

Water year looks dire

Lack of precipitation worries irrigators, fishermen

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Apprehension and worry were mixed with optimism at Thursday's Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement signing in Salem.

Horsley

"People talk about 50 years, I'm just trying to figure out how to get through the next five years," said Luther Horsley, president of Klamath Water Users Association.

Horsley was among Basin residents, tribal members and leaders who attended the signing ceremony in Salem for the restoration document and related Klamath River dam removal agreement.

The water agreement aims to resolve the Basin's disputes over water for agriculture, endangered fish species and the environment.

It would spend \$1.5 billion to remove four dams, conduct habitat restoration and enact other provisions. The document still needs legislation and funding from Congress, and studies on dam removal are only beginning.

Right now, though, the approaching water year — with its increasingly dire conditions — is weighing on irrigators, fishermen and others in the region.

Tough conditions

Stakeholders, including U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, pointed out during Thursday's signing ceremony that the coming water year looks tough.

The region has had a lower than average snow pack and precipitation this winter, which were about 72 percent of normal as of Thursday.

Stakeholders said it's crucial they continue working together until the restoration agreement is fully implemented. Even with the possibility of tough water years, they say the relationships they've cultivated will help get the Basin through them.

"If anything, it would cement the relationship, not break it up," said Glen Spain, northwest regional director for Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations.

The restoration agreement will not have an immediate impact on the Basin, and likely won't for several years.

Lake levels low

Snow pack and precipitation are only part of the problem this year.

According to weekly figures from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the surfaces of Upper Klamath Lake and Clear Lake are nearly a foot below where they were at this time last year. Gerber Reservoir is even worse off — its water level is more than six feet below levels from a year ago.

Spain and Greg Addington, executive director of Klamath Water Users Association, said the lakes are low primarily because a court order specified high river flows for

endangered fish. Those high f lows, combined with below average precipitation, hurt the region's water supply.

"Even with substantial rain and snowfall this spring, predicted water supplies will be limited," said Sue Fry, area manager for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's Klamath Falls office.

Side Bar

Understanding the water year

The water that flows throughout the Klamath River Basin depends on each winter's snowfall.

Winter storms build the snow pack in the region's mountains. The melt water generated from that snow feeds the Basin's streams throughout the year, which in turn ends up in the lakes and eventually the Klamath River, providing water for people, fish, the environment and irrigation.

By measuring the amount of snow throughout the region, as well as its water content, officials track and predict how much water will be available throughout the rest of the year.

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