

## **Rhode Island's dangerous dams**

It may have been a good thing that a dam broke in 1998 and sent muddy water cascading through the village of Peace Dale, in South Kingstown. That's when the public discovered that the State of Rhode Island had no dam inspector on the job -- and that many of the state's worst dams had not been inspected since the 1980s.

There are much worse things that can happen when a dam lets go than property damage and a muddy mess, of course. When the South Fork Dam in Pennsylvania broke at 3:10 p.m. on May 31, 1889, it unleashed a torrent that swept away, injured and drowned thousands of innocent victims. When the 1890 Johnstown Flood was over, 2,209 people were dead.

The scale of those disasters is greater than any risk in Rhode Island, but the danger here is real and serious. Concern over the 1998 break led officials to look into the state's dams, and the Governor's Task Force on Dam Safety and Maintenance has come back with a sobering final report.

The report found that a fair number of Rhode Island's dams are over a century old, and that the construction of houses around them has dramatically increased the potential risk of loss of life in a break. "Many of these man-made dams," the report noted, "both public and private, have not been properly maintained through the years and pose a significant threat to public safety and the preservation of the state's natural and recreational resources." Some 16 dams in northern and central Rhode Island have been identified as high hazard: Failure of these dams might kill many people and would certainly do extensive property damage.

The Almond administration deserves credit for taking this seriously, studying the problem and introducing legislation to rewrite the state law on dam safety, which has been in effect since 1890, the year after the Johnstown Flood. The bill would use grants, loans and the permitting process to prod owners to make repairs. The price tag for grants to municipalities and low-interest loans to owners would run some \$28.6 million over five years, put to the voters as a bond referendum on next year's ballot.

Repairing the dams will not be as easy as it sounds, however. Some dam owners protest they do not have the money to make repairs; they would rather drain lakes, which are pleasant public amenities, and take down the dams. Should the state, in a free society, force them to maintain dams, without compensation and against their will? Such details will have to be worked out through hearings and public discussion.

But the state must make sure the old dams that dot Rhode Island will remain sound and not let go. Public safety should be one of government's highest priorities.