

Farmers and Fishermen Find Much in Common

By Dan Keppen

George Gibbs, traveling through Northern California in 1851, was struck by conditions at the confluence of the Klamath River and Trinity River.

The Trinity, wrote Gibbs, “is in size about half that of the Klamath, and its waters, likewise rapid, are of transcendent purity; contrasting with those of the latter stream which never lost the taint of their origin.”

The origin of the Klamath River is warm, shallow Upper Klamath Lake, which feeds the federal Klamath Irrigation Project. One hundred and fifty years after Gibb’s visit, the Klamath River and the Project are now in the sights of the national media and environmental activists. Every week, we read activists’ claims that the river and the coastal salmon fishery are being destroyed by the Project, a convenient source of blame for all that is apparently tainted in the Klamath ecosystem.

In the days immediately following the deaths of 33,000 salmon below the Klamath-Trinity confluence in the fall of 2002, environmental activists were quick to assign blame to the Klamath Project. A federal judge in 2003 and a final report by the National Research Council (NRC) in 2004 did not reach a similar verdict, although mainstream media coverage of Klamath issues rarely mentions this.

What we don’t see in the papers are reports that, through a combination of idling farmland and pumping their own groundwater, family farmers and ranchers are being forcibly and steadily weaned from their century-old water supply. Over the past four years, between 40,000 and 100,000 acre-feet of water originally developed for agriculture has instead been bought by the federal government and dedicated annually to “protect” fish. In 2005, nearly 30 percent of the water traditionally used in an average water year by the Klamath Project and wildlife refuges was reallocated in this manner.

Further, even though the Klamath Project is one of the most water-use efficient reclamation operations in the country, over 800 growers have applied for 2002 Farm Bill funding to implement cost-share projects that conserve water.

These actions are laudable. However, one has to remember that there is only so much water that can be squeezed from an area that comprises just 2 percent of the watershed and uses only 3-4 percent of Klamath River flows in an average year.

Despite these efforts, irrigators are now being blamed in the media by environmental activists for a looming crisis on the coast. This spring, commercial salmon fishing has been closed along seven hundred miles of Pacific shoreline, which federal regulators believe will prevent “take” of Klamath River salmon. This very complicated issue is deftly and simply portrayed by faraway activists as a “fishermen vs. farmers” conflict.

This time, they’ve really got it wrong.

Recently, I joined a group of irrigator representatives that traveled to Coos Bay and met with over 50 coastal fishermen and political leaders. I have to admit, going into the meeting, I was a little apprehensive about what our reception would be like.

To our surprise and relief, not a single fisherman at the meeting pointed to the Klamath Project as the cause for the fishery closure. Instead, they offered up other explanations, including:

- Insufficient hatchery production and failure to count hatchery fish;
- Disjointed stock management by state and federal agencies;
- The presence of huge, international factory fishing and canning vessels working off the Oregon and California coasts;
- Sea lion predation; and
- Unfavorable ocean conditions.

Many of the fishermen focused on the hatchery / “natural” fish issue. While fishery regulators apparently claim that hatchery fish are different than natural fish, the fishermen who spoke at this meeting believe no visible or genetic difference between the two exists, other than the man-made markings on the hatchery fish.

I’m no expert on this matter, but you have to give the fishermen the benefit of the doubt on this. It was an eye-opening revelation for the landlubbers from the Upper Basin.

The meeting ended in mutual pledges by the irrigators and the fishermen to work together. As a first step, the Klamath Relief Fund – created to assist distressed farmers in 2001- has been re-activated by the Klamath farming community. This time, the money raised will be used to help Oregon fishermen and their families.

If you are as tired of the Klamath finger-pointing as I am, and instead want to extend a helping hand, I urge that you send a donation to Klamath Bucket Brigade: Klamath Bucket Brigade: Coastal Commercial Fishermen’s Relief Fund, P.O. Box 5252, Klamath Falls, OR 97601.

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