

The Return of the Klamath River Myth Makers

Dan Keppen
Executive Director
Family Farm Alliance
Klamath Falls, Oregon

“Well, time slips away and leaves you with nothing, mister, but boring stories of glory days.”

Bruce Springsteen – “Glory Days” - 1984

It’s been 7 years now since the unfortunate die-off of thousands of fish on the Lower Klamath River, and the stirrers of all that stinks on the Klamath have, unfortunately, and predictably, surfaced again. And yes, they are stirring it up again, doing their best to create a state of fear on the Klamath and desperately hoping that someone will listen to their aging, faded, and lie-riddled arguments.

Oregon Wild (formerly Oregon Natural Resources Council) and WaterWatch of Oregon representatives somehow managed to hoodwink the editorial staff at the *Portland Oregonian* to run a recent opinion piece that resurrects old, fantastic, and myth-based arguments.

Historic agreements will soon be signed that will emphasize a comprehensive, coordinated and collaborative approach to solving Klamath watershed challenges and the activation of a process that could lead to removal of some Klamath River dams. The extremists at Oregon Wild and WaterWatch apparently think a last-minute appeal to the readers of the *Oregonian* opinion pages will somehow garner sympathy for their preferred method of problem-solving: litigation and malicious press attacks against family farmers.

The enviros’ latest appeal is based on faulty and deliberately misleading information that-along with the recommendations posed by these groups - must be treated with skepticism. Consider just a few of the claims thrown out by Oregon Wild and WaterWatch to the readers of the *Oregonian*:

Myth: *Excessive water withdrawals in the drought year of 2002 caused the largest fish kill in the history of the West.*

Reality: Man, this myth gets bigger and better every year! At first, Oregon Wild and their ilk said that this die-off was the worst ever on the Klamath River. Then, with time....it became the worst fish die-off in the history of the West coast. And now...holy cow!....it’s somehow morphed into the worst fish kill in the history of the whole West!

The 70,000 dead fish number is not an actual number - it is a statistical projection, and one that has been questioned by many scientists. The actual number of fish counted was much lower, and that number, in fact, is an order of magnitude less than other recent events where fish have died in the West. The latest occurrence happened in July, where hundreds of thousands of fish washed ashore at Lake Elsinore, California.

Myth: In 2002, salmon were “*poisoned by hot, disease-filled waters drawn too low by irrigation diversions. Low flows were at the root of the fish kill.*”

Reality: as much as environmental extremists love to revel in favorable media coverage and resurrect the unfortunate memories of 2002, the courts and independent fishery scientists have not confirmed their irresponsible accusations. For example, the chairman of a committee of the National Research Council (NRC) testified at a July 2007 congressional oversight hearing and addressed the issue of whether management of water by the Klamath Project – hundreds of miles upstream - was responsible for withholding the pulse of flow that would have allowed the salmon to migrate upstream.

“The NRC committee concluded that this is very unlikely,” he said.

Myth: The tragic scene from 2002 was all part of political machinations orchestrated from the White House.

Reality: In 2003, presidential hopeful John Kerry requested that U.S. Interior Department Inspector General Earl Devaney investigate the White House and Karl Rove’s alleged role in the Klamath fish die-off. In a March 1, 2004 letter to Kerry, advising him of the results of the investigation, Devaney said his investigators interviewed all the officials and reviewed all the documents involved in the decision. Devaney ultimately found that the administration process followed in this matter “did not deviate from the norm.” Devaney wrote, “We found nothing to tie Karl Rove’s comments or presentation to the Klamath decision-making process.”

A hearing conducted by the U.S. House of Representatives Resources Committee in July 2007 did absolutely nothing to strengthen the accusations and claims made by critics of the Bush Administration and its handling of Klamath matters. Those who claimed that Vice-President Cheney somehow used his influence to kill fish on the Klamath River in 2002, and the witnesses who testified towards this end, offered up no evidence linking the Vice President or any other high-level Bush Administration appointee to alleged political skullduggery on the Klamath.

Oregon Wild and WaterWatch apparently miss the glory days of 7 years ago, when the national media quickly accepted their accusations that Klamath project family farmers were responsible for a very unfortunate event on the Klamath River. But, they may be right in one regard, as noted in the *Oregonian* column – it IS time to write a new chapter in the story of the Klamath.

Let’s just make sure that chapter is based on fact, and not fiction.