

January 22, 1997

Officials urge improvements in mapping of state's vast floodplains

By John Howard
Associated Press

SACRAMENTO — State officials said Tuesday they need to improve the mapping of California's far-flung floodplains, even as the first major flood-linked lawsuit was filed against the state.

The enormous volume of water that surged through northern and central California rivers during the first week in January broke levees and inundated nearly 300 square miles, state water officials said Tuesday.

Damage was "more widespread than the 1986 flood and more widespread than any floods in recent history," Ray Hart, deputy chief of the state Water Resources Department, told a Senate committee.

Gov. Pete Wilson's top environmental adviser said the amount of water was unprecedented in California.

"This was an event of record, in terms of its hydrological impact. It was also an event of re-

cord, in terms of the people evacuated," said Resources Secretary Douglas Wheeler.

The water, including runoff from deep Sierra snows melted by unseasonably warm temperatures, destroyed or damaged at least 16,000 homes, killed eight people and caused an estimated \$1.6 billion in damages. The estimate of losses is still being tallied.

On Tuesday, the Senate housing committee heard testimony

on flood damage, while minutes later the Wilson administration's top water and environmental officials briefed reporters on the flood cleanup.

Ray Barsch, general manager of the State Reclamation Board, said the system of "flood mapping" — drawing the lines on a map that describe the anticipated movement of floodwater — needs to be improved and expanded.

The goal of the flood mapping

is to "assure the safe passage of floodwater from a 100-year event," Barsch said.

Local officials believe the maps are extremely helpful in flood planning.

"If it had not been for the maps, the damage would have been more severe," said Jeff Redding of the County Planning Directors Association.

Barsch said the program has been crippled since 1988 by limited funding.