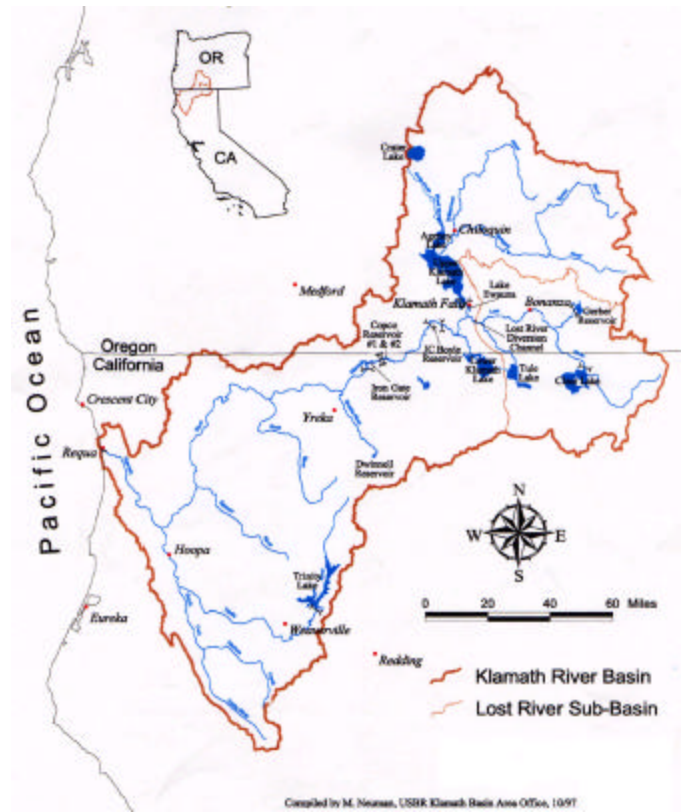


CRISIS ON THE KLAMATH



Crossing northern California and southern Oregon is the Klamath River basin, an area that recently became ground zero for the many disputes in the western US that pit environmental and tribal needs for water against agricultural interests.

The high-elevation river basin is fairly remote and sparsely populated, but made national headlines when a severe drought led federal regulators to stop the flow of irrigation water in April 2001. The cutoff was needed to maintain flows for threatened and endangered fish species.

The 2001 crisis had its roots in the century-old Klamath Project. Three years after 1902 Reclamation Act, which enabled the destruction of at least 45 million acres (over one-third) of US natural wetlands, the federal government began draining the basin to create farmland.

The land was offered to veterans of World Wars I and II. Today, farmers there grow potato, alfalfa, horseradish and other crops, and raise livestock.

Eighty percent of the natural wetlands in the basin (more than 300,000 acres) were destroyed as a result of the Klamath Project, and summer flows in the Klamath River have been reduced to a trickle.

The state and federal governments granted irrigators the right to divert a set amount of water. This water came at the expense of local tribes, the Klamath's marshes, lakes, and rivers, as well as the fish and wildlife that depend on them.

During 2001, the region received about half of its normal rainfall. Commercial fishermen and environmental groups sued the US Bureau of Reclamation to limit water deliveries to farmers.

Responding to the lawsuit and biological opinions issued by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and US National Marine Fisheries Service, the Bureau cut off irrigation water to most project growers to protect the fish.



Klamath basin farmers protest their 2001 loss of irrigation water. Photo courtesy of the California Farm Bureau Federation.

Some desperate farmers illegally tapped water from the basin three months later. Federal authorities gave into pressure from the farmers and released 75,000 acre-feet of water.

While a subsequent moderately wet winter eased the drought, environmental, tribal and fishing organizations continued their legal efforts to maintain increased river flows and lake levels for fish.

In March 2002, at a ceremony with more than 500 cheering farmers, Interior Secretary Gale Norton and Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman opened the gates on irrigation canals in Klamath Falls, giving farmers full delivery of water.

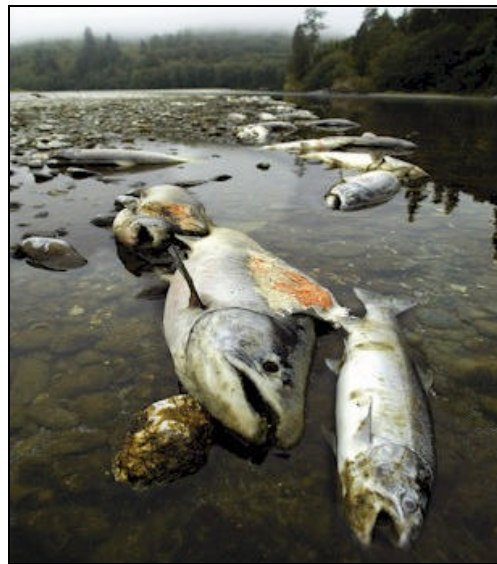
Six months later, the worst fears of salmon advocates were realized. The banks of the Klamath were fouled by the carcasses of 30,000 salmon, killed due to water diversions upstream. It was the largest die-off of adult salmon ever recorded in the West.

The Klamath was once the third most productive salmon river system in the US. Today, fall chinook salmon runs are down to less than 8 percent of their historic numbers, and coho salmon have been pushed down to between 1-2 percent of historic numbers, so low that they are now listed as 'threatened' under the Endangered Species Act.

As many as 4,000 jobs have been lost over the past decade from a lack of water in the river, resulting in economic losses estimated at \$800 million.

Faced with certain water shortages in the future, the situation remains tense. Finding solutions to the water conflicts in the Klamath basin and elsewhere will require many compromises, experts say.

Proposed solutions include increasing storage, reducing demand and retiring of some lands that presently receive project water. A voluntary program has reduced demand on about 17,000 acres of project lands that were idled by farmers.



Thousands of adult salmon killed when Klamath water was returned to farmers in fall 2002. Photo courtesy of Defenders of Wildlife.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Klamath Basin Crisis

www.klamathbasincrisis.org

Oregon Natural Resources Council

www.onrc.org/programs/klamath.html

WaterWatch

www.waterwatch.org