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Wyden: Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement Costs Too Much

June 21, 2013 | OPB



A mat of algae in the Sprague River, an important tributary in the Upper Klamath Basin. Senator Ron Wyden called an \$800 million restoration deal for the Klamath "unaffordable." | credit: Amelia Templeton | [rollover image for more](#)

Oregon Senator Ron Wyden revealed relatively little about how he plans to approach the conflict over water allocation in the Klamath Basin in a round-table today before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources.

One message did come across clearly during the hearing: Wyden believes the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement, an 800 million dollar settlement and restoration plan signed by tribes, fisherman, and farmers, is too expensive for congress.

"After considerable thought, I have concluded that the KBRA, and essentially what has been agreed to at this point, is simply unaffordable in the current budget environment. My message on this point is working together in good faith, there's got to be a way to accomplish the agreement's objectives with a lower price tag," Wyden said early in the hearing.

The Klamath Tribes hold senior water rights to the headwaters of the Klamath river. In the KBRA the tribes agreed provide a steady supply of water to potato and onion and mint farmers who all share a federal irrigation system in exchange for big investments in habitat restoration and fisheries management.

The deal calls for 800 million dollars of federal spending over about 15 years. It would require federal legislation to authorize spending and to approve the removal of four dams on the Klamath River owned by power company PacifiCorp. The cost of dam removal is not part of the 800 million projected cost of the KBRA, and would instead be funded by Pacificorp ratepayers and a California water bond.

Wyden told the groups the river restoration deal would be more politically feasible if they could the budget by a third.

CONTRIBUTED BY:



AMELIA TEMPLETON

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Opponents of the KBRA - including environmental groups on the left and ranchers and tea party activists on the right - have long criticized the cost of implementing the settlement, and have suggested there are less expensive options for restoring the river and resolving the conflict.

Environmental groups including Water Watch and Oregon Wild have suggested downsizing the amount of irrigated agriculture in the basin and ending farm leases in the Klamath Basin Wildlife Refuges.

During the Senate Hearing, Klamath County Commissioner and rancher Tom Mallams suggested building more water storage in the Upper Basin as an alternative to the KBRA.

Richard Whitman, Natural Resources Advisor to Governor John Kitzhaber, cautioned that new water storage could be prohibitively expensive.

Craig Tucker, a spokesman for the Karuk Tribe, says proponents of the KBRA haven't done a good enough job explaining the costs. Tucker says that 262 million of the total price tag is funding federal agencies will likely spend on fish management and water quality problems in the Klamath, whether or not the KBRA is implemented. 536 million would be new spending, spread out over a 15 period.

You can read the draft [Klamath River Restoration Agreement Budget](#) and watch the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee [Klamath round-table](#) webcast.

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Klamath basin

klamath river

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These deals need to be recognized for what - at their heart - they are: special deals for a rich corporations and the Klamath Basin's Irrigation Elite: eight rich and powerful growers who get tons of subsidies already courtesy of taxpayers but want even more.

The Klamath Dam Deal is a sweetheart deal for PacifiCorp and its investors. But it does not even name a "dam removal entity." If legislation to authorize it were to become law that "dam removal entity" would likely become the USA. That means more costs to taxpayers.

There IS a better way and that is a return to the normal Federal Energy Regulatory Process the dam deal put on hold. A dam removal agreement will happen there because - if relicensed with modern requirements - the Klamath Hydroelectric Project will lose PacifiCorp an estimated \$24 million each year.

As for the Water Deal it favors some water users over others and can not solve conflicts over water in the Klamath River Basin. The two deals need to be delinked: back to FERC for the dams; water users can renegotiate their own deals not using federal money to sweeten the pot.

When the KBRA Water Deal was being negotiated, federal irrigation interests told us they would take care of the refuges. But right now Lower Klamath and Tule Lake Refuges are being dewatered damaging the interests of Arctic Tribes which rely on the eggs the geese and ducks migrating through the Klamath lay up there.

Wyden should pressure the Bureau of Reclamation to give water to the refuges.

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- Aaron Kunz
- Amelia Templeton
- Ashley Ahearn
- Bonnie Stewart
- Cassandra Profita
- Courtney Flatt
- David Steves
- Katie Campbell
- Toni Tabora-Roberts

CONTACT:

earthfix@opb.org

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