

## **Stop the Myth-Making: Now's the Time to Focus on the Positive**

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The politics surrounding Klamath River water and environmental matters have reached a new low. Spurred by a front-page story in the June 27 *Washington Post*, Congress has agreed to conduct an oversight hearing to investigate Vice President Cheney's alleged role in the 2002 die-off of salmon on the Lower Klamath River.

The latest media feeding frenzy – sparked by anti-farming activist groups - has been a wonder to behold, and the story plot becomes more interesting and fantastic with each day that passes.

First – the *Post* story runs, alleging that, for purely political purposes, the vice president somehow exerted his power and directly interfered with scientific studies undertaken on the Klamath River. Then – that evening – three dozen Democrats in the House of Representatives send a letter to Resources Committee Chair Nick Rahall (D-West Virginia), demanding an oversight hearing to investigate the charges made in the *Post* story. The very next day, Chairman Rahall obliged, and the hearing is set for July 31<sup>st</sup> in Washington, D.C.

In the days following Mr. Rahall's decision, we have seen the predictable, regurgitated editorials that always seem to follow this type of overt political stunt. And with each new report, the myth expands. The storyline – which is deceptively simple and effective - goes something like this:

- “Fish need water”;
- “Klamath Project farmers were denied water in 2001 and no fish died in the Klamath River”;
- “With the help of high level Bush Administration policy officials – Klamath Project farmers received full supplies in 2002, and salmon died in the river”;
- “The Bush Administration sacrificed fish for the benefit of farmers.”

Of course, most of the reporting fails to mention the more mundane facts behind the real story. The 2002 die-off of fish on the lower river still has not been conclusively linked to operations of the Klamath Project, which, only the year before, was shut down for the first time in 95 years. Disease, warm water, and crowded conditions were contributing factors to the die-off. A judge in 2003, based on the conflicting evidence presented by the parties regarding the cause of the fish die-off, found a “triable issue of fact” existed on that point. That court case was ultimately dismissed as “moot” in 2005. A final report released by the National Research Council (NRC) also failed to find a link between the die-off and Project operations. These slightly important facts are consistently and conveniently ignored by outside anti-farming organizations and their messengers in large urban newspapers.

A similar political tact was used by activists and Democrats during the last presidential campaign. At that time, Presidential hopeful John Kerry requested that the U.S. Interior Department Inspector General conduct an investigation into alleged heavy-handed tactics employed by presidential advisor Karl Rove. Inspector General Earl Devaney complied with the request, and in March 2004 responded back to Senator Kerry with his findings:

“We found no evidence of political influence affecting the decisions pertaining to the water in the Klamath Project,” said Devaney. “The individuals at the working-levels denied feeling pressured at all.”

Again – Devaney’s findings were virtually ignored by the mainstream media.

This time, the very same approach – with very little new evidence - is being used by anti-farming activist organizations, but they have substituted “Cheney” for “Rove” in their widely-circulated press releases. Most folks that I’ve talked to simply shake their heads in bemusement at the notion that the Vice President somehow manipulated the conclusions of the NRC.

It is truly unfortunate that these agenda-driven, outside groups have such sway with the current leaders in Congress. Why not schedule a hearing to provide an update on the truly remarkable things that have been accomplished up and down the Klamath River since 2002? There are dedicated people in our watershed who have been tirelessly trying to solve Klamath problems on the ground. These people – and their shared environment – have benefited from over \$500 million spent by the federal government on water conservation, environmental banking, restoration work and research conducted along the Klamath River since 2002.

This includes money spent on Trinity River restoration, funding that supports tribal resources management activities, and money that helps ranchers find ways to more efficiently use water on their property. This dollar amount does not include over \$10 million spent by local irrigators to fund these latter projects.

Let’s face it. It takes this kind of commitment to make the entire river a better place for fish, farmers, tribes and fishermen. Spending time on a Katrina-type blame game (five years later) does nothing to help the future of fish, farmers or tribes.

It’s time to give the people who live along the Klamath River and who care about it the credit they deserve. We can only hope the constructive efforts of communities up and down this basin, here, on the ground, can be recognized and supported on July 31<sup>st</sup>. That hearing date provides an incredible opportunity to consider the real facts and put a halt to the needless diversions caused by anti-farming activists and their allies in Congress.