

If it Bleeds....It Leads

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With the new Congress having conducted over 600 oversight hearings so far, even Klamath Basin farmers and dead fish are getting pulled into the ever widening oversight net. On July 31, the House Natural Resources Committee ("Committee") conducted an oversight hearing entitled "Crisis of Confidence: The Political Influence of the Bush Administration on Agency Science and Decision-Making." As has generally been the case on all matters Klamath, the mainstream media coverage of the hearing was incomplete and biased.

While the focus of the hearing was originally intended to address claims made by Democrats (based on a June front page article in the *Washington Post*) that Vice President Dick Cheney (allegedly) over-rode scientists to give Klamath Project farmers water in 2002 - thereby (allegedly) killing over 30,000 fish in the lower Klamath River that fall - other topics of interest to Western water users were also discussed. These included (allegations of) political interference on California Bay-Delta water decisions and the role of peer-reviewed science in water resources decision-making.

By the time the day-long hearing ended, nothing had been presented to strengthen the accusations and claims made by critics of the Bush Administration and its handling of Klamath matters. Those who claimed that Mr. Cheney somehow used his influence to roll the National Academy of Sciences and 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. Consider the following:

1. The witness who the anti-farming environmental groups have relied upon the most - "Whistleblower" Mike Kelly - admitted that he had no direct exposure to purported Vice-Presidential heavy-handed tactics in 2002;
2. A high-ranking official in the Interior Department's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) admitted that if Dick Cheney had used his influence to change Klamath water management, that likely would have been discovered in an earlier OIG report that found no such political influence exerted by anyone in the Bush Administration;
3. The Chairman of the National Research Council (NRC) committee that provided recommendations on Klamath in no uncertain terms denied that his committee's work was tampered with by politicians;
4. This same witness re-stated the NRC committee's finding that Klamath Project operations in 2002 had little - if any - effect on the die-off of salmon on the Klamath River.

Environmental activists and their allies in Congress quickly found a way to put a positive spin on the mess that came out of the committee hearing. A press statement released after the hearing by Chairman Rahall suggests that further investigation into Mr. Cheney's Klamath involvement is justified because the earlier OIG report only focused on Karl Rove.

The mainstream media appeared ready to accept that explanation. "*Cheney overlooked in Klamath inquiry*" was the headline in the Associated Press article on the hearing, which opened its story with, "The Interior Department's inspector general did not find political interference by Vice President Dick Cheney on a key environmental policy in part because investigators were not looking for it..."

The *Washington Post* article on the hearing was short and buried within the inside pages. *The Post* also appeared to accept Chairman Rahall's explanation: The OIG in 2004 did not find any evidence of Mr. Cheney's involvement because he was not looking for it and he was not looking for it because nobody gave him reason to believe that the Vice President was involved.

What truly stands out and what is regrettable in the media coverage is the lack of attention paid to the very significant hearing developments noted above. This hearing was driven primarily by allegations made by the *Washington Post*, and the hard evidence presented at the hearing that countered those claims was simply not reported in most media accounts.

The hearing utterly failed in fulfilling its original purported intent to provide more information on the Cheney-Klamath relationship. Virtually every argument made trying to link Bush Administration political interference to dead salmon on the Klamath River was shot out of the water. But still, critics of President Bush appear to be set on further pursuing these matters as part of a larger strategy to paint the Administration as a place where politics reign supreme, at the expense of the scientific process and the environment. Apparently, quotes in the *Washington Post* hold more sway with the House Natural Resources Committee leadership than unbiased investigations and National Research Council studies that say otherwise.

And reporters with urban newspapers continue to report one side of the story – an inaccurate perspective that will, nevertheless, allow their headlines to comply with the old adage "If it bleeds, it leads".