LOSING A HUGE OPPORTUNITY FOR THE KLAMATH WATERSHED: MORE RANDOM ACTS OF RESTORATION

The extraordinary Klamath Watershed needs help. Conflict and competition over water are acute. Agricultural communities are fast drying up, and fish and wildlife are suffering. Division among and within our watershed’s communities is the worst in memory.

Help is available, but we fear the opportunity is being squandered. We certainly appreciate the strong and effective leadership shown by our Congressional leaders, who helped secure exceptional amounts of funding for environmental restoration projects.

Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive plan to spend all this money for the best benefit of all the watershed’s communities. Agencies are doling out the funds for individual projects based on a competitive proposal process. This piecemeal approach does not require results or provide any accountability.

For long-term stability, a watershed-wide, negotiated, integrated plan is needed that would address water management for irrigation and fish and provide fair and legal treatment of the Klamath Watershed, Counties, Tribes, and irrigators and their families. There are critical parties up and down the river that could help make this happen, and watershed interests need support for this effort from the state and federal governments and our local communities. The document purporting to be such a plan, recently released in draft form by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's contractor, is not such an 'integrated plan' for the simple fact that all stakeholders and interests were not involved and represented in that planning process.

It can be done; it has been done elsewhere.

We are committed to actions that will steer things in a better direction. Federal decision-makers must commit to getting a better handle on the science behind what is happening to the fisheries in the Klamath Watershed to support future actions that can help these fish. We can do better for farmers and fish in the Klamath Watershed, and we need to do it now.

Surely we know better. We have seen decades of random acts of restoration in our watershed already. Tens of thousands of acres of agricultural land have been taken out of production. Projects have been built and then abandoned. Dikes that once protected productive farmland have been blown up to flood that farmland and create habitat for endangered species. That project – like others that have been tried over the past 20 years – has, by all accounts, failed miserably.

There is a better approach. As the elected representatives of three counties that cover most of the Klamath Watershed, we have reached out to other leaders in a spirit of collaboration.

We have written to leaders of tribal governments, and to our sister counties covering other parts of the watershed, to propose that we work together to chart a path that is best for all of our communities.

We should seek solutions that reflect a philosophy that the best decisions on water issues take place at the local level.

We have proposed that the tribes and counties form an advisory committee that would work together to make recommendations to federal and state agencies on the best uses of available funding. Through that collaboration, we can restore relationships and trust, and serve the overall public interest.

Many people and groups are working to promote their priorities. This is appropriate and should continue. We simply propose to set a table that seats a full range of Klamath Watershed interests, driven by the shared goal to do what is best for our watershed.

We look forward to a shared journey to a better place.

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