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Opinion

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Our View

Reclamation must take lead in resolving Klamath problems

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has 5,425 employees, many with advanced degrees in specialized areas such as water law, endangered species, hydrology — all matters related to water.

Why is it, then, that the farmers and others within the bureau's Klamath Project have for decades been subjected to the whims and vagaries of an agency that talks a good game about resolving the problems there but doesn't do much?

During a year when the precipitation is plentiful, the agency seems to utter a collective sigh of relief.

During years when there isn't enough water, the agency sues the irrigators, as if that will in some way solve the problem.

To properly frame the plight of the farmers within the Klamath Project, one must go back to the beginning. The 225,000-acre project was one of the first by the Reclamation Service, now the Bureau of Reclamation. It has seven dams, 28 pump stations and 717 miles of canals to deliver water to



Oregon Conservation Commission/Wikipedia
The main canal of the Klamath Project in 1908.

farmland and 728 miles of drainage canals.

Altogether a massive undertaking, much of it aimed at enticing World War I veterans to farm the area by providing them with free land. Those pioneering families withstood many hardships to make the dream of farming a reality.

The project's water now supports 1,400 farms, which grow many types of crops, from wheat and potatoes to onions and horseradish.

This was before Congress overlaid the Endangered Species Act on the nation, changing forever how the proj-

ect would be managed.

The ESA presented Reclamation's Klamath managers with a double-edged sword. Water was needed in the Upper Klamath Lake for protected sucker fish at the same time it was needed downstream in the Klamath River for spawning coho salmon.

Caught in the middle were farmers, whose livelihoods depended on that same water. Under the ESA, the farmers lose out every time.

The ESA has always been a deeply flawed law. When it was drafted, many in Congress had the plight of the bald eagle in mind, not minor species or tiny populations of species. The ESA requires resource managers to bow to endangered species no matter the cost to people.

Which brings us back to the Bureau of Reclamation. Recently, the bureau's new commissioner, Camille Touton, visited the Klamath Project. She was not reassuring, suggesting new piping, repairing old infrastructure and the like.

She also made it sound as if Oregon's leaders were in charge of a project that in every way is her

responsibility.

An aside: Oregon's leadership has been less than effective in handling many of the state's water issues. While chattering about "stopping" climate change — even though Oregon produces only 0.17% of global atmospheric carbon — it's as though many legislators are ignoring the water issues and the people pleading for help.

It should be noted that Idaho and California have efforts underway to store more water, while Oregon is largely silent, even in the drought-stricken central part of the state that includes much of the Klamath Project.

We suggest the experts at Reclamation sit down individually with the interested parties within the Klamath Project and then present several options to them. Then at least everyone will know what the possibilities are.

Then they need to reach some level of consensus and move forward.

We all know this: The ESA is a mess, and the status quo is unworkable during drought years. The fish may survive but the farmers suffer.

Our View



Capital Press File

Houses sprout up on former farmland.

Preserving farmland must be a priority

Mark Twain is credited with telling readers to buy land because, he warned, they aren't making more of it. Unfortunately, farmland sold too often is put to other uses and is lost forever.

A new report from the American Farmland Trust warns that the Pacific Northwest stands to lose more than half a million acres of farmland to urban sprawl by 2040 unless cities make smarter development choices.

Between 2000 and 2016 alone, roughly 11 million acres of farmland has been lost or fragmented by development.

Across the Northwest, as many as 527,185 acres of additional farmland may be lost to urban and low-density residential development by 2040 — particularly in rapidly growing metro areas around the Puget Sound, Portland, Spokane and Boise.

Washington would be the hardest-hit state, losing 238,614 acres of farmland under the worst-case scenario. That is an area roughly 4 1/2 times the size of Seattle.

Oregon would lose up to 142,267 acres of farmland, while Idaho would lose up to 146,304 acres.

Our own reporting has shown that when urban development moves into rural spaces more than farmland can be lost. As areas fall to other uses, the overall viability of the local ag infrastructure comes into jeopardy.

As fields give way to housing developments, conflicts between

homeowners and farms increase.

New residents don't like the dust and smells associated with farm production, complain about farm machinery on the roads, and trucks during harvest time.

And, as developments break up the landscape, farmers find it ever more difficult to move equipment from field to field.

We can't fault farm families for getting the highest value for their property. Where there are buyers, there will be sellers.

As an alternative to development, we favor easement programs that allow owners to sell their development rights and realize the market value of their land while preserving it for farming.

We encourage state legislatures to fund those types of programs while taking steps to rein in urban sprawl.

