

## **Klamath region grows more desperate Paltry snowfall may lead to conflicts over water**

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SACRAMENTO – California's record-setting storms bypassed the thirsty Klamath River Basin, threatening to incite another farmer rebellion over water deliveries and imperiling a vital salmon fishery and bald eagle habitat.

While February and March still hold the possibility of a reprieve, the immediate outlook is grim for the region, which straddles the California-Oregon border from Tule Lake to Klamath Falls.

The snowpack is slightly less than half the normal amount, an unsettling contrast to the ample snowfall that buried much of California after Christmas. More than three weeks have passed since the last significant snow fell in the basin, and that was just an inch.

"If this is all we get, we're all in big trouble," said Bob Gasser, a businessman active in the water uprising four years ago.

Many say the stressed Klamath River is relied on for too much. Its 190-mile run to the Pacific is tapped by hundreds of farmers, American Indians, commercial fishermen and recreational anglers. Upper Klamath Lake was once brimming with suckerfish, the river full of salmon and the skies crowded with waterfowl, but the basin wildlife has been seriously depleted because of the water shortage.

"The real problem is the feds and states have promised more water than what's available," said Steve Pedery, a wildlife advocate with the Oregon Natural Resources Council.

"There's not enough to go around."

Officials say one long, heavy snowfall could erase fears of a repeat of 2001, when the federal Bureau of Reclamation was forced to temporarily turn off irrigation water to farmers to protect a fishery that helps sustain tribes in the basin.

"We don't want to go there again," said Jeff McCracken, a spokesman for the Bureau of Reclamation.

That's when defiant farmers used chain saws to force open taps that had been closed by a federal court order. Tribes protested the loss of salmon and suckerfish. To meet tribal demands, the government sacrificed water meant for wildlife refuges, driving away waterfowl.

More recently, tribal leaders and environmentalists have argued that Bush administration policies favor farmers by drawing down the Klamath River, which they say has led to scores of salmon deaths.

The Klamath water quarrels have continued to fester, even in the wake of the creation of a pilot program that paid farmers \$2.3 million last year to idle land or pump groundwater. The move saved 80,000 acre-feet for fish and wildlife.

Under a federal decree, the Bureau of Reclamation must increase that water bank program to 100,000 acre-feet this year. Officials say sufficient growers have signed up, lured by promises of between \$62 to \$156 for every acre-foot they relinquish by fallowing land or pumping groundwater.

The water bank has drawn some protest. Environmentalists are opposed to tax dollars being spent annually to keep farmers from harming fish and wildlife instead of the government permanently buying the rights to the water. Tribes fear that an explosion of groundwater pumping could dry up springs that feed streams flowing into Upper Klamath Lake.

The Bush administration plans to announce in mid-April how it will divide the pool of water available in the basin. The decision will be guided by environmental law, tribal rights and a dose of political philosophy that sides with farmers over fish.

"I'm optimistic they will deal with a fair hand," said Allen Foreman, chairman of the 3,500-member Klamath Tribes.

The tribes, which consider the Klamath fishery sacred, receive priority thanks to earlier federal water rights and the Endangered Species Act.

Farmers would usually receive 400,000 acre-feet in a normal year for their cattle pastures, potatoes, hay, spearmint and horseradish crops. An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons, enough for the household needs of two families of four for a year.

Wildlife refuges are last in line for water under the federal allocation system. In the best of times, only 75,000 acre-feet go to those marshes – a summertime mecca for egrets, herons and grebes. The largest concentration of wintering bald eagles in the lower 48 states can be found at the Tule Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

"We've got some real challenges," said McCracken, the bureau spokesman. "We don't know how much of the resource is going to be available."

The uncertainty is feeding apprehension across the basin.

"If we don't get any snow, there's always the possibility of things erupting," warned Zeke Grader, who represents commercial fishermen.

Farmers remain frustrated, wondering why they might be forced to sacrifice even more after selling 25 percent of their entitlement to create the water bank for fish.

"The mood is very guarded," said Tracey Liskey, who runs cattle and farms hay on a spread just inside the Oregon border.

Liskey said he is confident the pro-agricultural policies of the Bush administration will prevail if there are cutbacks. Nevertheless, there might be only so much water available if the dry spell persists, he said.

"It then becomes a question of how do I keep my cows? Where do I get my pasture? How do I survive until the next year?" Liskey said.

Foreman, the tribal chairman, said times have changed since 2001. "Certainly there's more cooperation and understanding," he said.

But he knows the tug of war will be magnified if the snow doesn't come.

"There's a potential for water shutoffs," Foreman said.

Gasser, the businessman, agreed. "There could be a wreck coming" unless Mother Nature saves the day, he said.

The immediate forecast is not promising – it calls for continued dry and warmer-than-usual weather. With the mercury approaching 50 degrees on some days, early snowmelt is also becoming a concern.

"It's not looking good at this point for getting all the water they need for the competing needs," said Jolyne Lea, a federal hydrologist in Portland, Ore. "They have a big demand on a river system that isn't doing too well so far."

Nevertheless, she cautioned that winter is far from over.

"People should not panic yet," Lea said. "We still have February and March – and even April yet to go."