally, reimbursing people for flood damage costs about \$5 billion a year, from disaster aid and related help. The Army Corps of Engineers, the agency charged with flood protection, seems committed to the new direction.

"Napa will be the showcase, because there's nothing quite like it anywhere in the country," said Homer Perkins, a spokesman for the Corps in Washington.

The test for Napa will come 10 years or so down the road, when the living river plan is complete. Ms. Johnston Block said she had an image of a benign river: "You will see a living river, a restored river downtown, with marshes and wildlife on one side and latte and wine on the other."

The Corps is more prosaic. "I think, 5 to 10 years from now, when it starts to rain in the winter, people will be able to sleep at night," Mr. Bowers said.

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