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## KLAMATH BASIN IMPRESSIONS – A SUMMARY

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**DATE:** February 10, 2003  
**PAGES:** 3

Two reports have been compiled on impressions gained from a trip to the Klamath Basin January 25 to February 3, 2003 – a full report and a summary. This is the summary.

I met with 32 people in the Klamath Basin – Klamath County Commissioner Steven West; producers from the Sprague River and Poe valleys, as well as from Tulelake, Lower Klamath Lake and adjacent to the Straits Drain; Dan Keppen and 2 of his board members from the Klamath Water Users Association; officials from BOR and USDA; 2 extension service officers and 2 resource conservation district managers (one each in Oregon and California); an experiment station superintendent; an irrigation district manager; and a farm supplier. I also spoke by phone with Jeff Mitchell of the Klamath Tribal Council.

Each of these people shared thoughts and data with me, then reviewed a draft of the full report. I received comments on the draft from 25 of the 32 people. Their comments have been incorporated into the full report. Of those I heard from, no one dissented from the content (or the tone) of the report – although I did not hear back from Jeff Mitchell.

It was clear everyone wants to work out a solution. But there are pressures (and individual agendas) pushing against each other. **My impressions from the week can be summarized in 10 statements.** They are, in priority order:

- 1. There absolutely must be water for farmers and ranchers this year, including those above Upper Klamath Lake.** This is a tough issue, with a lot of difficult – *and expensive* – ramifications, no matter what decisions are made. For more detail, see the full report.
- 2. The right people on the ground with the right knowledge, expertise, dedication and ideas to fix ALL ASPECTS of this problem.** What they need is: a) TIME, b) the resources and authority necessary to move ahead, c) COOPERATION (without a lot of second-guessing) from everyone above them, and d) DÉTENTE or a moratorium on further litigation until solutions can be explored and implemented.
- 3. The Department of Interior must be extremely cautious in using current opinions on “levels” and “flows” as the basis for ANY decisions.** Current opinions appear to be based on *selective* information (a few hand picked years of record high precipitation, for example). Important scientific and historical data has been ignored that would lead to some very different conclusions. *Irreparable damage could be done – not just to the community, but to the species that are in jeopardy – by pursuing current opinions, if opposing views turn out to be correct.*

4. **One of the major problems in the basin does not have anything to do with farmers, Tribes, irrigation districts or water levels and flows. It's government. And it is one particular agency of government -- the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.** Lack of knowledge (or any desire to learn) about what is involved in farming, outright arrogance and a "mission from God" attitude have damaged relationships with and alienated townspeople, farmers, irrigation districts, other agencies of government and university researchers who have dared to question USFWS personnel or their data. I had the opportunity to see first hand the results of USFWS's water management, wildlife habitat management, and noxious weed and invasive species management on the Lower Klamath Lake Wildlife Refuge. *Abysmal* is the word that comes to mind. The very best place to begin improvements – in water savings and water quality – is on the waters at the end of the system, on the lands that are owned and managed by the USFWS.
5. **You must look upstream into the higher elevations of the watershed.** The region has experienced a major invasion of junipers over the past 100 years, which take up to 10 times more water than a pine tree. **Removal of junipers must be a top priority.** **Overstocked forests** are holding snowfall in the canopy of the trees, where it evaporates and is lost to the ground. Forest density contributes to the depletion of ground water because every tree uses water and takes it out of the system. The dense forest also is a fire hazard. If the forest burns too hot, it will be destroyed and downstream meadows (that absorb and retain water) will erode and be lost as natural water storage areas.
6. **Subsurface storage must be given more attention – allowing rivers like the Sprague, Williamson and Lost to overflow their banks in the spring so water is absorbed in the soil and not lost downstream, and flooding more fields in the winter when temperatures are cool and evaporation rates are low.** This will allow water to be stored in the soil, which will percolate up during late summer to recharge the system.
7. **Basic economic survival issues must be addressed.** Dan Keppen has some ideas on steps that can be taken to ensure ALL groups can benefit – and not be penalized or pitted one against the other – economically. All groups should set aside differences and listen to him very closely. The "Summary of Recent and Proposed Environmental Restoration and Water Conservation Efforts Undertaken by Klamath Water Users and Basin Landowners" that Dan prepared also is excellent. It shows what producers have done – and can continue doing – to help resolve the issues facing the region.

