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Brainstorm meeting
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Death of Klamath fish revives cultural conflicts

A drought emergency in southern Oregon rekindles debates over water rights

Jody Burruss
 Environment/Science/Technology Reporter

When University history major Beth Juhas visited Klamath Falls on Memorial Day, she was surprised to see a sign reading "No Indians Served Here" hanging in the window of a local restaurant.

The town was in an uproar over the recent decision to halt irrigation use in order to protect endangered fish species.

Many of the tribes in the area have been outspoken on the importance of protecting these fish, which are a part of their culture.

Gov. John Kitzhaber's declaration of a drought emergency in March 2001 started the debate. Drought conditions created a greater need for already-scarce water to irrigate farmland. But because endangered sucker and coho salmon inhabit the Klamath River, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released a biological opinion saying the minimum level of Upper Klamath Lake must be raised, even though it was a drought year.

Based on this opinion and the mandates of the Endangered Species Act, the Bureau of Reclamation, which controls water use, announced on April 4, 2001, that no water would be available from the lake for irrigation. That decision left farmers high and dry.

Although they were offered some assistance to compensate their losses, huge debates and



Courtesy photo

Yurok tribe officials say low water levels on the Klamath River are to blame for the deaths of 20,000 to 30,000 fish within the last month.

protests ensued over water rights.

Eventually, a peer review of the scientific opinions by the National Academy of Sciences rendered the decision baseless, and the water was turned back on.

The Yurok tribe is one of the main groups contesting the release of water for irrigation, which they say may have contributed to the deaths of 20,000 to 30,000 fish along the Klamath River in the past month.

The fish die-off threatens the economic, cultural and religious future of the Yurok, tribe Executive Director Troy Fletcher said.

USFWS Service Director Steve Williams said Oct. 2 in a teleconference call that there is not yet any direct evidence of what caused the die-off.

"Given the limited data, at this point we consider it premature to draw conclusions," Williams said. "There are too many unanswered questions. We are gathering facts and aggressively seeking answers."

Fred Olmey, senior scientist at the USFWS's Portland office, said fish often die of natural causes, such as predation, previous injury and disease.

But the Yurok tribe believes the deaths are not from natural causes, and they have strong ideas about what caused the die-off that is now affecting their livelihood. According to tribe members, the scarce amount of water being released upriver is to blame.

"For years, we've been asking for more water, and (governmental agencies have) ignored our pleas," Fletcher said.

But Williams said that water volume at the time the die-off began was higher than it had been during the same month in three of the past 11 years.

Bureau of Reclamation spokesman Jeff McCracken said the bureau began releasing emergency pulses of water in response

to the fish deaths. This lasted for two weeks but stopped Thursday.

The following morning, hundreds of tribal members and concerned community members gathered at the dam where the water was shut off to protest and speak out. Ray Matilton of the Hupa tribe, another group concerned with fish populations, said people are worried about water levels being lowered again because this will cause new problems.

Eggs are often spawned in gravel areas, he said. When the water level is lowered, many of these areas will become exposed, killing the eggs.

"We're following the judgment of all the biologists," McCracken said. "We're hoping this won't create an additional problem."

Fletcher said there will be long-term effects from the die-off because the dead fish are not replaceable. The Yurok tribe has an integral relationship with the river and the salmon. The fish play an important role in religious ceremonies, and the tribe depends on them for subsistence and economic sustainability.

But to their tribe — and other tribes that depend on the Klamath for fish — the battle is not only about the money they will lose, but about their way of life.

"Money is just money," Fletcher said. "But the fish mean more to us, and they're at the center of our existence."

"We're salmon people. We have a great dependence on the salmon and the river."

The Yurok tribe plans to move forward with litigation to prevent low water levels from continuing in the future.

"We need to take care of the river system, and the river system will take care of the fish," Fletcher said.

Contact the reporter at jodyburruss@dailyemerald.com.

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