

## **A Watershed-Wide Approach is the Way to Go on the Klamath River**

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Buried in the media coverage surrounding the public release of the final Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement (KBRA) last week, I came across an article about an upcoming science conference planned February 1-5 in Medford.

Science and policy conferences on Klamath River issues are nothing new, but I was encouraged by a comment in that article made by a senior executive with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the agency that is organizing the conference. According to the USGS official, the pending conference will be unusual because it involves the entire Upper and Lower Klamath River basins and focuses on the region as a single unit. Previous conferences have focused on either the Upper or Lower basins.

This is a significant development, and it resonates with the same tone of the October 2003 recommendations made by the National Research Council (NRC) Committee on Endangered and Threatened Fishes in the Klamath Basin.

The final NRC report was consistent with what many local interests have been saying for years: a watershed-wide approach to species recovery – one that addresses all the stressors to fish – is essential to improving the environment and saving the local economy. The final NRC report was important to local farmers and ranchers for this and several other key reasons:

1. The report clearly indicated that recovery of endangered suckers and threatened coho salmon in the Klamath Basin cannot be achieved by actions that are exclusively or primarily focused on operation of the federal Klamath Irrigation Project;
2. The committee also reconfirmed its findings from the earlier interim report that found no evidence of a causal connection between Upper Klamath Lake water levels and sucker health, or that higher flows on the Klamath River mainstem help coho salmon; and
3. The NRC committee did not accept arguments that the operation of the Klamath Irrigation Project caused the 2002 fish die-off or that changes in the operation of the Project at the time would have prevented it.

Despite the final conclusions, some environmentalists and many in the media continue to maintain the sensational but unsupported position that the Klamath Irrigation Project was responsible for the 2002 fish mortality that occurred over 200 miles from the Project.

The NRC report articulated a vision that increased knowledge, improved management, and cohesive community action would promote recovery of the fishes. The NRC final report advocates a watershed approach, peer review, greater stakeholder involvement, oversight of agency actions, focus on factors other than the Klamath Project operations, reduction of resource conflicts, and incorporation of the principles of adaptive management toward species recovery.

For over two years the Klamath Settlement Group, representing 26 organizations, has been working to develop a comprehensive solution for the Klamath Basin. The proposed agreement was released last week to inform the public and, where appropriate, to enable public review and comment before taking final action.

As I review this document, I will do so keeping the spirit of the NRC report in mind. To solve the problems of the Klamath River watershed, we need a coordinated management program that spans two states in a watershed that is characterized by a strong federal presence.

Hopefully, the NRC report philosophy is folded into the new agreement, and that the collaboration that has occurred over the past two years can be used as a catalyst to address the basin-wide problems we face. That sort of thinking is what I'll be looking for in the public agreement, since collaboration – with local interests taking the lead – is critical if we want to protect the economic livelihood of our communities.