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Editorial: Corps must rethink policy on levee trees

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The Pentagon is not known for its arboreal expertise. Yet as strange as it might seem, the nation's top brass could soon be determining the fate of many forests that line the rivers of California and other states.

Top officials at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are expected to soon decide whether to enact a draconian policy of tree cutting along river levees nationwide. The policy is a misdirected reaction to the flooding of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, which has exposed the Corps and the federal government to unprecedented liability.

In a letter this week, U.S. Rep. Doris Matsui of Sacramento and 16 other members of California's congressional delegation urged Jo-Ellen Darcy, assistant secretary of the Army for civil works, to reconsider this levee vegetation policy, for both economic and environmental reasons.

"The state of California and a number of local governments are in the midst of upgrading hundreds of miles of levees that protect urban cities, rural agricultural areas and the Delta," the member of Congress wrote. "The Army Corps' levee vegetation policy may result in stripping valuable ecosystem habitat from our state, as well as force projects to be redesigned at higher costs to taxpayers."

Trees in the wrong place undoubtedly pose a threat to levee integrity. Yet instead of taking a selective approach, the Corps following Katrina proposed a rigid ban on woody vegetation within 15 feet of levees and flood walls. If enforced nationwide, food districts could be forced to take chain saws to thousands of miles of riparian forest.

The Corps has a variance option, and recently granted one for 42 miles of levees in Natomas under repair by the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency. Yet SAFCA had to spend big bucks obtaining the variance and meeting Corps directives

relating to vegetation. That's money better spent on actual flood control.

Uncertainty over the Corps' vegetation policy has dragged on far too long. Corps leaders need to rethink their policy and restore balance to decisions involving levees and trees. If they won't, the Obama administration should intervene in the name of common sense.

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