

Water in our Basin



H&N file photo - Political speeches and protests captured national media attention in 2001 when irrigation water was denied to farmers on the Klamath Irrigation Project.

1,300 farmers, three fish and the Klamath River

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An upside down U.S. flag flew at the A-Canal headgates. A line of protestors a mile long passed buckets of water from Lake Ewauna down Main Street and dumped the water into an irrigation canal.

The political speeches and protests captured national media attention. But irrigation water stayed off, and fields in the Klamath Reclamation Project dried up, crops withered and livelihoods were lost.

A drought – and resulting irrigation shut-off – had pitted farmer against environmentalist, tribal member against rancher.

Federal authorities guarded the A Canal headgates while demonstrators camped outside a fence that represented the distance between federal regulation and irrigation water.

That was 2001.

Flash forward nine years.

Water – and who gets how much – is as much an issue today as it was then. The Lost River and shortnose suckers are still endangered, Klamath River flows still impact coho salmon and Chinook salmon downstream, and Tulelake and Klamath basin irrigators still need water.

But today, some say there's hope for compromise and reconciliation.

It comes in a 369-page document called the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement, and a related dam removal deal, the Klamath Hydroelectric Settlement Agreement.

Five hundred people attended the signing of the two documents Thursday at the State Capitol in Salem. Among them were farmers from the Klamath Reclamation Project, Klamath County's three commissioners, Upper Basin ranchers and members of the Klamath Tribes.

The documents aim to restore salmon runs in the Klamath River, stabilize water supplies and power rates for irrigators and restore habitat for wildlife and fish. But their implementation – if legislation passes and funding is provided -- is several years away.

Between now and then, the fear for many remains: Could 2001 happen again? And if it does, are we more prepared to deal with it now than we were then?

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Then & Now

THEN: History of the Klamath Project

Settling the West was an idyllic aim for many pioneers who headed for destinations in Oregon and California, spurred by the promise of land and met with an untamed terrain. It was inviting, but brutal.

Farmers, called by the fertile valleys of the Klamath Basin, settled in. Shortly after, their desire for irrigation gained federal attention, enough that, in 1906, the government began building the Klamath Project.

Canals that now deliver water to the Project — which consists of about 210,000 acres of land in Klamath, Modoc and Siskiyou counties — cut a crosshatch pattern in the agricultural lands. Dams and reservoirs, diversions and drainage make up a complex water delivery and drainage system.

The canals have seen their share of problems, from burrowing squirrels to deteriorating wooden supports. Many of the irrigation canals are now being enclosed to reduce water loss through evaporation and seepage.

Construction of the Klamath Project drew immigrants and the surrounding rural towns began to gain in population. Klamath Falls emerged as the largest town, and increased in population rapidly in the 1920s. Many veterans of World War I and World War II chose the area to start their new civilian lives.

The Klamath Project currently provides water to about 1,300 farms. Traditionally, the lands have been used to produce forage crops such as alfalfa, cereal grains such as barley and oats, and potatoes, as well as supporting livestock pasture.

Source: "The Klamath Project" by Eric A. Stene, published in 1994 by the Bureau of Reclamation History Program available online at www.usbr.gov/projects/Project

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Now: Prioritizing needs according to law

The federal listing of the Lost River and shortnose sucker as endangered species changed everything, although the effect wasn't immediately felt.

The fish were listed in 1988, and it was more than 10 years before anyone really knew what power endangered species designations would have on agriculture in the Klamath Basin.

Then drought, coupled with biological opinions by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, changed things for many Basin irrigators.

More than 1,300 farms depend on water from the Klamath Project. Bureau of Reclamation canal systems connect these farms to water stored at Gerber Reservoir, Clear Lake Reservoir and Upper Klamath Lake, all of which are home to one or more species of endangered Lost River and shortnose suckers.

Downstream, another endangered species, coho salmon, rely on water flowing from the Klamath River to the Pacific Ocean, connecting those fish to breeding grounds.

Demands on Klamath Basin water came to a head in 2001, when water deliveries were shut off for 180,000 acres of farmland and pasture in favor of endangered fish species.

As a federal agency, the Bureau of Reclamation was required by law to follow the Endangered Species Act and the determination of the biological opinions. Each year since, the Bureau has been tasked with balancing the needs of fish and farmer.

Sue Fry, the mid-pacific regional director of the Bureau of Reclamation, said the Klamath Project was built to drain and reclaim lakebed lands in the Lower Klamath Lake and Tule Lake regions, to store the waters of the Klamath and Lost rivers, divert irrigation supplies and control flooding of the reclaimed lands.

“The significant difference in operations now and in the past is concern about the need to protect and restore habitat for endangered species,” she said. “Reclamation now works with other federal, state and local interests in the effort to protect those vital resources.”

Some years, the needs of fish and the needs of farmers are in direct competition.

Updated biological opinions now dictate the amount of water that must be in Upper Klamath Lake, and how much water must flow to the Klamath River, to ensure endangered fish have the water they need for survival. Each year, farmers wait to see how much precipitation winter brings to the Basin.

In 2009, the irrigation season appeared in jeopardy, with irrigation deliveries delayed because of low lake levels. Spring rains brought much needed water and the main gates to the project at the A Canal were opened.

But in Langell Valley, water deliveries stopped early. Half the valley, fed by Clear Lake Reservoir, lost irrigation water before the alfalfa was done growing and cattle were finished grazing for the season. Farmers and ranchers coped as best they could, but many saw their assets depleted.

Fry said the Bureau of Reclamation works with stakeholders in an attempt to reach everyone’s mutual goals.

“The ultimate goal is to fulfill water-user contracts and protect and enhance conditions for fish, wildlife, land and cultural resources,” she said. Those contracts, she said, are written to specify that the irrigation districts which now manage the canal systems will get water “when it is available.”

