

# Farmers struggle to survive irrigation cutbacks

By JEFF BARNARD

AP Environmental Writer

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Rob Unruh lets dry dirt trickle through his fingers last month in a field he will irrigate with well water to grow potatoes outside Malin. Farmers on the Klamath Reclamation Project are facing another difficult drought year. **Jeff Barnard The Associated Press**

**MALIN, Ore.** — When drought and the Endangered Species Act shut off irrigation on the Klamath Reclamation Project in 2001, farmers demonstrated and broke open headgates to let water into irrigation ditches, setting up a confrontation with federal agents.

Their defiance won the sympathy of President Bush and Karl Rove, and they came to believe that they could change the law so that people would take precedence over fish when it came to water. Even if the fish were on the verge of extinction.

But the Endangered Species Act survived, despite the best efforts of the Bush administration and some conservatives in Congress. And now farmers on the Klamath are facing another difficult drought year.

Signs with peeling paint proclaiming that "People are the REAL endangered species" lean against fences around the project, but no one expects a repeat of the 2001 conflict.

When tempers cooled, farmers sat down with Indian tribes, salmon fishermen, conservation groups and government agencies and worked out an agreement tied to removing four dams from the Klamath River to help salmon. The Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement contains a long list of provisions to help farmers through dry years, but has yet to be approved or funded by Congress.

In the agreement, farmers gave up the full amount of water they enjoyed in the past, in return for greater assurances they would not be cut off except in extreme drought years. A drought plan would be drawn up to include utilizing increased storage, buying water from willing sellers, tapping groundwater and prioritizing which lands get water.

Had the agreement been in force this year, supporters say it would have allowed for holding more water back in the project's main reservoir last winter, and that there would be more available now.

Since the announcement last month that only 30 percent of normal irrigation could be expected this year, farmers are desperately searching for land with wells to water their potatoes, onions, grain and alfalfa. Rents are skyrocketing while jobs with irrigation districts and farm-dependant businesses are drying up.

"Now, most all of us, if we could pick up and move someplace where we knew we could make a living somewhere out of the project, we'd do it in a heartbeat," said Bob Gasser, a leader of the 2001 demonstrations and a partner in Basin Fertilizer & Chemical in Merrill.

For a century, the irrigated soils straddling the Oregon-California border were a prized place to farm, even in drought. Midwestern farmers, Oklahoma migrant workers and veterans moved to the little towns of Merrill, Malin and Tulelake, Calif.

But in 2001, designation of Klamath River coho salmon as a threatened species tipped the balance. Federal courts ordered enough water for salmon, even if it meant not enough for farmers on the project.

Sheriff Tim Evinger refused to arrest demonstrators who broke open irrigation headgates, despite pressure from federal authorities.

"It was going to inflame it and make it worse," he said.

He and Gasser are among those who do not expect a repeat of 2001. Hammering out the restoration agreement built relationships between former enemies, and there is hope that next year will be better.

"Our grandfathers would kick our butts for doing what we did," Gasser said of signing the restoration agreement with its cap on irrigation water. "But we understand we can't change ESA. We are losing every lawsuit we're getting into. Wake up. Get real. We can't fight anymore."

The town of Malin was founded in 1909. It has been on a downward slide since the state highway was rerouted in the 1950s. Television killed the movie theater in the 1960s. The 2001 water shutoff was too much for the grocery store and gas station. The population stands at 720.

Hardware store owner Dennis Kalina, whose grandfather regularly drove a wagon team over the Cascades to supply the store, said he can stay in business. He owns the building and gets Social Security. But the town may lose the elementary school as Hispanic farmhands leave to find jobs.

"It's just gradually dying," he said of the town.

Rob Unruh, descended from Oklahoma migrant workers, is the fourth generation of his family to farm here. He grew his first crop of spuds right after high school, and would be growing them right up to the lawn around his neat white 1912 farmhouse if there was water. Instead, he will plant half his normal crop on rented fields with wells.

"I tried everything I could to talk my son out of farming with me," said Unruh. "Finally, we compromised that he would go away to school and have an education he could fall back on, then we would try to farm. When you are in situations like this, there are no guarantees that you are going to have an income."

He and alfalfa farmer Gary Derry rent enough land with wells to see them through the year. They hope the restoration agreement will give farmers the certainty they once knew, but worry that until it goes into effect, so much pumping could draw down the aquifer, leaving more farms dry.

"We want to take hardworking people who like to turn their hands down and go to work," Derry said. "Do we want to turn those people into people who turn their hands up, waiting for a handout? No thanks, I don't want it."

Bill Walker is CEO of J&W Walker Farms and related businesses owned by his family. They own a cutting-edge storage and packing facility that sends potatoes to Frito Lay chip factories as well as markets in Central America and Asia. His brother is spending all his time looking for ground with wells, to be sure they can fulfill their contracts.

The blood on his neck rises and his voice gets a harsh edge when he thinks about the potential consequences of no more farming in this valley: Fewer jobs for his 60 employees and more dependence on foreign food.

"Man should come before the fish," he said. "They shouldn't take and put people against people. Because all we're trying to do is make a living. And not a really great one."

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