

Headlight- Herald

SERVING TILLAMOOK COUNTY, OREGON, SIN

9, No. 28

www.TillamookHeadlightHerald.com

December 13, 2006

County seeking aid to fix lengthy levee breach at Josi farm

By JOE HAPP
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TILLAMOOK — County officials this week asked the state for help to repair a 500-foot breach in a Wilson River levee on the Josi farm.

"This should not be construed as us fixing a private levy," said County Commissioner Mark Labhart. "This needs to be done to protect public infrastructure."

Officials said the breach, which occurred during record-level flooding on the Wilson Nov. 6, sent water flowing through pastures on the Josi and other nearby dairy farms and dumped large amounts of it into the Dougherty and Hoquarton sloughs, inundating businesses along North U.S. 101.

Labhart said the flooding

caused a section of Wilson River Loop to be closed at the same time U.S. 101 was closed.

The situation made it impossible to make milk deliveries to the Tillamook County Creamery Association plant on U.S. 101 for a time, causing several local dairymen to dump milk. In addition, ambulance service north of Tillamook was cut off while both roads were closed.

Two of the three commissioners, Labhart and Commissioner Charles Hurliman, voted on the request. Commissioner Tim Josi was not present and would have had a conflict of interest because the levee is located on a farm operated by his brothers.

Hurliman also had a personal

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conflict — his wife is the Josi's sister — but County Management Analyst Paul Levesque said he could vote under Oregon's ethics law if there otherwise would not be a quorum. The law, however, precluded Hurliman from taking part in discussion of the matter, Levesque said.

County Emergency Management Director Tom Manning told the commissioners he believes repairing the levee "is something that needs to be done." To bolster his point, he noted that officials of the National Weather Service have predicted a "typical significant risk of additional flooding in Tillamook County this winter."

Leo Kuntz, who owns Nehalem Marine and is considered an expert on local rivers and wetlands, said the breach is 16 to 20 feet above the level of the North 101 business district and that further flooding in the area would cause serious problems. He said water that escapes from the river channel at the Josi farm can't re-enter the channel downstream because dikes and levees there are too high.

"I think a nuisance flood will overwhelm it," Kuntz said.

Manning said the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which inspected the levee last week, has said it has no money to fund repairs. But, Manning said, if the White House issues a disaster declaration, the county could be eligible for Federal Emergency Management Agency funds for repairing damaged public infrastructure. In that case, he said, FEMA would pay 75 percent of the cost of the repairs.

No word is expected on a presidential declaration until sometime around Christmas. Without it, the county would be liable for the cost.

In a related development, Gov. Ted Kulongoski on Monday officially requested a presidential declaration covering Tillamook, Lincoln, Clatsop and Hood River counties.

"Given the amount of damage, we need the federal government to partner with us so our communities can begin to rebuild their homes, businesses and roads, and to help us mitigate damage from future flooding or other natural disasters," the governor told FEMA.

In addition, the governor announced that he is asking the Small Business Administration for a "physical disaster declaration" for Tillamook County, which would make low-interest loans available for homeowners and businesses that suffered damages.

County and city officials have estimated the damages from November's flooding at \$12.5 million.

Manning and Kuntz said the cost of repairing the Josi levee could run anywhere from \$120,000 to \$200,000 depending on a number of factors, including the cost of materials and trans-

portation.

County Treasurer Karen Dye said the county does have money in a contingency fund for situations like this.

"But, if it goes higher than \$200,000," she said, "we would have a greater challenge than if the cost were around \$100,000. It's better if we have FEMA's help."

Labhart said officials are hoping they can get 6,000 cubic yards of rock left over from a road project on SR 6, east of Tillamook, donated by the contractor. Officials are also hoping for any kind of help they can get from the Oregon Department of Transportation and the Oregon National Guard.

Labhart pointed out that Congress last week adjourned without reauthorizing Rural Schools and Secure Communities funding, leaving what he called a "\$600,000 hole" in the county's road budget.

Manning said Corps officials told him that repairing the levee would not do any damage to the area, but could not be considered a long-term solution to the county's flood problems.