Throughout the Klamath Basin, the focus has been on increasing irrigation efficiency. The Bureau of Reclamation has provided funding to irrigation districts to enclose more

than 30 miles of open canal. It also provides funding to the Klamath Water and Power Agency to purchase water to supplement irrigation supplies.

Long-term studies are ongoing into an off-stream storage facility, Fry said.

“Any new construction must take benefit and cost into consideration,” she said. “The construction must be proven by science to provide a viable benefit to the Project and be worth the cost to the American taxpayer.”

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Then & Now

Jim Hunter, Klamath Falls Police Chief



H&N photo by Andrew Mariman - Klamath Falls Police Chief Jim Hunter stands near the A Canal head gates on Feb. 2. Hunter was a sergeant in 2001 during the water struggle, and was responsible for helping keep the peace between protesters and federal law enforcement.

Klamath Falls Police Chief Jim Hunter was a patrol sergeant in summer 2001, when irrigation water was shut off to the Klamath Reclamation Project.

He was assigned the task of keeping the peace inside the city limits.

“Law enforcement found itself, as it usually does, in the middle, torn between those persons residing in the community and the federal government,” Hunter recalled. “It was a fine line we walked. You don’t want to pit yourself against the community.”

In his 13 years on the force, he had never seen anything like what he saw that summer. He had seen protests, but never of this magnitude, and not with this level of personal responsibility.

Hunter credited the protesters with preventing any major confrontations, and he said officers knew some acts of civil disobedience had to be tolerated.

In May 2001, thousands of people lined Main Street between the Link River and the A Canal to pass 50 buckets of water in an act of defiance and civil disobedience. That, Hunter said, although illegal, was something local police had no desire to stop.

“If we had tried to shut that down, there would have been a riot,” he said. “There was

no way we were going to try to stop that. It was peaceful and went off without a hitch.”

Hunter identified a few protesters who were more zealous than the rest, encouraging the throng to storm the fences and take the head gates by force.

“My primary concern was one or more of these individuals would enflame or incite other persons so they would actually try it,” he said. “There would have been arrests made, and federal and local law enforcement was sadly outnumbered.”

Today, Upper Klamath Lake levels are dangerously low. Irrigators throughout the Klamath Basin are praying for rain. Hunter joins them.

“Every time it doesn’t snow in winter, I become concerned,” he said. “I pray for snowpack. I am not dependent on water for my livelihood, but I have great understanding of their need.”

City law enforcement is prepared, should a year without water result in more large-scale protests. Hunter is doubtful they would be like the ones in 2001. The head gates have been modified. There is little room left for protesters now.

“I have a hunch protesters may go elsewhere,” he said.

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Then & Now

Dan Keppen, former executive director, Klamath Water Users Association

It was the first time there was no water available for a Bureau of Reclamation project.

Dan Keppen was working for the Bureau of Reclamation in Sacramento at the time, and was asked by the Klamath Water Users Association to come to Klamath County.

It was the first time U.S. citizens got a good look at what could happen to the average farmer when environmental concerns and dueling federal agency opinions coincided with a drought, Keppen said.

Endangered Lost River and shortnose suckers in Upper Klamath Lake needed a certain amount of water to survive, a biological opinion by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said. And the endangered coho salmon needed certain amounts of water to flow out of Upper Klamath Lake into the Klamath River to survive, a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration opinion said.

“By the time the lake levels and downstream flow requirements were met, there was no water left for the farmers,” Keppen said.

Farmers questioned the science behind the biological opinions, even as they gained national media attention with large-scale protests. The media brought political interests,

who pressured then-Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton to solicit a review of the biological opinions by the National Academy of Sciences, Keppen said.

Although vindicated two years later when the National Academy of Sciences determined the science behind the shut-off was faulty, the victory was bittersweet, and the damage had already been done.

The economic impact of the shut-off rippled through the community.

“It showed how important agriculture is to the economy,” Keppen said. “I think agriculture has always been a part of this economy, but a lot of times I think people take food for granted. With the water gone, and the ripple effect through the economy, it made people realize how important water is.”

It also made Klamath County, for better or worse, a poster child for water conflict in the West, Keppen said.

Today, what happened to Klamath Basin farmers in 2001 is being replayed in the Central Valley in California, where half the nation’s produce is grown. Three years of poor precipitation resulted in water deliveries from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta being limited by federal regulations aimed at protecting fish.

Keppen said with the recently completed Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement and accompanying dam removal agreement, the region has the chance to lead the nation in solving water conflicts.

“There’s a chance now, if collaboration and cooperation can really come out of this settlement, it will be a different kind of poster child,” Keppen said.

The animosity and blame that competing interests spewed at one another took time to dissipate, Keppen said.

“Some of that had to happen. Some of that bad blood had to come out to make people realize how bad it could really get,” he said. “It seems like that dynamic is starting to go away. To me, it’s pretty amazing to look back at 2001, and those same parties that were fighting each other in court are now coming out in solidarity with this settlement.”

Keppen is hopeful that a year without water for the farmers on the Klamath Project won’t destroy the years of work that went into the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement. But the failure of the settlement isn’t what concerns Keppen the most about a drought year.

“I’m worried that, if we don’t get some big storms or the agencies can’t find a way to perhaps keep more water in the lake, I think it’s really going to cause anger, especially toward federal agencies,” he said. “It’s the last thing this community needs right now, to be both in a recession and then farmers not to have a water supply.”

Keppen said farmers in the Central Valley have been photographed standing in line for food hand-outs.

“That’s how serious it gets,” he said. “When farmers have to stand in line for food, that’s a sad state.”

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