Preserving farmland must be a priority.

When developers look at farm and range land, they see "empty" spaces with nothing on it. They see parcels for subdivisions, apartment buildings, shopping malls and restaurants.

Farmland is far from empty. It provides the food that sustains us and the fiber that clothes us. It is a vital strategic resource. It is, as Thomas Jefferson said, the wealth of the nation.

Farmland is more than just a patch of ground with stuff planted on it. Once paved over and developed, it cannot be replaced.

Council helps build foundation of trust for revision of forest plan

The Blues Intergovernmental Council (BIC) supports the USDA Forest Service's plans to reinstate Forest Plan Revision for the Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests. The work completed by the BIC over the past two years has established key foundations that will be crucial components of an improved Forest Plan Revision process by reflecting local values, incorporating input and providing robust opportunities for meaningful engagement.

On March 14, 2019, the Forest Service Deputy Chief issued instruction to the Forest Service Pacific Northwest Regional Forester to withdraw the Blue Mountains Revised Land Management Plans, Final Environmental Impact Statement and draft Record of Decision. This decision came after nearly 15 years of a highly contentious public planning process in which numerous community members and leaders felt frustrated, misunderstood, and ignored. The objection process yielded over 350 objections to the Forest Plans, which made clear that the public did not see how input provided had been incorporated nor did the plans fully account for the unique social and economic needs of the affected communities.

Following the withdrawal of the Blue Mountains Forest Plans, leadership from the Pacific Northwest Regional Office and the Malheur, Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests met with the Eastern Oregon Counties Association in April 2019 to coordinate, better understand concerns, and identify opportunities to approach forest planning and management in a new way. The participants recognized the need to explore unique approaches and work together at a larger scale, which included other government entities within and surrounding the Blue Mountains geographic area.

The various government entities officially formed the Blues Intergovernmental Council (BIC) in November 2019, to serve as an overarching entity and develop joint recommendations on the most contentious issues identified in the Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision process. The BIC members include leaders from all 14 local counties, as well as federal, state, and tribal government entities. The diverse membership of the BIC ensures numerous perspectives and interests are represented.

Over the two years since the BIC formed, members worked together to develop desired conditions for Forest Service consideration on several key and previously polarizing issues in the withdrawn Blue Mountains Forest Plans, including riparian livestock grazing, fisheries, hydrology, forest health and access. The BIC also commissioned and oversaw the completion of a socioeconomic analysis that will offer data to help consider impacts of forest management decisions to local communities.

The BIC-endorsed desired conditions serve as recommendations to the Forest Service to inform the

Forest Plan Revision process (with a minority report included for the access issue). The collective work over the past two years has fostered trust and strengthened relationships between the key intergovernmental groups within the BIC and the Forest Service.

GUEST VIEW

Susan Roberts

The BIC members and leadership from the Blue Mountains National Forests feel this unique approach will provide a crucial foundation for success in accomplishing Forest Plan Revision for the

Blue Mountains in a timely manner. By building off the past plan revision analysis, the BIC's endorsed desired conditions, products, and connections that each member has with various community perspectives, we have an exceptional opportunity to develop updated Forest Plans for these National Forests that provide for the sustainable needs of the landscape and the needs of current and future generations.

Building off these accomplishments, the BIC believes that the Forest Service should move forward with the plan revision process under the 2012 Planning Rule, with the goal of working together to develop sustainable Forest Plans that reflect local values, incorporate input, and provide robust opportunities for meaningful engagement. We support the Forest Service's plan to establish a local team and would urge this be done as quickly as possible to maintain the forward momentum the BIC has achieved in these last two years. By working together through this intergovernmental forum, the BIC can serve as a bridge between the Forest Service and communities surrounding the Blue Mountains to help repair and build trust, provide clarity about the planning process and plan components, complement Forest Service public outreach efforts, and bring continual feedback to the Forest Service regarding ways to improve the process or products.

While there will still be passion around important issues, we feel that through the joint efforts between the BIC and the Forest Service we have built important relationships and developed key recommendations that address much of the previous controversy. This has built a solid foundation to move forward now with Plan Revision.

Thank you for the consideration and recognition of the vast progress that has been made in the Blue Mountains. We look forward to working together with the Forest Service to steward these National Forest lands in a way that provides for sustainable land management while considering the communities' economic and social-cultural health.

Susan Roberts, co-convenor of the Blues Intergovernmental Council, submitted this on behalf of the council. Website: <https://bit.ly/3O2vUID>