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LAIRD HONORED FOR ROLE IN MAKING LONG OVERDUE LEVEE PROJECT POSSIBLE

WATSONVILLE, CA – The New Year started off right for the communities of Watsonville and Pajaro. On January 1, Senate Bill 496 became law, authorizing the CA Department of Water Resources to fund 100 percent of the non-federal cost share – or about \$140M – for the US Army Corps of Engineers’ Pajaro River Flood Risk Management Project. On January 12, the Pajaro Regional Flood Management Agency (PRFMA) – a joint powers authority responsible for reducing flood risk in the lower Pajaro River Region – will honor Senator John Laird for authoring and steering the bill to approval without a single dissenting vote during a challenging 2021 legislative session.

“Our community has been waiting 60 years for this project, but to ask two disadvantaged communities to shoulder the burden of local costs wasn’t possible or feasible,” said PRFMA Board Chair and Santa Cruz County Supervisor Zach Friend. “But, when we turned to the State for assistance and emphasized our shared vision for the equitable delivery of public safety projects to disadvantaged and historically underserved communities, Senate Bill 496 became the result. Without question, SB 496 makes the project possible and, as a result, we are on course to become a more flood-resistant community.”

The \$400M project, which is currently in the early design and environmental permitting stages, will shore up levees along the lower Pajaro River and Salsipuedes and Corralitos Creeks. Currently, the federal levee system along these waterways only provides an eight-year level of flood protection, among the lowest of any federal system in California. The communities this system protects have survived six floods since the levees were first built in 1949, most significantly in 1995 when flooding caused more than \$95 million in damages and two deaths. Levees nearly broke again in the federally declared storm disasters in early 2017.

“No community should live in fear of flooding,” said Laird. “SB 496 brings the communities of Watsonville and Pajaro one step closer to a flood-ready future, and I thank our local leaders for their diligence in supporting this important community safety measure. I am an eager partner in efforts to prevent harm to community residents and strengthen desperately needed infrastructure.”

The costs for ongoing and future levee operations and maintenance remains a local obligation. In fact, the state and USACE will require assurances that the levees will be maintained to strict federal regulations as a condition of funding agreements. PRFMA will take over responsibility for levee operations and maintenance for its member agencies, a move that’s expected to result in consistent maintenance standards and long-term cost efficiencies. PRFMA plans to propose a property assessment to adequately fund these required services. More information will be shared in coming months.

For more information, visit www.prfma.org, or contact Mark Strudley at 831-201-2778.

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PRFMA is a joint powers authority of the County of Santa Cruz, the Santa Cruz County Flood Control and Water Conservation District, the County of Monterey, the Monterey County Water Resources Agency, and the City of Watsonville. Formed in 2021, the agency will plan, finance and implement projects and programs to reduce flood risk from the lower Pajaro River and its tributaries in Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties.