

Still Trying To Dam The River

by Jim Stiak

STATE AGENCIES, FISHERMEN, archaeologists and white-water rafters have rallied against it, but the city of Klamath Falls hasn't given up on its plan to dam the last free-flowing stretch of the Klamath River.

Tumbling through the southern Cascade and Siskiyou mountains from its headwaters east of Crater Lake, the Klamath River cuts a deep canyon sacred to the Shasta, Modoc and Klamath Indians. Until this century, the tribes would gather into large villages there when the salmon ran thick as spring mosquitoes. Artifacts from these villages have been radio-carbon dated at over 7000 years, making them the oldest continuously occupied sites in Oregon.

In 1895, the first hydroelectric project was built on the Klamath River. Four more followed over the next half century, including the JC Boyle, whose controlled release of water led to the river's discovery by rafters in 1979. The 18 miles below the Boyle's powerhouse—the last Oregon stretch unscarred by bulldozers and cement mixers—is "one of the top ten whitewater rivers in the country," according to one commercial outfitter's brochure. In dry summers, when many other western rivers slow to trickles, Klamath rafters are guaranteed a bountiful supply of crashing foam from Pacific Power & Light, Boyle's operators, who have timed their releases with organized river expeditions. But what the power company giveth, the power company can taketh away.

In 1985 the city of Klamath Falls applied to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) for permission to build a sixth dam on the Klamath River, near a site known as Salt Caves. Their \$131 million proposal—scaled down from the original plan—would flood two archaeological sites under a 70 acre reservoir, and create several miles of concrete chute running along what would be left of the river below.

Proponents of the dam see it as a matter of economic necessity for a severely depressed region. The \$3-10 million annual revenues from the dam would fund an "Operation Bootstrap" which would finance new businesses to create jobs. "We're losing thousands of people a year, over 150 businesses over the last couple years," says project spokesman C. Michael Hartfield. "This is one heck of a good project to pump money into a region that desperately needs it."

Many people, however, question the need for the dam's electricity in a regional power grid already operating at surplus. "Who needs it?" asks Klamath County Commissioner Roger Hamilton. "They're not going to use the power, they're just going to go into the power business."

Klamath Falls mayor George Flitcraft searched the west coast for financing for the project, but eventually found it in his own backyard. A Klamath Falls company called Trendwest provided \$2.5 million for preliminary studies in exchange for free fire protection on one of their developments and 12 percent of the dam's net revenues for the period of the federal license—about 25 years. It was, says commissioner Hamilton, "a pretty sweet deal."

So sweet that Flitcraft and six other city officials have been



KLAMATH CANYON, BEFORE THE DAM

PHOTO BY JIM STIAK

"Like driving a bulldozer through a church"

fined \$1400 each by the state ethics commission for a Trendwest-sponsored trip to New York. Sweeter still when Klamath Falls city manager Harold Derrah left his position to take a job with Trendwest, and the city issued \$250 million in bonds to underwrite the costs of the Salt Caves Project.

Their plans quickly hit rough seas. White water adventurers were particularly outraged at the impending loss of their newly found treasure. "The dam would destroy this area's only world-class recreational attraction," said Hamilton. To appease those concerns, the project managers proposed to develop nearby Pelican Butte as a winter ski area. Only in the Orwellian logic of regulatory mitigation can the loss of one wild area be offset by the loss of yet another.

Fishermen had other objections. Salmon had long since been eliminated on the upper Klamath by the two downstream dams without fish ladders, but steelhead and rainbow, drawn by the abundance of nutrients flowing from Klamath Lake, had turned the river into what one angler called "the top trout-producing stream in the Northwest."

Others opposed the destruction of sites sacred to Native

Americans. Says Elliot Gehr, archaeologist in charge of the preliminary excavations of the area, "building a dam there would be like driving a bulldozer through a church."

In 1985, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife criticized the project for its environmental impact. This August, the state Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) refused a permit for the dam, ruling that the increased water temperatures it would create could endanger the river's rainbow trout.

Project promoters, unhappy with the DEQ's decision, have appealed it, and launched a media blitz in the Willamette Valley to win support for their dam. "We didn't expect the state to disregard facts," says Hartfield. "They found we were warming the water one to two degrees—that's within the error of the computer model."

"We will continue to move forward as much as we can."

The fate of the Salt Caves Dam now rests in the hands of FERC, who will probably take at least a year to decide. The project managers would like to see it on line by 1994, but unless the DEQ changes their decision, admits Hartfield, FERC will not grant approval. For now, Oregon's last stretch of wild Klamath, home to eagles, otters and ancient spirits, flows uninhibitedly to the sea.

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