

For Klamath dams, it's hasta la vista

By [The Oregonian Editorial Board](#)

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signs the Klamath Basin agreement.

Go ahead, get swept up in the river of rhetoric that flowed through the Oregon Capitol when Govs. Ted Kulongoski and Arnold Schwarzenegger, top federal officials, tribal leaders, farmers and hundreds of others gathered Thursday to celebrate the signing of an agreement to restore the Klamath Basin.

It was an historic moment, not just for the shallow, sick river that has been the source of so much pain and controversy, but for every other once-great salmon river reduced to a crawl by dams and insatiable demand for water. "The eyes of the nation, the eyes of the world, are on the Klamath," U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar declared near the end of the hour-long ceremony in the Capitol Rotunda.

What the nation is watching is the culmination of years of negotiations leading to a remarkable agreement calling for the breaching of four dams and a water-sharing agreement meant to end one of the most bitter struggles between irrigators and endangered fish in American history.

The skeptics will note that for now all this is just words, promises and names on paper. The critics will attack the plan for guaranteeing possibly unsustainable levels of water to irrigators, and for permitting the continued farming of tens of thousands of acres of wildlife refuge land in the basin.

Yes, dam breaching is at least a decade away, and still hinges on a determination by the Interior secretary in 2012. Yes, Congress still must consider and approve the Klamath plans, and appropriate more than a billion dollars to make them happen. Yes, the Klamath plans are a product of negotiations, and they include compromises that leave no one entirely happy with the deal. And yes, new problems, lawsuits, water crises, are certain to arise.

Still, the soaring rhetoric, the Native American songs, the gifts of blankets and pottery, the handshakes and smiles, all the ovations Thursday, were more than justified. Give

credit to the governors, the federal officials, the tribes, the irrigators, the PacifiCorp representatives, the conservation groups, all of them, who spent years overcoming the distrust, the suspicion, the hate, that had built up around the Klamath Basin over the decades.

Remember, it was only nine years ago, during a bitter drought, when the federal government shut off irrigation water to protect endangered fish in the Klamath Basin, leaving thousands of acres of crops to wither in the southeast Oregon heat. It was only eight years ago when the Bush administration ordered irrigation deliveries even though another water shortage gripped the region. The result was the largest single salmon kill in U.S. history; an estimated 68,000 salmon rolled up dead in the hot, poisoned lower river.

If you were in Klamath Falls in 2001, feeling the heat, the anger, the potential for violence at the closed irrigation canal headgates, it was impossible to imagine a feel-good moment at the Oregon Capitol only nine years later.

Yet on Thursday there was Gov. Schwarzenegger cracking wise, quoting his movie lines -- "Hasta la vista, Klamath dams," and saying of migrating salmon, "I'll be back!"-- and mugging for the cameras as he signed the agreement. There were old enemies -- irrigators, conservation groups, tribal leaders, the federal government -- lining up one after another to put their names on the agreement. It was inspiring, exhilarating, and those are words seldom associated with the Klamath.

We're under no illusions about the challenges that lie ahead. There will be setbacks, and Klamath restoration only gets harder from here. But over the last century there have been precious few occasions to celebrate in the Klamath Basin. Thursday was a day of hope for all the people who live near and love this once-great river.

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