

# Officials sign landmark Klamath dam removal agreements

JEFF BARNARD, AP Environmental Writer February 18, 2010

SALEM, Ore. (AP) — A century-old fight over water from Oregon's Klamath Basin ended Thursday with signed agreements that assure farmers water and power to keep their crops green, and lay out the removal of dams that have blocked salmon from hundreds of miles of spawning grounds.

For decades, American Indian tribes, farmers, salmon fishermen and conservation groups have fought in courts and centers of power over who gets the scarce water in the basin — the farms and ranches through irrigation or the salmon and suckers in rivers and lakes.

Those groups gathered with state and federal officials in the Oregon Capitol Rotunda to sign two landmark agreements five years in the making.

One lays out a roadmap for removing four hydroelectric dams from the Klamath River in Southern Oregon and Northern California. The other details how to share water between fish and farms and restore the ecological balance of the basin.

They mark the end of an era when the government and the people thought they could turn nature upside down to make a better life, and a pathway to peace in one of the most hotly fought water wars in the nation.

"Who would have thought that we'd ever have Klamath basin farmers and ranchers, fishing groups, conservationists and Native Americans all joining together working toward a common goal and constructing such a balanced and pragmatic solution," Greg Abel, CEO of PacifiCorp, the utility that owns the four dams, said in remarks prepared for Thursday's ceremony.

"I commend every one of you for working so hard to peacefully resolve these historic conflicts."

Much has yet to be done, however.

The dams produce enough power for 70,000 people. Removal is not scheduled to start until 2020 and depends on funding, authorization from Congress and a federal determination that it will actually help salmon and is in the public interest. Conservation groups have characterized the river restoration as the biggest in the country's history.

PacifiCorp will not bear the estimated \$450 million cost of removing the dams. Oregon and California share the costs with surcharges on PacifiCorp customers and a \$250 million bond not yet approved by California voters.

The utility serves 1.6 million customers in Oregon, California, Washington, Idaho, Utah and Wyoming, and is owned by MidAmerican Energy Holdings Co., a unit of Warren Buffett's Omaha, Neb.-based Berkshire Hathaway Inc.

The agreement also calls for spending \$1 billion over the next ten years on environmental restoration.

The conflict stretches back to the early 1900s, when the federal government turned the hydrology of the upper Klamath Basin upside down, drawing water from lakes and rivers to irrigate crops on dry uplands. Veterans of World War I homesteaded the Klamath Reclamation Project straddling the Oregon-California border near Klamath Falls, where potatoes, alfalfa, horseradish and cattle are still grown.

In 2001, a drought brought the conflict to a head.

Irrigation for farms had long been constricted to assure enough for endangered sucker fish in Upper Klamath Lake, the project's main reservoir. Then coho salmon were declared threatened in the Klamath River, flowing out of the lake, and the Endangered Species Act forced water to be shut off to hundreds of farms and ranches.

The next year, the Bush administration restored water to the farms, but with the river low and warm, tens of thousands of chinook salmon died of disease before they could spawn.

Besides blocking salmon, the dams raise water temperatures to levels unhealthy for fish. California water authorities have been taking a hard look at the toxic algae produced by the dam's reservoirs, and river advocates have sued PacifiCorp to fix the algae problem.

Pressure has been building since PacifiCorp applied for a new 50-year federal operating license in 2004 and made no provision for fish passage, which stops at Iron Gate Dam near the Oregon-California border.

California and Oregon's governors pressed for dam removal after West Coast commercial salmon fisheries collapsed in 2006 because of declines in Klamath River returns, triggering a disaster declaration.

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