

Water Hazard

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This week's deluge in New England reminds us that the destructive force of floodwaters is hardly a danger exclusive to the Gulf Coast. Yet parochial interests undermine both the defenses our government erects to prevent flooding and the recovery assistance that is needed for when they fail.

The Army Corps of Engineers must learn, or be compelled, to place a higher priority on safety projects than on Congressional pork. At the same time, the government should use its federal flood insurance to encourage safe building, not to subsidize irresponsible development.

The corps changes the courses of rivers, dredges the depths of harbors and builds the walls that protect homes, but it gets its marching orders from members of Congress. They are often more interested in wasteful and unnecessary projects in their individual districts than in enhancing safety and acting responsibly toward the environment on behalf of the nation as a whole.

Senators Russell Feingold and John McCain have sponsored a measure that would bring more accountability to the corps' multibillion-dollar construction budget; they hope to attach it as an amendment to the giant water-resources bill in Congress. Their plan would also require greater independent review of project designs to head off engineering failures like the ones that led to the breach in the New Orleans levees. While it wouldn't solve all of the corps' problems, it would shine more light on an often opaque process, a reform we support.

Federal flood insurance is a necessary buffer for the people whose homes are ruined when disaster strikes. If the system is going to continue, following the \$25 billion in claims the program racked up after Hurricane Katrina and a pair of less destructive storms, change is needed there, too.

The government can start by excluding vacation homes from the subsidized rates. Levees are imperfect, and those living next to them should be required to buy the insurance. Right now, the rules assume that flood walls won't fail. Most of all, rules on new construction in vulnerable areas have to be enforced to ensure that we're not just building the next generation of endangered homes.

Nature's storms seem to be getting fiercer as people are moving closer to harm's way, whether that's along the coast or behind flood walls. Hurricane Katrina made the risks abundantly clear, but our nation has yet to show it's learned the lesson.

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