

It's signed! Klamath dam pacts signed in Oregon Capitol

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Agreements to tear out four dams on the Klamath River and rebuild its storied salmon fisheries were signed in Oregon's Capitol on Thursday, marking a major milestone for tribes, fishermen and farmers who put aside years of conflict to negotiate the deals.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski and U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar were on hand to sign the historic pacts, joined by the chairmen of three Klamath River tribes and dozens of other stakeholders from the basin. The ceremony in the rotunda of the Capitol building in Salem drew hundreds.

"These agreements bring together groups that for years stood toe-to-toe and now stand side-by-side," Schwarzenegger said.

Schwarzenegger said that the creation of the landmark deals was "not an easy lift," but that they may provide a model to fix other conflicts around the country.

The Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement and the Klamath Hydropower Settlement Agreement together call for \$1.5 billion to remove Iron Gate, Copco 1, Copco 2 and J.C. Boyle dams and embark on major river restoration efforts meant to revive the faltering salmon stocks in the basin. The deals vow more water for fish -- from an upper basin water bank in the near term to reduced irrigation deliveries in the long term -- and a change in how water is allocated to farms.

The four dams would begin to come out in 2020, provided a U.S. Interior Department study finds it in the public interest. A number of studies that will be rolled into that determination are already under way or completed as part of a federal license application by the dams' owner Pacificorp. The utility agreed to allow the decommissioning of the dams instead of pursuing a 30- to 50-year license to continue operating them, which would have required the installation of costly fish ladders.

The dams block hundreds of miles of spawning habitat for salmon and are responsible for the near decimation of the key spring chinook salmon run. Reservoirs also increase the intensity of algae blooms, which lead to poor water quality in the river below Iron Gate Dam.

Secretary Salazar said the Klamath basin was locked in one of the most intractable water wars in the United States until recently. In 2001, the Interior Department stopped water deliveries to many upper basin farms to protect salmon in the river and

endangered suckers in Upper Klamath Lake, which caused an uproar and prompted political action on the part of the Bush administration.

The next year, farms got the water they needed, while the river was shorted. That summer, some 68,000 salmon died before they could spawn. Salazar said the agreements that came out of the talks among the disparate groups in the basin were the result of hard work, courage and commitment. He acknowledged, however, that there are still a number of major tasks that are ahead.

"Let us continue to forge common ground," Salazar said.

The Klamath River's salmon, lamprey and sturgeon are vital to the Yurok and Karuk tribes, but Yurok Chairman Thomas O'Rourke said it is clear that the river is sick -- but that the tribe can't look after the river by itself.

"The Klamath River is our lifeline," O'Rourke said.

He said the river will be set free as a result of talks between people who, just a few years ago, could hardly look at each other, let alone negotiate. Legislation is now required to put the agreements into effect. Funding for the dam removal will come from a \$200 million fund being built by rate increases from Pacificorp customers, and \$250 million from the state of California. Currently, that amount is written into a controversial \$11 billion water bond bill that will go before voters this year, and which has drawn opposition from groups that support the Klamath agreements.

Federal funding for the restoration agreement through the Interior Department must also be found, with the expected costs of \$41 million in the first year the plan is implemented, and some \$97 million a year for the following 10 years.

The two agreements are not without their opponents, including the Hoopa Valley Tribe and some environmental groups. The Hoopa Tribe voted in February not to sign the deals, claiming that more water isn't guaranteed for salmon, and that dam removal isn't required by the pacts, as parties can bow out and delay dam removal. The tribe also maintains that the deals terminate the rights of tribes in the basin, a claim vehemently denied by the supporting tribes. In a February resolution, the tribe called the agreements' flows inadequate for salmon, which could lead to reduced fishing on the Trinity River, the main Klamath tributary that flows through the Hoopa Reservation.

Kulongoski said that there's no doubt that much more work needs to be done, and that it will take wisdom to see a common future for the basin. But the strife over resources in the basin does not need to continue, he said.

"There is no need for this conflict to rage on," Kulongoski said.

A number of tribal elders with long histories on the Klamath River made the trip to Salem to witness the ceremony. Among them was Merkie Oliver, an ardent Yurok

fisherman who has watched the river become more and more polluted and less productive in recent decades. He said those who deny that the river is plagued with algae from the reservoirs aren't opening their eyes. Oliver said that he was thankful to be on hand to watch the signing of the agreements, but that leaders now need to live up to the promises made in the deals.

"I hope I live long enough to see the dams come down," Oliver said.

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