

## **County Commissioners Do the Right Thing on Forestland Issue**

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The Klamath County Board of Commissioners on the morning of February 6<sup>th</sup> took on a very controversial topic in an overfilled public meeting room in Klamath Falls. Over six hours later, after hearing testimony from over 30 local citizens on both sides of the issue, agreement was reached.

At least, temporarily.

A group of concerned citizens - organized under the banner of the Basin Alliance (not to be confused with the Family Farm Alliance) - had proposed to the commissioners that a resolution be passed which would essentially oppose –into perpetuity – any sort of sale, return or delegation of management responsibilities of the National Forest to the Klamath Tribes. This policy – if passed – would apply to any sort of ownership or management transfer, be it 1 acre, or be it the entire 730,000-acre forest.

A proposal to simply return or sell 730,000 acres of public land to the tribes or any other organization or entity is one that many people in the Klamath Basin would have grave concerns with, including yours truly. However, should such a proposal come to light, it would be necessary to assess the actual proposal and study all the conditions that would have to accompany that proposal. The same philosophy should be applied for a proposal that entails a land exchange totaling two, or two thousand, acres. Then, the overall risks and benefits to the community would have to be weighed, before a decision could be made.

Many of the concerns expressed by those at last week's hearing who were worried about such a proposal are concerns that need to be addressed. In particular, I share their concerns that such a proposal not be discussed behind closed doors. Public lands discussions require a public forum.

IF such a proposal were on the table, this is the approach I would advocate to assess its overall viability.

As it soon became apparent once the hearing started, the reality is, there is NO current proposal for return / sale of any lands on the table. The ongoing discussions between tribes, irrigators, and government agencies on Klamath River dam re-licensing are apparently taking on a lot of issues. However, return of federal forest lands to the tribes is not one of them. Thus, it is premature and potentially damaging to Klamath County's reputation and credibility to adopt a resolution as broad as the one proposed by the Basin Alliance on Tuesday. Why adopt a blanket approach to an issue that might develop, and that, if it does, will very likely require a specific, thoughtful approach to resolve?

There are very serious unintended consequences that may result if a Tribe-specific resolution were to be adopted at this time.

First, the tribal focus of the Basin Alliance resolution – if passed – would likely lead to increased friction between the Klamath Tribes and others, at a time when relations between the tribes and irrigators has been relatively positive. Negative focus placed on the Klamath Tribes at this time – when we are facing a very grim water supply forecast in the Upper Basin – could negatively affect the relatively positive working relationship that the Tribes and Klamath water users currently have in place.

Second, the broad language of the Basin Alliance proposal could have impacts on potential future projects that might benefit Klamath County. In the past year, the Bush Administration floated a plan to eliminate the so-called “checker board” ownership patterns exhibited in certain areas of federal ownership. The idea behind this was to consolidate federal land holdings by selling off those smaller holdings that were isolated or that created federal islands in a sea of private ownership.

What if such a proposal were to become reality in the future? It would appear that passing a county resolution to restrict sale or transfer of these types of lands would definitely prevent the Tribes from participating in such a purchase, who would likely be able to make their own argument that no one would be able to participate in such an exchange without violating the county resolution.

Finally, a resolution that outright prevents the Tribes from owning or managing existing federal lands could very well lead to the very scenario that many people fear. Rather than asking for a seat at the table in the event that a public forestlands proposal is put on the table, the proposed resolution would instead pull the seat and the table completely out of reach of the county commissioners, and force the Tribes to find other, less open avenues to pursue their objectives.

This of course assumes that such a proposal is ever developed.

Without a real proposal to review and respond to, it is premature to take such firm action. And that’s what the commissioners decided to do by tabling this issue until such time that the Basin Alliance and Klamath Tribes can sit down together and begin meaningful face-to-face dialogue. Spokespersons for both parties appeared to initially support this idea, with the understanding that they will report back to the county commissioners in two months.

The Klamath County Board of Commissioners should be applauded for the professional and thoughtful manner in which they handled this very delicate and potentially divisive issue. Many of us at the meeting walked away with a feeling of assurance that the commissioners are looking out for all the citizens of Klamath County, and that they are committed to providing recourse to those who have concerns regarding any sort of federal land exchange. In the meantime, let’s hope the Klamath Tribes and the Basin Alliance can achieve some meaningful progress when they leave the hearing room and sit down face-to-face.