

Drought upends life at Oregon, California border

Tribes see fish die in droves

By GILLIAN FLACCUS
Associated Press

TULELAKE, Calif. — Ben DuVal knelt in a barren field near the California-Oregon state line and scooped up a handful of parched soil as dust devils whirled around him and birds flitted between empty irrigation pipes.

DuVal's family has farmed the land for three generations, and this summer, for the first time ever, he and hundreds of others who rely on irrigation from a depleted, federally managed lake aren't getting any water from it at all.

As farmland goes fallow, Native American tribes along the 257-mile long river that flows from the lake to the Pacific Ocean watch helplessly as fish that are inextricable from their diet and culture die in droves or fail to spawn in shallow water.

Just a few weeks into summer, a historic drought and its on-the-ground consequences are tearing communities apart in this diverse basin filled with flat vistas of sprawling alfalfa and potato fields, teeming wetlands and steep canyons of old-growth forests.

Competition over the water from the river has always been intense. But this summer there is simply not enough, and the farmers, tribes and wildlife refuges that have long competed for every drop now face a bleak and uncertain future together.

"Everybody depends on the water in the Klamath River for their livelihood. That's the blood that ties us all together. ... They want to have the opportunity to teach their kids to fish for salmon just like I want to have the opportunity to teach my kids how to farm," DuVal said of the downriver Yurok and Karuk tribes. "Nobody's coming out ahead this year. Nobody's winning."

With the decadeslong conflict over water rights reaching a boiling point, those living the nightmare worry the Klamath basin's unprecedented drought is a harbinger as global warming accelerates.

"For me, for my family, we see this as a direct result of climate change," said Frankie Myers, vice chairman of the Yurok Tribe, which is monitoring a massive fish kill where the river enters the ocean. "The system is crashing, not just for Yurok people ... but for people up and down the Klamath basin, and it's heartbreaking."

Roots of a crisis

Twenty years ago, when water feeding the farms was drastically reduced amid another drought, the crisis became a national rallying cry for the political right, and some protesters breached a fence and opened



Jamie Holt, lead fisheries technician for the Yurok Tribe, maneuvers a boat near a fish trap in the lower Klamath River.

Nathan Howard/AP Photo

the main irrigation canal in violation of federal orders.

But today, as reality sinks in, many irrigators reject the presence of anti-government activists who have once again set up camp. In the aftermath of the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, irrigators who are at risk of losing their farms and in need of federal assistance fear any ties to far-right activism could taint their image.

Some farmers are getting some groundwater from wells, blunting their losses, and a small number who get flows from another river will have severely reduced water for just part of the summer. Everyone is sharing what water they have.

"It's going to be people on the ground, working together, that's going to solve this issue," said DuVal, president of the Klamath Water Users Association. "What can we live with, what can those parties live with, to avoid these train wrecks that seem to be happening all too frequently?"

Meanwhile, toxic algae is blooming in the basin's main lake — vital habitat for endangered suckerfish — a month earlier than normal, and two national wildlife refuges that are a linchpin for migratory birds on the Pacific Flyway are drying out. Environmentalists and farmers are using pumps to combine water from two stagnant wetlands into one deeper to prevent another outbreak of avian botulism like the one that killed 50,000 ducks last summer.

The activity has exposed acres of arid, cracked landscape that likely hasn't been above water for thousands of years.

"There's water allocated that doesn't even exist. This is all unprecedented. Where do you go from here? When do you start having the larger conversation of complete unsustainability?" said Jamie Holt, lead fisheries technician for the Yurok Tribe, who counts dead juvenile Chinook salmon every day on the lower Klamath River.

"When I first started this job 23 years ago, extinction

was never a part of the conversation," she said of the salmon. "If we have another year like we're seeing now, extinction is what we're talking about."

The extreme drought has exacerbated a water conflict that traces its roots back more than a century.

Beginning in 1906, the federal government reengineered a complex system of lakes, wetlands and rivers in the 10 million-acre Klamath River basin to create fertile farmland. It built dikes and dams to block and divert rivers, redirecting water away from a natural lake spanning the California-Oregon border.

Evaporation then reduced the lake to one-quarter of its former size and created thousands of arable acres in an area that had been underwater for millennia.

In 1918, the U.S. began granting homesteads on the dried-up parts of Tule Lake. Preference was given to World War I and World War II veterans, and the Klamath Reclamation Project quickly became an agricultural powerhouse. Today, farmers there grow everything from mint to alfalfa to potatoes that go to In 'N Out Burger, Frito-Lay and Kettle Foods.

Water draining off the fields flowed into national wildlife refuges that continue to provide respite each year for tens of thousands of birds. Within the altered ecosystem, the refuges comprise a picturesque wetland oasis nicknamed the Everglades of the West that teems with white pelicans, grebes, herons, bald eagles, black-birds and terns.

Last year, amid a growing drought, the refuges got little water from the irrigation project. This summer, they will get none.

Speaking for the fish

While in better water years, the project provided some conservation for birds, it did not do the same for fish — or for the tribes that live along the river.

