

KLAMATH RIVER

THREAT: IRRIGATION WITHDRAWALS, HYDROPOWER DAMS, POLLUTION

SUMMARY

The federal Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) is irresponsibly maximizing irrigation in the Klamath River basin, depleting the river and wreaking havoc on imperiled wildlife, imposing tremendous hardships on Native American and fishing communities. Unless Congress and federal agencies bring water commitments back into balance with what nature can sustain, the nation can expect more tragedies like the staggering die-off of more than 33,000 salmon that occurred last September.

THE RIVER

The Klamath River flows from a broad patchwork of lakes and marshes at the foot of the Cascade Mountains straddling the California-Oregon border, and winds southwest into California. After passing through five hydropower dams, the river reaches the Pacific Ocean south of the fishing community of Crescent City. More than 75 percent of birds migrating on the Pacific Flyway feed or rest in the upper basin, and the largest population of bald eagles in the lower 48 states winters in several national wildlife refuges there.

The upper Klamath basin has been called the "Everglades of the West." However, almost 80 percent of the upper basin's wetlands have been converted to grow thirsty crops such as potatoes, alfalfa, and hay, including nearly 23,000 acres on the Tule Lake and Lower Klamath National Wildlife

Refuges. Irrigation withdrawals and polluted farm runoff combine to make portions of the watershed among the most degraded in Oregon. Diversions from three Klamath River tributaries, the Trinity, the Shasta, and the Scott, exacerbate the river's water shortages. Klamath River salmon runs were once the third-largest

in the nation, but have fallen to just 8 percent of their historic numbers. Coho salmon are so diminished that they are protected under the Endangered Species Act.

THE RISK

In 2002, BOR adopted a new 10-year operating plan for its massive Klamath Irrigation Project. The plan signaled a political decision to maximize irrigation deliveries at any cost and abandoned flow targets that had been set to protect endangered fish. Agency leaders have suppressed biologists' calls for more water in the river and studies substantiating those recommendations. A federal economic analysis concluding that water in the river had eight times the value of water on farm fields was released only after a copy was leaked to the media.

The consequences of allowing politics to trump science were immediately apparent. In September 2002, poor river conditions killed more than 33,000 salmon and steelhead returning to spawn, including hundreds of imperiled coho salmon. This was the worst salmon die-off in the basin's history, including tribal oral histories going back more than 1,000 years.

The damage is more than ecological. Thousands of commercial fishing jobs and \$75 million in annual income have already disappeared, and the BOR operations put the remaining jobs at risk. BOR's failure to honor treaty rights that predate the construction of the irrigation project has imposed enormous cultural and economic hardship on the Native American tribes.

Ecologically-abusive irrigation practices in the river's headwaters are compounded by the presence of five hydropower dams between the agricultural basin and the coast. The dam closest to the river mouth lacks fish ladders or other passage devices and blocks access to more than 100 miles of salmon and steelhead spawning habitat.



U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

THE KLAMATH RIVER BASIN IS A CRITICAL WETLANDS STOPOVER FOR BIRDS MIGRATING ALONG THE PACIFIC FLYWAY.



OREGON NATURAL RESOURCES COUNCIL



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

WHAT CAN BE DONE IN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS

More fish kills, the river's continued decline, and further hardship for coastal fishing communities and Native American tribes are inevitable unless the nation's leaders make a concerted effort to manage irrigation sensibly and return water back to the Klamath River.

The White House-appointed Klamath River Basin Federal Working Group is due to present proposals for resolving this conflict by September 2003. The group should recommend that the federal government help bring water supply and demand back into balance by offering fair prices for water to willing sellers. The Working Group also should call for the end of commercial farming on the national wildlife refuges. These two measures would free up water for the lower river.

The September fish kill revealed the fundamental flaws in BOR's 10-year water plan. BOR should scrap it and start over, basing new operations on the Hardy and Addley Phase II study. This report, prepared by the Department of the Interior in cooperation with state and tribal biologists, recommends more water for salmon but has thus far been suppressed by the Bush administration.

Congress also should pass Rep. Mike Thompson's (D-CA) Klamath River Basin Restoration and Emergency Assistance Act into law. This bill would authorize funds for water conservation and habitat restoration projects and provide compensation for communities affected by the salmon kill of September 2002. The bill also would establish a Klamath Basin Restoration Task Force of conservationists, fishermen, tribal representatives, and farmers to oversee water conservation and restoration activities.

The future of the dams on the Klamath River rests on the outcome of a relicensing process by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which is already underway. PacifiCorp, the utility that owns these dams, should commit to installing fish passage or removing dams to open up blocked spawning habitat, and should also implement other measures to improve water quality in the river when it files its formal license application this year.

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EXCESSIVE IRRIGATION WITHDRAWALS COST THESE FISH THEIR LIVES, AND COST FISHING COMMUNITIES THEIR LIVELIHOODS.

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO TAKE ACTION:
WWW.AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/MOSTENDANGERED/KLAMATH2003.HTM

