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January 17, 2006

To the editors:

The editors of Capital Press used the occasion of the recent California Floods to editorialize on the states water and flood control needs (1/13/06 edition). We can all agree with the editorials conclusion: "Now is the time to prepare for what is coming…we need to make sure the state continues to have the water it needs…to grow." In order to achieve water security, CP's editors say that "Additional surface water storage throughout the state will be vital to meet the needs."

This is, of course, the traditional solution. But dams and reservoirs have proven to be inadequate for flood protection and they carry costs – including loss of valuable fisheries and wildlife habitat, historical and archeological resources – none of which were not considered when they were built. For these and other reasons, it is unlikely that many (if any) large, new storage projects will be built in California.

Furthermore, because global warming is reducing the mountain snow pack, California will have trouble keeping its existing reservoirs filled. More water will be dumped in winter to prevent flooding and dam failure and less will be available during the dry summers.

So what is a thirsty state to do?

The answer is all around us if we only look up. Fortunately, California and the rest of the West's mountains are largely covered by forests and forest soils are by far our largest water reservoir. In fact, our forested uplands are already more valuable for the water they store and slowly release than for the timber that has traditionally been the focus of upland economic activity.

But California and the rest of the American West have not yet learned what most of the world understands – that upland forest protection and water security are one and the same. Instead, we are still allowing corporations like Sierra Pacific Industries to clearcut our forested mountains. While science and experience clearly show that industrial logging compacts forest soils and destroying the soils water storage capacity, the political power of Red Emerson's Sierra Pacific Industries is such that politicians not only allow it to continue destroying California's forest reservoir but to get away with claiming that destructive logging is reducing fire danger and increasing water supplies in the bargain.

When will Californians wake up and realize that the key to water security is protecting the forested upland watersheds that store the majority of our water and – when the forests are healthy – release this water slowly over the course of California's long, dry summers? When will we overcome our denial and realize that more dams and surface reservoirs are not the answer?

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