

## **There's Something Fishy in the Media....**

By Dan Keppen

As the month of March rolled in, West Coast readers were greeted to newspaper headlines that predict dire times for Pacific salmon fishermen. From Coos Bay to San Diego, newspapers have highlighted a potential decision by federal regulators to put 700 miles of the Pacific coast "off-limits" to Chinook salmon fishing.

This, of course, is a hugely important issue to West Coast commercial fishermen, because the health of the Klamath River salmon stock has a dominant impact on the ability of fishermen to make a living at distances far up and down the coast from the mouth of the Klamath.

It's tough to see what the fishermen are going through. While the *Redding Record-Searchlight* on March 2<sup>nd</sup> theorized that Klamath farmers might take a grim satisfaction in seeing fishing fleets in the same boat they were in during the disastrous water curtailment of 2001, I haven't talked to a single irrigator who shares this cynical view.

While the plight of the fishermen should not be minimized, it is always interesting to me to see a sudden media barrage related to the Klamath River periodically erupt in urban papers. I've seen it happen several times in the past few years.

For example, when dead fish began to appear near the mouth of the Klamath River in September 2002, I was astounded to see reporters and editorial boards from Portland to Los Angeles immediately point to the Klamath Project (located 200 miles upstream from the die-off) and the Bush Administration's policies as the causes, despite very little evidence to support these claims.

While the media and certain environmental activist organizations continue to perpetuate the opinion that Project operations killed those fish, that finding was not supported by a federal judge in Oakland or by an independent assessment completed by the National Academy of Sciences.

A similar media blitz occurred in 2003. Vocal critics of Klamath Project operations and the Bush Administration used the die-off anniversary to renew their now-familiar arguments. These same interests even attempted to directly link the fish die-off to political maneuvering orchestrated by senior Bush policy officials. As a result, presidential hopeful John Kerry called on the U.S. Interior Department's Inspector General to look into whether "political pressure from the White House" was "intimidating staff and influencing policy" in Klamath River management decisions. This claim was broadcast in prominent headlines in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times* and *Portland Oregonian*.

Conversely, the silence was deafening when the March 2004 report released by the inspector general found no basis for Senator Kerry's claim. While Inspector General Earl Devaney's report found "no evidence of political influence affecting the decisions pertaining to the water in the Klamath Project", the papers that originally gleefully reported on the purported White House shenanigans apparently decided not to report on the Devaney findings.

Looking back at urban newspaper coverage of Klamath issues, you can tell that the spin-masters in the environmental community obviously have a very chummy relationship with these papers. You always see the same anti-farming interests quoted, and their message is always the same. It ignores a multitude of factors that we all know affect fish, and instead focuses instead on two years, 2001 (when Project farmers were denied water for the first time in 95 years, with no fish die-off) with 2002 (when farmers full supplies were restored to typical levels, but an unprecedented 33,000 salmon died downstream). Clearly, these advocates claim, the Bush Administration's decision to provide water to the farmers has to be the reason those fish perished.

You will see a similar message in the latest media blitz. The focus of the environmental groups continues to be on flows, with an increased emphasis on removal of hydroelectric dams. Of course, they continue to get their licks in on President Bush and his appointed policy makers, the focus of a recent front page story in the *New York Times*.

The focus on Iron Gate flows continues to puzzle me, especially when you consider that Klamath Project irrigators in the years of the Bush Administration clearly gave up more water to the environment (between 20,000 and 100,000 acre-feet of Project water each year between 2002-2005, not including the 2001 curtailment year) than during the Clinton years. And yet, somehow, the current administration manages to get the blame for short-changing the fish. Plus, if fish need cold water, why the heck would you want to pull more water from warm, shallow and nutrient-rich Upper Klamath Lake?

Granted, the other salmon stressor that draws the fixation of environmentalists - the set of hydro dams on the main stem - was identified by USFWS as one of the most important eight factors "most frequently referred to with regard to recent population declines of anadromous fish in the Klamath River". However, there are other factors also identified that don't get the same media emphasis, including natural flood and drought conditions, and predation by brown trout and sea lions. And, incidentally, that same USFWS study failed to identify Klamath Irrigation Project operations as a key factor to declining Klamath salmon numbers.

Meanwhile, with the focus in U.S. urban papers on Klamath River flows and dams, our neighbors to the north are looking for answers in another direction. A British Columbia news article on March 4 discussed low returning sockeye numbers to the Fraser River, and quietly reported that "researchers primarily blame poor marine survival, caused by warm ocean temperatures that drastically reduced nutrients across the food chain."

*Ocean conditions affecting salmon?*

Maybe, but that sure isn't going to sell papers in San Francisco.

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