

## **Water for New Demands Must Come from New Storage.... or it Will Come from Agriculture**

**By Dan Keppen**

The barrage of storms that charged through Northern California and Southern Oregon dissipated early last week, leaving some residents throughout the Klamath River watershed relieved, and provoking others to scratch their heads and ponder the question “Is there really not enough water to go around?”

You know the argument I’m talking about. Activist groups from places like Medford, Eugene, Portland, and San Francisco love to repeat their favorite mantra when it comes to the Klamath River: “There’s simply not enough water to go around”.

With that declaration made, they conclude: “There are too many demands on the system – we must find ways of reducing demand.”

These groups then point to the small family farms and ranches served by the century-old federal Klamath Project, located south and west of Upper Klamath Lake, in Oregon and northern California. “Reduce Klamath Project demand,” they say, “and the ‘balance’ of the Klamath River watershed will be restored.”

“Reducing demand”, according to the activists, equates to “eliminating agriculture”.

This very simplistic message is easy to swallow for some, and newspaper editorial boards in places like Medford, Eugene, Portland and San Francisco eagerly serve it up to their readers.

Unfortunately, it is a flawed argument, for a variety of reasons. First, the activists argue that the reason there is “too little water” in the Klamath river system is because the watershed is over-allocated, primarily due to Klamath Project agricultural demands. They fail to disclose that, in the past 40 to 50 years, while the cropping pattern in the Klamath Project has varied from year to year, the overall planted acreage has remained consistent.

At the same time, farming critics seem to ignore the 2002-2012 biological opinion created by NOAA Fisheries for coho salmon. This controversial opinion established the river flow schedule and the water bank, which now requires 100,000 acre-feet of Klamath Project water, regardless of actual hydrologic conditions. This is the primary source of new demand for water in the Klamath River watershed, and it has had far-reaching consequences: stored water that has flowed to farms, ranches and the refuges for 100 years is now sent downstream at such high levels, that groundwater pumped from the Lost River basin is being used to supplement the resulting “coho salmon demand” in the Klamath River.

Even more fundamentally, the anti-farming activists have failed to demonstrate HOW retiring Klamath Project farmland will generate new water, particularly since many of those same environmental groups propose converting the farmed land to wetlands, which we know consume and evaporate over one acre-foot per acre more water than farms use in the Klamath Project .

The roaring river flows we have seen in the past several weeks ought to make every sensible person question the activists’ claims about “too little water”. On New Year’s Eve, measurements

on the Klamath River showed that flows over 400,000 cubic feet per second were being discharged to the Pacific Ocean. That flow rate equates to approximately 800,000 acre-feet of water in one day. By comparison, the Klamath Irrigation Project and adjacent national wildlife refuges use approximately 350,000 acre-feet of water in an entire typical irrigation season.

If only some of that water could be saved for drier times, the present water supply pie could be expanded, thereby addressing the perceived problem of “too many demands”, and providing improve downstream flood control benefits, to boot.

As in the Klamath River watershed, the retention of existing water supplies and the development of critically needed new supplies – such as the proposed Long Lake offstream storage project - are of the utmost importance throughout the West. Drought and population growth have accelerated the arrival of inevitable water shortages. In some areas, supplies are already inadequate for the growing demands.

At the federal level, we are told that the big dam-building era is over. This may indeed be true, but it is also plainly and painfully true that, in some areas, there really isn't enough water to meet the needs of agriculture, urban growth and the environment. Increased conservation and efficiency can help, but they are only part -- a small part -- of the solution. And buying and bullying water away from farmers isn't the solution either. Meeting the current and future water needs of the West will require a thoughtful combination of means, not the least of which is the creation of new water storage facilities.

Farmers and ranchers will continue to do all they can to save water. However, water saving cannot be expanded indefinitely without reducing acreage in production.

Before the West's growing demand outstrips available water supplies (which is already happening in some areas), we need to take responsibility for modernizing our aging infrastructure and facilitating opportunities to enhance water supplies. Strict conservation measures and water banking, which represent only part of a suite of actions that can be taken to help during drought periods, cannot be the sole answers. Flexibility is the key to addressing drought, and the more the system is “hardened”, the more flexibility that is taken away from water managers. The construction of additional water supply infrastructure will allow more efficient management and enable greater cooperation between traditional and non-traditional water users.

In the big picture, urbanization and competition for water supplies are driving Western farmers off the land at a time when American food production in general is following other industries “off-shore” in search of lower costs. Traditional farms and ranches are disappearing, and next year our country will become a net importer of food for the first time in our history.

The U.S. needs a stable domestic food supply, just as it needs a stable energy supply. The post 9/11 world of terrorist threats makes the stability of domestic food supply even more pressing. For farmers to survive; for food to be produced in America; a stable water supply must be available to grow food. We cannot continue long-term hypothetical processes that focus primarily on continued conservation and downsizing of Western agriculture.

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