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Critics rip federal flood study

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SEBASTOPOL — Federal emergency officials Monday unveiled a new flood study that critics say is riddled with errors.

The study repeats the long-standing view that the Laguna de Santa Rosa floods because water backs up from the rain-swollen Russian River. But the activists and a water resources consultant argue that during the 1986 Valentine's Day flood, the record amount of water came from upstream, not the river.

At stake is how much protection the Federal Management Flood Agency will provide for the laguna, a long-neglected waterway that activists and some city officials now are trying to restore.

The outcome of the federal study also will determine the stringency of building regulations in the lower areas of Sebastopol along the laguna.

Cynthia McKenzie, a representative for the federal agency, said officials concluded the laguna acts more as a storage basin during storms than a "floodway" or drainage channel. As such, the waterway is exempt from stringent regulations that would prohibit any added fill without removing an equal amount of dirt elsewhere in the flood plain.

Kim Cordell, a water resources consultant in Occidental, argued the study is contradictory in its conclusions for flooding. She said federal engineers have yet to make any hydrological studies of the laguna based on the type of flood that hit in 1986 — an intense storm from the south rather than a weather front coming down from the North Coast.

McKenzie acknowledged the laguna may need further study. Criticized for holding the public meeting on a weekday morning, she agreed to return for a second hearing at a yet-to-be-determined date.

"I have to admit this is the most interest any community has shown

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in a long time," McKenzie said.

Richard Nichols of the watchdog group Sebastopol Tomorrow called the study "so inaccurate it's almost pointless" and out of step with the town's "political realities."

"This doesn't cut it," Nichols said. "This isn't even close to what Sebastopol is talking about."

Nichols would prefer the floodway designation for the entire Laguna to provide another level of protection for the waterway.

If adopted, the study would drop the level of the theoretical 100-year flood by one foot to 75 feet elevation. Sebastopol officials nonetheless said they would continue to designate the flood level at 76 feet. Under city rules, the bottom floor of any new building must be built above that height.

City Manager Mel Davis said the water reached a height of 74.5 feet in the 1986 flood.

"That's awfully close for comfort," Davis said.