

Text of Perspective, KQED 19 October 2005

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<http://www.kqed.org/epArchive/R510190737>

The California Reclamation Board oversees flood control for much of the Central Valley. After Hurricane Katrina, the Board began asking hard questions about proposed new development in floodplains behind fragile levees. The cities of Stockton, Oakley and Lathrop propose thousands of new homes below sea level in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, many on lands that flooded in 1997. The Reclamation Board questioned these developments and demanded engineering studies to prove they would be safe.

Then, Governor Schwarzenegger fired the entire Reclamation Board. He appointed new and inexperienced members, mostly tied to development and agricultural interests, interests that contribute heavily to his campaigns. The result could have serious consequences for California.

The first principle in flood management should be that we *not* put people in harm's way. Hundreds of horrible deaths in New Orleans are ample proof that it's a bad idea to put people in any floodplain, but especially below sea level. Any levee failure can cause almost instant inundation, with little warning. And eventually levees are sure to fail.

Those who died in New Orleans probably assumed that government wouldn't let them live there unless it was safe. We expect government to draw on scientific expertise to identify hazardous lands and prohibit building there. Yet Mr. Schwarzenegger chose this moment to neuter the one state agency facing up to the problem in California.

We risk not just human tragedy, but the water supply for 20 million people and a multi-billion dollar economy. Stormwater from new development in the Delta will pollute drinking water supply, and to reduce flood hazard, lower lake levels behind upstream dams will be required, reducing water storage.

The Reclamation Board was right to ask hard questions and assert the state's responsibility to prevent the same folly here that ravaged New Orleans. Mr. Schwarzenegger was wrong to fire that Board, wrong to endanger our people and our water supply. The developers will tell us they can engineer away all these problems. But where will they be when a levee fails anyway? For that matter where will Mr. Scharzenegger be?

With a Perspective, I'm Matt Kondolf.