

A Century-Old Success Story

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Last Friday, I participated in great event celebrating the 100 – year anniversary of one of our area’s most spectacular natural treasures - the Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge. Lower Klamath was the first of six National Wildlife Refuges to be established in the Klamath Basin. It was also the very first of many wildlife refuges throughout the nation to be set aside to protect migratory waterfowl.

100 years ago, on August 8, 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt reserved Lower Klamath “for the use of the Department of Agriculture as a preserve and breeding grounds for native birds.”

Current management of Lower Klamath Refuge emphasizes maintaining a diversity of wildlife on 51,000 acres. Wildlife biologists carefully plan for a mix of seasonal and permanent marshes along with croplands, grassland, and seasonally wet uplands to provide food and other vital needs for a diverse array of migrating and breeding birds and other wildlife.

The refuge is a remarkable place – full of water and open marshes, with Mount Shasta to the south, towering over all. And, at certain times of the year, millions of birds funnel into this wetland oasis to utilize the food and cover of the marshes.

Lower Klamath and neighboring Tule Lake National Wildlife Refuge are also remarkable for the unique partnership that exists between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Bureau of Reclamation (which supplies water to the refuges), and local water users. Farming and the refuges together are forming a productive environment for wildlife in the Klamath Basin. For example, in recent water-short years, many water users have offered to donate water to the refuges during dry fall months. The refuges in 2004 received \$70,000 from the Reclamation to pay for groundwater pumping that fall, because the refuges provided 8,000 acre-feet of water to sustain higher flows in the Klamath River the previous spring. Local growers have also have played a significant role in procuring funding for development of dedicated refuge waters supplies and environmental projects.

Landowners are now working cooperatively with refuge managers to develop "walking wetlands", where wetlands and farming are being used in concert to restore agricultural soil fertility and restoring important habitat. Local water users, Ducks Unlimited, and California Waterfowl Association have jointly proposed and pledged support for additional projects to benefit refuge water supplies and habitats. These efforts are designed to develop solutions intended to comply with Endangered Species Act

requirements while enabling farmers to continue to farm and to continue to support wetlands and wildlife. It is a delicately balanced activity.

Despite these impressive efforts – which should be held up as a template for success – some environmentalists, in their effort to protect both fish and wildlife, have called for the complete elimination of farming on Lower Klamath and Tule Lake “lease lands” in order to redirect surface water to refuge wetlands. They hold firm to their conviction that farming is entirely inconsistent with wildlife management.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Agriculture and wildlife management is not an either-or proposition. In fact, the opposite is true. Migrating waterfowl depend upon the cereal grains that are planted on 75% of the acreage of the lease lands, as required by federal law, for food and habitat. The row crops – the “potatoes, onions and alfalfa” of which environmental activists speak – can be planted on not more than 25% of the total lease land acreage. This is not a conflict, but a mutually beneficial relationship.

According to the California Waterfowl Association, “[f]or nearly 100 years, farmers and ranchers of the Klamath Basin have coexisted with immense populations of wildlife.... Klamath Basin agriculture provides a veritable nursery for wildlife.”

Klamath Basin Refuges Project Leader Ron Cole, Dave Menke, and the rest of the USFWS staff working for the refuges deserve some “ataboys” for the incredible centennial event they hosted last Friday. They – and all of us in the Klamath community– have a lot to be proud of. Policy makers at all levels should take a hard look at the cooperation that is emerging around these refuges.

Ron Cole said it best in a conversation I had with him shortly after he took over the helm for the Klamath refuges about 5 years ago.

“Working together, our migratory birds will benefit greatly, as will those of us who enjoy observing, hunting, and hearing the thundering wings of our fall friends as they return again.”