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FEDERAL GOVERNMENT CALLS OFF FOOD PRODUCTION,
SHUNS WILDLIFE, IN THE KLAMATH BASIN

Today, the United States Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) said that irrigation districts that provide water to family farms and national wildlife refuges should immediately cease all diversion of water from Upper Klamath Lake, the major water storage reservoir for the Klamath Project (Project).

The move is the latest chapter in a two-decade history of requiring ever-higher levels of flow in the Klamath River, and water surface elevations in Upper Klamath Lake, both ostensibly for protection of threatened or endangered fish species. The policy has caused severe damage to rural communities, food production, and terrestrial wildlife, with no identifiable benefit for the target fish species.

Klamath Water Users Association (KWUA) Executive Director and Counsel Paul Simmons said that drought is a factor this year, but in the Klamath Basin, reckless federal water management is the real problem. “This irrigation season, there will be about 335,000 acre-feet of inflow to Upper Klamath Lake, yet the government is requiring that 407,000 acre-feet be released for Klamath River flows, and that Upper Klamath Lake end the year at elevations far above any level ever claimed to be necessary for endangered suckers species,” he said.

In mid-April, Reclamation announced that the water supply for producers and wildlife would be about 15 percent of the actual demand. KWUA estimates that about 100 square miles of otherwise productive Project farmland (roughly one-third of total Project acreage) will have received zero water this year, and all of the rest will receive very limited water.

KWUA President Ben DuVal said that farmers are mystified by the federal government’s insistence on shutting down farms, especially amid global food insecurity. “There are thousands and thousands of acres of some of the planet’s finest farmland that are infested with noxious weeds and literally blowing away in dust storms because of misguided federal water policy,” said Mr. DuVal. “We want to work. We are ready and willing to grow food. All we need to do is add water.”

Although Reclamation’s April 2022 announcement for water deliveries was disappointing to local water users, there was abundant precipitation in the basin between mid-April and June. This triggered hope within the local farming community that there would be more water

available for diversion and delivery for food production and wildlife this year. Instead, the federal agencies made a decision that was based on politics, not science, and withheld readily available water from farmers who needed it.

Tulelake Irrigation District Manager Brad Kirby said that there is great concern that some food crops may die in the field. “For some crops like alfalfa, we are looking at severely reduced production,” said Mr. Kirby. “But for row crops like potatoes and onions, there is essentially no production unless you have water through the end of the irrigation season.”

Today’s federal action virtually guarantees that there will be no water deliveries to Lower Klamath and Tule Lake National Wildlife Refuges for the foreseeable future. For the first time ever, both refuges are bone dry.

Mr. DuVal said that farmers are sickened by denial of water that would support waterfowl, reptiles, and amphibians on both federal and non-federal land. “My farm is just down the road from Tulelake National Wildlife Refuge,” he said. “This area once hosted 80 percent of the Pacific Flyway’s migrating waterfowl. Now, I can’t bring myself to even go look at the federally-created disaster taking place on that refuge.”

This year’s water management comes on the heels of 2021, where the federal government shut down Project irrigation entirely.

“Last year, the government dictated zero Project water diversions for the first time in the 115 years of the Project,” said KWUA Vice President Ry Kliewer, a hay and grain producer. “Between last year and this year, my production is about 25 percent of normal. Meanwhile, the bills I have to pay are skyrocketing.”

Klamath Irrigation District Executive Director and Manager Gene Souza said that irrigation water management this year has been even more complicated because of ever-changing information. “Since April, there has been a cascade of confusing, conflicting information from the federal government, that has continued right through today,” said Mr. Souza, whose district operates A Canal, the Project’s largest diversion. “You can’t run an irrigation project, an irrigation district, or a farm this way. It’s irresponsible and absurd.”

Mr. Kirby added that the investment already made in crops that may fail is enormous.

According to Mr. Souza, districts and producers hope only that Project operations will be guided by law and science. “We in the Project pray for judicial clarity and an honest approach to science,” he said. “We will accept objective assessments when we have them, and we will move on from there.”

Mr. Souza, Mr. Kirby, and Klamath Drainage District Manager Scott White, all said that their governing boards are scrambling to schedule emergency meetings to evaluate their alternatives and responses to today’s federal instruction.

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