



Pictured: A map of the Soap Lake Floodplain. Above right and inset below: January 2023 flooding at SBALT's Soap Lake Ranch Conservation Easement and surrounding lands. Photo by Bob Connolly.

SBALT NEWS

Soap Lake Ranch provides flood resilience

By Lynn Overtree
SBALT Executive Director

The Carmel River came through my home in the early hours of February 3, 1998. At the same time, the town of Pajaro, near Watsonville, was entirely evacuated. The 1995 floods were worse; they flooded all the residences and businesses in Pajaro, and two people lost their lives.

For decades, efforts have been made to reduce the risk of flooding in the communities of Watsonville and Pajaro, near the mouth of the Pajaro River. A key element in managing the volume of water deposited in these towns is the capacity of the Soap Lake Floodplain, in northern San Benito and southern Santa Clara counties, to capture and slow the water before it funnels through the Hwy 129 corridor to Pajaro Valley.

“Natural floodplains provide flood risk reduction benefits by slowing runoff and storing flood water,” states Shawn Novack, Water Conservation Program Manager for the Water Resources Association San Benito County. “Floodplains allow floodwaters to spread out and temporarily store excess water. One acre of floodplain one foot deep holds approximately 330,000 gallons of water.”

SBALT supports agriculture as the optimal land use in the Soap Lake Floodplain area. We offer financial incentives to willing landowners who extinguish their development rights. The Soap Lake Ranch conser-



vation easement is one such project. Rain that falls in Pacheco Pass drains to the ranch at the convergence of Pacheco Creek, Tequisquita Slough, and Ortega Creek.

Dave Brigantino, one of the Soap Lake Ranch landowners, says, “I think that with the recent storms, we all have seen and can appreciate the value of preserving our flood plains. San Felipe Lake (Soap Lake) and surrounding north San Benito County lands provide a place to store and meter out water from excessive rainfall while providing habitat for wildlife.”

By preserving our agricultural lands, we recharge our groundwater and reduce the flood risk to our downstream neighbors. When land is converted to homes, we lose these benefits and increase the number of structures at risk of flooding.

Soap Lake Ranch is a privately owned cattle operation and is not open to the public. However, the entire watershed benefits from its conservation. Learn more or donate to SBALT here: www.sanbenitolandtrust.org. ■



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Grandmother overhearing 9-year-old grandson playing Xbox online:

Are you white? Oh, because I'm Mexican. I'm not racist; I love everybody. ■