

Saving Lake Abert was focus of BBR symposium

By **Jim Anderson**
Correspondent

Professor Frank Conte, retired OSU limnology professor (emeritus) living in Camp Sherman, has a long love affair with Oregon's only salt lake, Lake Abert, located in Lake County. He used Lake Abert as a living textbook for his OSU students' studies, and sent graduates out to follow careers in water-related work over the years he taught at OSU.

However, the object of Prof. Conte's affection is — as we speak — dying. This undeniable fact has plagued Conte for years, and each year his frustration has become more acute. As a result, he has contacted resource managers, conservationists and politicians again and again — all to no avail.

Last Friday and Saturday, Conte took another step toward creating awareness of Lake Abert's situation by putting on a two-day Lake Abert educational symposium, sharing what is known about the lake's past, present condition, resources and future.

The symposium began at

the Camp Sherman headquarters of the conservation group Conte leads, High Lakes Aquatic Alliance Foundation (HLAAF) under the title: Lower Chewaucan Aquatic Ecosystem. (Chewaucan is pronounced, She-wah-can, a Warm Springs Confederated Tribal name.)

The kick-off speaker was Dr. Ron Larson, retired USFWL wildlife biologist, who spoke about "Lower Chewaucan Basin Ecosystem-Model of Drought Impact on Water Levels of Lake Abert."

Like Prof. Conte, Dr. Larson shares an extensive working relationship with Lake Abert, and is as concerned about the present condition of the lake as Conte. Larson spoke of what drought is doing to the lake, the irreplaceable brine shrimp fishery, vanishing shorebird habitat and ecosystem that are in such jeopardy.

He was followed by climatologist Dr. Stephen Bieda, who addressed the science that is resulting in the Great Basin drought, and affecting the snow cover of the Cascades. Dr. Bieda's collection of data

left no stone unturned as he addressed the reasons behind the present drought, and what we can expect in the future. However, he qualified much of his work by speaking about the problems of coming up with a full picture of what many are calling climate change, when he addressed "the things we know we don't know."

Dr. Bieda's data collection left no questions as to what is causing the present — and upcoming — drought that is affecting Lake Abert and much of the Great Basin; data other scientists can hang their hat on. The only question that remains unanswered is: "WHY?"

The afternoon session provided private water-users of the Chewaucan River to state their vision of their uses of the water as it flows on its way to become what will be Lake Abert.

Conrad Weiler, a resident member of HLAAF living in Camp Sherman, had this to say about the afternoon session:

"One of the saddest stories came from one of Lake Abert's fishermen and his wife. 'We've had our (brine shrimp) fishing

business at Lake Abert for 35 years, and it's gone,' he said. 'I just want the answer to what's causing this.' Nobody in the audience had one.

"One of the better points made during the afternoon session was the need for everyone involved with Lake Abert to come together and try for a solution, rather than battling each other with blame. Whether alfalfa, hay, or cattle were taking more water from the Chewaucan River as it flows into Lake Abert, it appears there is just less water as drought conditions continue. It also appears from projection data that this dry condition will continue."

The all-day Saturday HLAAF symposium held at Black Butte Ranch began with an address by Professor Conte regarding the educational objectives of this session, and his hope for feedback on what was addressed during the two days.

He was followed by Dr. Lewis W. Oring, retired professor (emeritus) of natural resources from the University of Nevada, Reno, presented

findings on shorebirds demonstrating the irreplaceable role of Lake Abert as a refueling resource for shorebirds about to begin their long, non-stop migratory flight to South America.

Dr. Annette Henry, biologist for NOAA working out of San Diego, California, talked with local shorebird rehabber Elise Wolf of Sisters. They enjoyed a long, detailed discussion on what they have seen and do when discovering grebes falling out of the sky after running out fuel.

Dr. Henry said: "It was worthwhile to get everyone together to engage in a conversation on Lake Abert. The educational section was very good—but we leave without a direction and knowing the next steps."

"I recommend forming a steering committee to create a path forward. The committee should be comprised of experts of different areas of the lake. A panel of hydrologists should review the Lake Abert information to close the loopholes on the reasons for the lake drying up."

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