

Klamath River Basin

OVERUSE OF RIVER'S RESOURCES IS HURTING FARMERS, FISHERMEN, TRIBES, AND WILDLIFE

Background



AP WIDE WORLD

The Bush Administration diverted Klamath flows in 2002, killing more than 34,000 salmon and steelhead.

fish and inflamed a long-standing water struggle among farmers, Native Americans, and fishermen.

In August 2002, the Bush Administration ignored warnings from tribal, state and federal biologists and drastically cut water flows to the Klamath River, causing the deaths of more than 34,000 migrating salmon and steelhead in the largest recorded fish kill in U.S. history. During this time, and again in 2003, many of the basin's National Wildlife Refuges also were without sufficient water — yet farmers upstream received full water deliveries.

Outstanding Values

Considered the "Everglades of the West," the Upper Klamath Basin once held 350,000 acres of seasonal lakes, freshwater marshes, and wet meadows. It remains a home or stopping ground for 263 bird species, including the largest wintering population of bald eagles in the lower 48 states, and millions of migratory waterfowl. Every fall, nearly 80 percent of the birds migrating along the Pacific Flyway rest and feed in the region's six National Wildlife Refuges. More than 400 wildlife species live here, including sage grouse, pronghorn, and Rocky Mountain elk.

The Lower Klamath Basin encompasses most of the wild Klamath Mountains, world-renowned for extraordinary plant biodiversity including a record 29 species of conifers.

The Klamath River and its tributaries once supported a thriving fishery on the third largest runs of salmon and steelhead in the continental U.S. Today the region's waterways are home to threatened coho salmon and other sensitive fish species such as spring chinook salmon, lamprey, green sturgeon, and the Lost River and shortnose suckers, both endangered species.

Threats — Water Diversion, Loss of Wildlife and Fisheries

Much of the Klamath River Basin's natural water flow is diverted to irrigate crops and pastures. Three-quarters of the arid Upper Basin's wetlands have been converted to agriculture, increasing water pollution and knocking this natural filtration system severely out of balance. Hydroelectric dams on the Klamath permanently block salmon and steelhead from more than 300 miles of habitat and further degrade water quality. Intensive logging and road-building have destroyed salmon streams, increased winter flooding, and further decreased summertime base flows. Taken together, these impacts jeopardize the region's imperiled fish, and have left the basin's National Wildlife Refuges without sufficient water in 7 of the last 12 years.

Low flows kill fish and prevent recovery of the threatened coho salmon and other species. Even before the record fish kill of 2002, the Klamath River experienced springtime kills of tens of thousands of young salmon smolts. Poor water quality and the loss of in-stream and streamside habitat have devastated downriver sport fisheries, whitewater recreation, and commercial salmon fisheries, costing the region 4,000 family-wage jobs and \$80 million per year in economic benefits. Despite federally protected fishing rights, the basin's Native American tribal fisheries also have suffered greatly; today salmon are gone from the upper river, blocked by dams.

Commercial farming with pesticides and chemical fertilizers is still allowed on more than 22,000 acres within the basin's National Wildlife Refuges — the only refuges in the U.S. where row crop farming still occurs on any scale.

Status

In a November 2003 report, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service blamed the 2002 fish kill on extremely low river flows. In January 2003, the California Department of Fish and Game had similarly concluded the federal government's excessive water diversions were the prime cause of the fish kill.

In July 2003, a U.S. District Court declared the Administration's Klamath water plan in violation of the Endangered Species Act because it failed to protect threatened coho salmon, and ordered the plan re-written.

In fall 2002, a federal biologist revealed that the Bush Administration had pressured the federal NOAA Fisheries agency to accept flows they knew were too low to support fish. In July 2003, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that White House political advisor Karl Rove had repeatedly interceded in water management decisions, seeking to exploit the Klamath crisis for political gain.



CHRISTINE AMBROSE

Local activists are organizing against increased logging in the Salmon River watershed, a Klamath tributary.

U.S. Representatives Mike Thompson (D-Calif.) and Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.) introduced legislation in fall 2002 seeking to buy farmland, boost river flows, and aid communities hurt by the salmon kill. In October 2003, Congressman Thompson re-introduced a bill to designate wilderness areas and salmon restoration areas in the basin.

In March 2004, PacifiCorp must apply to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) to renew its license to operate five dams and six powerhouses on the Klamath River. FERC may grant a new license for the next 30 to 50 years or, alternatively, order the decommissioning of facilities and restoration of fish passage.

The U.S. Forest Service has significantly increased logging plans in the basin for 2004, targeting low-elevation big trees and threatening wild salmon spawning and rearing areas. The Forest Service is now planning or implementing 12 timber sales in the area totaling some 20,000 logging trucks full — including logging in designated Wild and Scenic corridors of the Salmon and Scott Rivers, riparian reserves, and active landslide areas.

Recommendations

For the Klamath River Basin to regain its clean, life-sustaining rivers, lakes, and marshes, its remaining wild lands must be protected and its wetlands must be restored.

- To reduce excess irrigation demand and protect National Wildlife Refuges, the federal government should initiate a program to buy land and water rights from willing sellers, to reclaim and restore wetlands, and to phase out commercial farming in the Refuges.
- Federal agencies must guarantee adequate water flows, lake levels, and habitat for the recovery of salmon and other listed species, and for the protection of bald eagles and National

Wildlife Refuges. They should improve water conservation, complete the scientific studies needed to restore salmon fisheries and lake levels, and implement the Trinity River Flow Decision made by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt.

- Federal agencies must respect tribal treaty and reserved rights — water quality and quantity must be ensured for all citizens of the Klamath River Basin.
- Congress should protect roadless forests as wilderness areas. The Forest Service should spend its scarce fuels-reduction funds to protect homes and communities, not log big trees in remote areas.
- To restore salmon in the upper basin, PacifiCorp should construct ladders and fish screens at each facility and remove dams for which effective fish passage is not feasible.

What You Can Do

Please write California's U.S. Senators and ask them to support these important measures to restore the Klamath River Basin.

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