

# EDITORIALS

## Nature's little lecture

■ One consequence of the recent floods has been widespread public acknowledgment that the San Joaquin River bottom is no place to build homes.

As the waters from recent flooding recede — however slowly — it is interesting to watch the vacuum they leave fill up with interpretations of the event and its meaning. There is much to be learned from this disaster, and it's encouraging to see so many agencies and institutions already started on that task.

It is less encouraging, though amusing at some level, to see the backing and filling from some in the local development industry, casting a flimsy Orwellian gauze over the scene in an effort to obscure what really happened.

Local and state experts are nearly unanimous in declaring that our understanding of what was possible in a flood on the San Joaquin River was short of the mark of reality. They relied on older estimates of the carrying capacity of reservoirs and the rate at which the snowpack would melt and turn into flood waters.

Floods in 1986 caused experts then to revise existing estimates upward, trying to predict how many acres, and which ones, might be flooded, and how much damage that would cause. "Most of us thought that [1986] was the mother of all storms," one expert said. "The storm that has just been through is significantly greater than '86."

Knowing that now will help those experts — and the elected officials who make the rules about land use — devise even tighter standards for the future. And we know how much more dangerous that future could be

than the vision of its perils we had before this year's monumental storm.

The first step in that direction could come soon, when the Fresno City Council takes up recommendations for updating the city's general plan. There are already strong prohibitions in the general plan against river bottom development. Now there is ample reason to believe that those provisions may need to be made even stronger yet.



Preservationists and supporters of the San Joaquin River Parkway may be excused if they've felt like they were lecturing to an empty hall with their earlier warnings about building homes in the river bottom. Now it's

clear that everyone — outside of some radical thinkers in the local development industry — has begun to understand just how accurate those warnings have been. In letters to the editor, phone calls to The Bee and other media outlets, in talk on the streets and across neighborhood fences, it's the same recognition of danger. That's hardly surprising, given the vivid and frightening pictures and stories emerging from the flood.

If the end result is a wiser, though somewhat sadder, community, then there is a silver lining in this cloud. While we grieve for our neighbors and their losses, and try to help them back to their feet, let's find the wisdom to protect ourselves from a repeat of this catastrophe by preserving the river bottom for the parkway, and finding better places to build homes.