

“Fishermen and Farmers Can Coexist, and We Will Coexist”

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Thursday, August 10, 2006 is a day that will always have special importance to me. Earlier in the day, Secretary of Commerce Carlos M. Gutierrez declared a commercial fishery failure for West Coast salmon fishermen this season from Cape Falcon, Oregon, to Point Sur, California. Secretary Gutierrez, Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski and California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger announced the decision in a teleconference call with the national media.

This is only the second time in U.S. history that the commerce secretary has made such a declaration prior to the end of the fishing season. This declaration will pave the way for Congress to provide much-needed financial aid for West Coast salmon fishermen.

That afternoon, I was part of a small agricultural delegation from the Klamath Basin that was asked to participate in an announcement ceremony on the docks near Coos Bay, Oregon, where U.S. Senator Gordon Smith (Oregon), Deputy Secretary of Commerce David Sampson and Dr. William Hogarth, director of NOAA Fisheries, personally delivered the message to commercial fishermen. After the photo shoot was over, a small group of us met with these gentlemen to discuss fish, potatoes, and the future of the Klamath River.

So what were a bunch of farmers and water policy wonks from the Basin doing in Coos Bay, commiserating with the “enemy”? Why would farmers be asked to share in the joy of the day, when newspapers from Portland to San Francisco say that irrigators and fishermen are locked in mortal combat?

Well, believe it or not, sometimes those big city papers just don’t get things right when it comes to reporting things out in the boondocks. The coastal salmon issue – characterized by most media accounts as a divisive “farmer vs. fishermen” issue – has been manipulated by certain environmental groups, who place the blame for the fishery restrictions on irrigation and dams located on the Klamath River. Media coverage since March has taken a very consistent and dominant anti-farming position, essentially accepting arguments made by environmentalists that farming operations located hundreds of miles from the ocean are responsible for the coastal crisis.

Last spring, Dick Carleton, who farms near Merrill, Oregon, decided to find out for himself whether the fishermen were as angry at the farmers as the newspapers and environmental groups were saying. The efforts of Dick and others to bring the two parties together over the past several months has led to increased trust and an emerging coalition that is beginning to be noticed by policy makers. In fact, Secretary of Commerce Gutierrez last month stated that he was heartened by the support that inland farming communities have given to the small

rural fishing communities of coastal Oregon and California. He specifically noted the support of the Klamath Water Users Association (KWUA) in his statement.

The organization I work for - the Family Farm Alliance -sent a formal request in May to President Bush, asking for an emergency declaration to open up assistance for coastal producers. Other organizations in the agricultural region of the Klamath Basin, including county commissioners and KWUA, sent similar requests. Over the past several months, we have met several times with coastal fishermen in an effort to better understand the issues faced by each party, and to work towards realistic solutions.

The post-press conference meeting on August 10 provided a chance for the big wigs from Washington to hear ideas about the challenges facing the Klamath River and the producers who rely upon it. The farmers and fishermen proposed similar solutions, including the need to address disease issues in the Klamath River, modernize and expand hatchery operations, control seal lion predation at the mouth of the Klamath, and improve real-time ocean management. Notably, both sides advocated for increased flexibility of Klamath Project operations, through regulatory measures and the development of new offshore storage like Long Lake, just west of Klamath Falls.

“Farmers and fishermen are producers who want to work cooperatively towards real solutions,” said Scott Boley, who operates Fishermen Direct in Gold Beach. “Farmers and fishermen can co-exist, and we will co-exist.”

“I truly believe that the farmers and fishermen, once we put the facts on the table, can find a viable solution to this,” said Scott Cook, a troller from Bandon. “Everyone in the country’s been lead to believe that farmers and fishermen are enemies. This message has been pushed mostly by outside environmental groups in the mainstream media, and I think our leaders are seeing this. The policy makers want to solve the problem, and I think they’re tired of the misrepresentations and the lawsuits coming from these groups.”

So, while the media and general public may believe there is a conflict between farmers and fishermen, the ones that are actually in the room talking to each other know differently. And it was the realization that we were all part of a little victory – definitely something to be savored in Klamath matters - that made August 10th such a special day for me.

“Without the cooperation of the agricultural community, we most likely would not have been heard by the federal officials,” Jeff Reeves, a commercial fisherman told me at the end of the day. “Without their help, we probably would have gotten nowhere.”