The farmers draw their water from the 96-square-mile Upper Klamath Lake, which is also home to suckerfish. The fish are central

to the Klamath Tribes' culture and creation stories and were for millennia a critical food source in a harsh landscape.

In 1988, two years after the tribe regained federal recognition, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed two species of suckerfish that spawn in the lake and its tributaries as endangered. The federal government must keep the extremely shallow lake at a minimum depth for spawning in the spring and to keep the fish alive in the fall when toxic algae blooms suck out oxygen.

This year, amid exceptional drought, there was not enough water to ensure those levels and supply irrigators. Even with the irrigation shutoff, the lake's water has fallen below the mandated levels — so low that some suckerfish were unable to reproduce, said Alex Gonyaw, senior fish biologist for the Klamath Tribes.

The youngest suckerfish in the lake are now nearly 30 years old, and the tribe's projections show both spe-

cies could disappear within the next few decades. It says even when the fish can spawn, the babies die because of low water levels and a lack of oxygen. The tribe is now raising them in captivity and has committed to "speak for the fish" amid the profound water shortage.

"I don't think any of our leaders, when they signed the treaties, thought that we'd wind up in a place like this. We thought we'd have the fish forever," said Don Gentry, Klamath Tribes chairman. "Agriculture should be based on what's sustainable. There's too many people after too little water."

But with the Klamath Tribes enforcing their senior water rights to help suckerfish, there is no extra water for downriver salmon — and now tribes on different parts of the river find themselves jockeying for the precious resource.

The Karuk Tribe last month declared a state of emergency, citing climate change and the worst hydrologic conditions in the Klam-

ath River basin in modern history. Karuk tribal citizen Aaron Troy Hockaday Sr. used to fish for salmon at a local waterfall with a traditional dip net. But he says he hasn't caught a fish in the river since the mid-1990s.

"I got two grandsons that are 3 and 1 years old. I've got a baby grandson coming this fall. I'm a fourth-generation fisherman, but if we don't save that one fish going up the river today, I won't be able to teach them anything about our fishing," he said. "How can I teach them how to be fishermen if there's no fish?"

'It's like a big, dark cloud'

The downstream tribes' problems are compounded by hydroelectric dams, separate from the irrigation project, that block the path of migrating salmon.

In most years, the tribes 200 miles to the southwest of the farmers, where the river reaches the Pacific, ask the Bureau of Reclamation to release pulses of extra water from Upper Klamath Lake. The extra flows mitigate outbreaks of a parasitic disease that proliferates when the river is low.

This year, the federal agency refused those requests, citing the drought.

Now, the parasite is killing thousands of juvenile salmon in the lower Klamath River, where the Karuk and Yurok tribes have coexisted with them for millennia. Last month, tribal fish biologists determined 97% of juvenile spring Chinook on a critical stretch of the river were infected; recently, 63% of fish caught in research traps near the river's mouth have been dead.

The die-off is devastating for people who believe they were created to safeguard the Klamath River's salmon and who are taught that if the salmon disappear, their tribe is not far behind.

Dr. Roy Little Retires from the Clatsop Care Health District Board after 30 Years

Dr. Roy Little began caring for the residents at Clatsop Care Center in 1990 as a part of his private medical practice. But, if you ask him when he officially engaged on the board of directors, the answer isn't so clear. "It's a mystery in time," recounts Dr. Little. "Back around '91 or '92 I started on the budget committee." And, it grew from there.

While the timeline might be murky, his dedication and compassion for Clatsop Care Health District (CCHD) are anything but.

In 30 years of service to the District, Dr. Little was involved in the creation of Clatsop Care Retirement Village and Clatsop Care Memory Community, two expansions that have gone to serve hundreds of people and will go on to serve hundreds more in the future.

Not one to boast, Dr. Little's proudest moments on the board aren't regarding his own actions, but the community as a whole. "It's a whole lot of things, but it's not so much about me. [I'm proud of] the support from the residents of the tax district, they had a willingness to help. When the

"I'm proud of the fact that the board was willing to take chances when it didn't seem like it would pencil out, but it did."

anti-tax sentiment had been high, they authorized a permanent levy in the 1990's. I'm also proud of the staff. The longevity of staff historically has been head-and-shoulders above others in our industry," notes Dr. Little. "they have a willingness to do the work for our community. And, I'm proud of the fact that the board was willing to take chances when it didn't seem like it would pencil out, but it did."

Dr. Little's kind-hearted and people-first approach to leadership has left a lasting impact on the board, the staff, and the community as a whole.

From the board and staff at Clatsop Care Health District, we say whole heartedly - thank you for everything, Roy!

for more information about Clatsop Care Health District, please visit www.ClatsopCare.org

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Fourth of July Parade
3 p.m. in Warrenton
S. Main Ave from SW 1st to 9th

Fireworks Display
10 p.m. in Astoria
Look to the sky over the Columbia River near downtown

With COVID safety in mind, we are asking for everyone's help to keep crowding to a minimum during this holiday weekend. Please be courteous to those around you, and pack out what you bring in, like food containers, personal fireworks & other garbage.



Thanks for making the 4th of July a blast!

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