**The proposal I've made** – to work with producers to “assemble” existing programs through a one-stop shopping approach, that will facilitate ALL efforts to address problems in the region – **also may be of benefit to the Tribes.** Every one of the agency officials I spoke with, and every producer I spoke with, indicated a willingness to participate in this approach ... **starting immediately.** Several like Rick Woodley, District Manager for the Klamath Soil and Water Conservation District, responded by saying “What can we do to help?” Producers asked, “When can we start?” There is no need for a workshop. People are ready to go NOW, before planting starts in the spring.
8. **Government efforts are fragmented and stakeholder groups are polarized.** Most agency people I spoke with felt constrained by the limitations placed on them by agency missions, policies and programs. They all are very dedicated to their jobs and their agencies. But they recognize that they only have the ability (and authority) to deal with one piece of the problem. As one person said, “So long as people are fragmented in their approaches, we won't solve problems.”
9. **Actual progress on the ground since 2001 is in short supply, and of the projects that have been started and/or completed, at least half are of questionable value (or are not being carried out properly) and are creating negative feelings toward “government.”** The water marketing proposal advocated by the Klamath Rangeland Trust came under sharp criticism from almost everyone I spoke with. This has done more

to undermine confidence that the Federal Agency Working Group understands local issues and knows what they are doing than almost anything else. There also have been some very unfortunate, divisive comments by agency officials. Water users were incensed by Commissioner Keyes at a recent meeting in Fresno when the Commissioner said “You can either be compensated, or we can take the water.” Comments like that, the water user told me, only moves those with less patience that much closer to seeing civil disobedience as their only alternative.

**10. You need real solutions to address real problems.** The people working on this issue must be sure that every step they take is a real solution. You need to save “real water,” not “paper water.” The water bank approach may look good to many people – and may be politically expedient – but the fact is: “Taking land out [of production in the middle of the system] does not solve the problem,” according to several people I spoke with, “it only helps BOR meet the biological opinion.” Also, it is very clear that, if there is to be a water bank, the people who participate are going to require ironclad guarantees of water allocations for the remaining users. Without those guarantees, there will be no water bank.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO SUCCESS

400+ producers have signed up for the USDA’s Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and a “surprisingly large number” of producers have made commitments to make the transition from flood irrigation to sprinklers – a major step considering the uncertainties they are facing with water allocations and a potential 10-fold increase in electricity rates in 2006. **You’ll lose ALL of these people if they can’t farm this year.** Producers need *encouragement* to continue moving in this direction, not *discouragement*. Six obstacles to success are detailed in my full report. The most important are listed below (Items B & C are included in full report):

- A. It is very tough for producers to do improvements when they don’t know if they will receive water. Agency officials suggested:
  - if there is a drought, *cut back* don’t cut off;
  - ensure that cutbacks are equalized among all users downstream;
  - ensure allocations are spread across the entire growing season; a potato farmer who receives water in the spring but no water in August is out of business;
  - need to recognize that only 57% of the water coming out of the Klamath Basin moves through the Klamath Project prior to downstream discharges at Keno Dam -- and the Basin as a whole contributes only 10% of the historical water flows at the mouth of the Klamath River (hence, farmers should only be responsible for 57% percent of the water required for downstream flows below Keno Dam – and 5.7% of the problems at the river’s mouth).
- D. Need to resolve the “Catch 22” contained in the 2002-2012 allocation formulas, as dictated by NMFS. As one irrigation district official noted, “no matter how you do the math, it does not work.” The complaint is that, no matter how much water is in the system, farmers always will be behind.
- E. Need more information on the watershed. Currently do not know which actions will save water and which could cause unintended consequences. Where is the biggest benefit – removing junipers, dealing with overstocked forests, installing on-farm irrigation improvements, making wetland and habitat improvements? At this point, no one knows. But it is clear that some actions – such as removing junipers will have a very clear positive affect, and are unlikely to have any negative affects.
- E. Finally, need money to fund a list of priority strategies.

**Additional details are provided in the full report.**