

Water talk' panel addresses Klamath agreements

Photos



Charlie Unkefer

At the last Cal Trout sponsored “water talk,” the issue was the Klamath agreements. Shown here are Curtis Knight, Mount Shasta Cal Trout director; Troy Fletcher, Yurok Tribe Policy Analyst; Mike Belchik, Yurok Tribe Lead Fisheries Biologist; Greg Addington, executive director of the Klamath Water Users Association; Linda Prendergest, PacifiCorp Fish Biologist; Ric Costales, Siskiyou County Natural Resource Specialist; and Phil Detrich, Fish and Wildlife Service, recently retired.

By Charlie Unkefer

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Mount Shasta, Calif. — Over 40 people showed up for last week’s Cal Trout “water talk,” which focused on the Klamath settlement agreements. If enacted, these agreements will lead to the removal of four Klamath dams and an overhaul of how upper basin irrigation will be managed.

Speaking was a panel of representatives from some of the key negotiating groups, including Troy Fletcher, policy analyst; and Mike Belchik, senior fisheries biologist with the Yurok Tribe; Greg Addington, executive director of the Klamath Water Users Association; Linda Prendergest, fish biologist with PacifiCorp; Ric Costales, Siskiyou County Natural Resource policy specialist; and Phil Detrich, recently retired as supervisor of Yreka Fish and Wildlife Services and representative to the negotiations for the last nine years.

The event was moderated by Meadow Barr of Cal Trout, and in her introduction, she reiterated it was not a debate but, instead, a panel discussion intended to inform the public on the many issues and perspectives.

Up first was Curtis Knight, Mount Shasta Area director of California Trout, who gave a short presentation on the basics of both the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement and

the Klamath Hydroelectric Settlement Agreement, the two documents which are collectively referred to as “the settlement agreements.”

Greg Addington, Klamath Water User’s Association

The first panelist to speak was Greg Addington of the Klamath Water Users Association, who began by explaining that his organization represents the irrigators of the Klamath Water Project, of which there are 17 districts and a total of 1,200 family farms and ranches.

Addington told the crowd why his organization had agreed to sign on to the agreements.

“We agreed to take less (than currently allocated), but it will be more predictable,” he said. “These regulatory assurances are, for us, a better way of doing business.”

Addington updated the audience on the current drought conditions faced by Upper Basin irrigators. “Just a stone’s throw away from here (where precipitation has been significantly above average this winter), we’re in a very dry situation... We were told that our water supply would be reduced by 30 to 40 percent by the Bureau of Reclamation.”

Addington said that the situation is different than 2001, the year of the last water crisis. “It’s different because we have been at the table with lots of organizations, and we have a five year history,” he said, referring to the many years of negotiations that have led to the Klamath Agreements.

Troy Fletcher, Yurok Tribe

Presenting next was Troy Fletcher, a policy analyst for the Yurok Tribe. “The health of the river equates to the health of our society,” he said.

Fletcher said that the years of acrimony between the various stakeholder groups have not been productive and, by his estimation, the current agreements represent a compromise that all the stakeholders can live with. “It’s about figuring out how to live together... It’s gotten old fighting with people.”

Mike Belchik, Fisheries Biologist, Yurok Tribe

Mike Belchik, senior fisheries biologist with the Yurok Tribe spoke next.

“My job is to look at whether this will work for the fish,” he said.

“The information that we have, and it is substantial, is that this is going to benefit the fish,” said Belchik, speaking specifically about dam removal. “There is a lot of science behind the flows,” he said, referring to the projected river flows that would result from dam removal.

Linda Prendergest, PacifiCorp

Linda Prendergest, a fish biologist for Pacificorp spoke next. "One of our mantras is to protect our customers from costs and liabilities," she said. "We believe that the KHSA does reduce risk for our customers."

Prendergest said that though PacificCorp is committed to the dam removal process, "We're not just sitting back and waiting for Congress (to pass legislative approval)... We have started implementing interim measures," she said, citing PacificCorp funded projects and studies.

Ric Costales, Siskiyou County

Representing Siskiyou County was natural resource specialist Ric Costales.

Costales outlined the County's many concerns with the two agreements and explained why, to date, they have not signed. "There's a context here," he said. "There's a lot of ignorance going around for everybody... What we want is a fair shake for everyone involved... We know we can't stop this freight train."

Costales said the county has been reluctant to sign the agreements because, as they see it, they do not represent a legally binding agreement until they have been approved by Congress. "We have fiduciary responsibilities to our taxpayers... The county could get sued for this," he added. "There are potentially actions we could be taking prior to congressional approval that could be illegal."

Phil Detrich, US Fish and Wildlife Service (recently retired)

Up next was Phil Dietrich, recently retired Yreka Supervisor for the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"I agree with Ric (Costales) that there is a tremendous need for information," he began. Detrich, who has been a lead agency negotiator on the issues for several years, outlined what he sees as some of the key issues and prevailing misconception.

Among other things, he explained USFWS interest in securing regular water allocations through the agreements.

Detrich also noted that, as he sees it, one of the issues that will have to be addressed are concerns that dam removal could impact Yreka's water supply by affecting the Fall Creek diversion. "It is an issue that has to be taken care of and will be addressed in the EIS."

Detrich said that one of the prevailing misconceptions is that Shasta and Scott Valley irrigators would have their water rights affected. "The agreements do not change anyone's water right (in these areas)," he said.

Questions and answers

In the follow-up question and answer period, Troy Fletcher commended the County for their input. "Siskiyou County has done a great job of getting the issues on the table," he said. "A good chunk of this agreement is due to Siskiyou County being at the table," he added.

Jim Hardy of Mount Shasta asked why the county was so reluctant to sign the agreements. "It looks like a lot of government heavyweights have signed on... wouldn't that give a lot of backing to the county?" he asked.

Costales responded, "It's been a loaded game from the beginning."

Despite their efforts, he continued, the county has not been able to get a statement of assurance that its interests will be protected. "We want an authoritative assurance," said Costales.

Siskiyou County District 2 Supervisor Ed Valenzuela spoke on this issue. "The county does not have resources to play this game... we never felt we were a participant," he said.

Local fishing guide Craig Neilson asked what will happen to the fish in the meantime. "What is the short term science saying?" he asked.

"They're hanging on but they're not doing fantastic," said Belchik. "They are going to make it."

Prendergest reiterated that PacifiCorp is committed to funding interim studies. "We're trying to improve main stream conditions," she said.

County to decide on April 1

Siskiyou County Board of Supervisors will vote on Thursday, April 1 to sign or not to sign the Klamath agreements.

The County Board of Supervisors hearing will take place at the Yreka Community Theatre, 812 North Oregon Street, Yreka. There will be two sessions: 2 p.m. and 6 p.m.

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