

Klamath Basin Coalition Fact Sheet

The Truth About Klamath Project Irrigation Water Deliveries in 2001

The drought and water crisis that struck the Klamath Basin during the summer of 2001 generated a storm of lawsuits and angry protests by irrigators. These highly visible events, which ranged from symbolic “bucket brigades” to anti-government rallies and vandalism of public property, left many onlookers with the impression that irrigators within the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation’s (USBR) massive Klamath Irrigation Project (KIP) experienced a complete shut-off of water deliveries. This is simply not true. While some KIP irrigators suffered during the drought, many were able to irrigate normally. In fact, the KIP experienced only a 33% reduction in normal deliveries during 2001, even in the midst of one of the worst droughts in Project history. Meanwhile, the lakebeds of the Tule Lake and Lower Klamath Lake National Wildlife Refuges—both within the KIP—remained dry and cracked in late summer 2001.

- Even at the best of times, the Upper Klamath Basin is arid, normally receiving only an average of about 12 inches of rainfall each year. During 2001 Mother Nature provided only about 54% of even this normal rainfall in the Upper Klamath Basin, making 2001 the worst drought year in at least 72 years of record-keeping.
- KIP’s total normal irrigation water intake is approximately 450,000 acre-feet (af) of water per year. Before the decision to reduce deliveries, the USBR’s Klamath Basin Pilot Irrigation Demand Reduction Program had paid 162 irrigators \$2.7 million to idle roughly 17,000 acres of irrigated land within the KIP. This reduced demand by roughly 35,000 af, or 7% of total demand even prior to the start of the season. Given this reduction, 415,000 af would have been “normal” irrigation water deliveries in 2001. Here are the numbers:

25%: On April 6, 2001, Vice President Dick Cheney ordered 70,000 af released from Clear Lake Reservoir. In fact, the USBR spilled 107,000 af from Clear Lake at this time to compensate for losses to evaporation and rampant unregulated diversions along the Lost River delivery system (Jim Bryant, USBR).

18%: On July 24, Secretary of the Interior Gail Norton directed a 75,000 af release from Upper Klamath Lake.

24%: Emergency wells authorized and funded after the federal water decision produced at least an additional 100,000 acre-feet of water for the KIP. (Michael Milstein, “Clearing up water issues on Klamath Basin,” *The Oregonian*, August 29, 2001)

Thus, in spite of one of the worst droughts in Klamath Basin history, the KIP still received over 280,000 af of water from reservoirs and wells in 2001, or 67% of what would have been normal water deliveries.

- Roughly 200 KIP farms saw no reduction whatsoever in water deliveries. (Milstein, *The Oregonian*, August 29, 2001)

- Whether affected by the water reduction or not, KIP irrigators split nearly \$40 million in state and federal relief funds in 2001. Some irrigators received hundreds of thousands of dollars in compensation, in some cases more than they would have received in profits from normal year crop sales. The average income from Klamath County's working farms was only about \$35/acre even before the drought, while direct 2001 disaster relief averaged up to \$129/acre.
- The Oregon Department of Employment estimated that only 500 farm operations affected by the water reduction received a majority of their income from agriculture. (Milstein, *The Oregonian*, August 29, 2001)
- There are over 400,000 irrigated acres in the Upper Klamath Basin of northern California and southern Oregon. Of this amount, the KIP covers only roughly 230,000 acres, including commercial leaseland acreage in Tule Lake and Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuges. Water supplies to the 170,000+ acres outside of the KIP were not affected by federal decisions in 2001, but were affected by that year's record drought. (Milstein, *The Oregonian*, August 29, 2001) Even so, these farmers received little media attention or financial relief. Fortunately, many had their own sources of well water independent of any federal irrigation programs, and many in fact sold surplus well water to the Bureau of Reclamation to help make up KIP shortfalls.
- Although some irrigators dependent on the Klamath Irrigation Project certainly suffered serious economic losses during the 2001 drought, and in some cases lost most of their crops, economic losses were nowhere near what was feared or claimed at the time, and in the end KIP irrigators affected by the 2001 drought were more or less fully compensated for their economic losses. However, compensation funds were not equitably distributed, with some landowners getting far more than their share of compensation but many leaseland farmers (as non-owners) getting little or nothing. The fundamental problems of water over-allocation in the Upper Klamath Basin have not been solved, and both future droughts and resulting conflicts over water are inevitable until these problems are resolved. (*Water Allocation in the Klamath Reclamation Project, 2001: An Assessment of Natural Resources, Economic, Social, and Institutional Issues with a Focus on the Upper Klamath Basin*, by Oregon State University Extension Services Special Report 1037 (December 2002)).