



Written by [Bonnie Gillis](#) on September 10, 2001

High and Dry in the Klamath Basin

Klamath Falls, Oregon, has become the rallying site for a national movement and the focal point of a life-and-death struggle for rural America. On May 7, 20,000 people showed up for a “bucket brigade” to draw attention to the desperate plight of farmers in the Klamath Basin, victims caught in a scissors attack between the blades of a harsh drought and brutal environmental policies.



With a phalanx of television cameras rolling and newspaper photographers clicking shots, 85-year-old Jess Prosser started the brigade into action. Using a star-spangled bucket, Mr. Prosser, a World War II veteran and longtime farmer from nearby Tule Lake, dipped water from Lake Ewauna and passed the bucket of precious fluid down a long line of volunteers. One of those volunteers was Senator Gordon Smith (R-Ore.). Also joining the bucket brigade were Congressmen Greg Walden (R-Ore.) and Wally Herger (R-Calif.). Many state and local officials pitched in as well.

Buckets of water were passed hand-to-hand along the brigade queue that stretched from the lake through town to the A Canal, the irrigation artery that for decades has delivered the lifeblood to many of the area’s farms and ranches. But this year that lifeblood was cut off, threatening over 1,400 farmers and ranchers with extinction. The towns and communities sustained by that agricultural base comprise some 40,000 residents of the Klamath watershed straddling the California-Oregon border. Without water for irrigation, the communities in the Klamath Basin will dry up and blow away too, along with the farmers’ soil. “No Water, No Life!” proclaim signs, stating a fact that is all too obvious in the arid expanses of the Western states.

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The bucket brigade’s heroic efforts did not, of course, solve the farmers’ water crisis. It was a symbolic gesture, aimed at sending an urgent “S.O.S.” message to the American public, especially America’s urban population. It was also a plea to other rural communities for solidarity, and a warning of the fate that awaited them too, if federal policies are allowed to stand. As 43-year-old farmer Rob Crawford told the *New York Times*, “We’re real people here, and we’re being annihilated.” The Endangered Species Act, Crawford pointed out, is a tool being wielded unmercifully by environmental extremists and their allies in government in a ruthless campaign of “rural cleansing.”

“They’re forcing us off the land,” Nancy Kandra told *The New American*. Mrs. Kandra and her husband, Steve Kandra, farm 1,000 acres in Oregon and California. “Steve is the third generation of Kandra on this land, and this is the first time since 1880 we haven’t had water here.”

“This isn’t about saving endangered species or the environment,” says Charles Bridges, a retired soft drink bottler who lives in the town of Klamath Falls. “It’s about control, taking the land away from the people, ‘re-wilding the land,’ going back to 1492. It’s all part of that UN Earth Summit, the Biodiversity Treaty, the Wildlands Project, etc. These green extremists don’t want us here.” Rural and small town people all over America are coming face to face with this ugly reality.



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Early this year the federal Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) announced that all irrigation water in the Klamath Basin Project was being withheld from agricultural use so that it could be diverted to the benefit of two species of “endangered” sucker fish and the “threatened” Coho salmon. The locals were astonished — and outraged. Many had crops already planted that would soon wither without irrigation. Others were ready to plant but would not be able to do so without water. All faced severe hardship, and for many the water cutoff would mean economic ruin: bankruptcy; tax liens; foreclosure; and the loss of their farms, their life savings, and their way of life.

The sense of outrage intensified when Oregon U.S. District Judge Ann Aiken, in an April 30 ruling, upheld the BOR decision. Citing the Endangered Species Act (ESA), Judge Aiken declared: “Given the high priority the law places on species threatened with extinction, I cannot find that the balance of hardship tips sharply in the plaintiffs’ [i.e., the farmers’] favor.”

Myths and Lies

Although the people of the Klamath Basin have been more successful at obtaining coverage for their cause from the national media than most other rural people facing similar depredations, they know the deck is still heavily stacked against them. “It’s so frustrating and infuriating because the major media is not telling the American people the truth about what is happening here,” Rick Rodgers, a Klamath farmer and activist, told *The New American*. “The media has been pushing and supporting the agenda of the extreme ‘environmental’ groups and their rich, city backers. This isn’t about farmers versus the sucker fish. The greenies don’t really care about the sucker fish or any other species they use. This is out and out thievery. This is a land grab, a water grab, a theft of private property. They want to steal the whole thing and shove us out of here and make it a ‘preserve.’ The ironic thing that most outsiders don’t understand is that in the name of protecting the environment, the government and the greens are *destroying* the environment. Just look around this area and you can see how parched and devastated it is. It doesn’t have to be that way; there is more than enough water in Upper Klamath Lake to support the fish, farmers, and other needs.”

Despite the appeals to supposed environmental necessity, the federal government’s policy in the Klamath Basin is both a colossal human and ecological disaster. The federal decision to withhold water from the people was — and is — unnecessary, immoral, illegal, and environmentally destructive.

Here are some facts not widely reported by the major media regarding the “Klamath crisis”:

- The problem is not a dire shortage of water. Despite the 2000-2001 drought, Upper Klamath Lake was at historic high levels when the BOR rendered its decision, and it remains so today. There is sufficient water stored for the needs of farmers, fish, and other wildlife.
- The so-called “endangered” suckers are not endangered, and the federal policy in the Klamath case has been criticized in scientific peer review as “illogical,” “inconsistent,” and “contradictory.”
- Even if the sucker fish were truly endangered, the Klamath policy is the wrong way to help them. The suckers thrive in warm, shallow water; increasing the water flow levels hinders, rather than helps, their reproduction.
- If the Coho salmon is “threatened,” why is the State of Oregon (with federal approval) paying state employees to net and club to death Coho salmon by the tens of thousands?
- Many, if not most, of the region’s farmers have deeds and land patents from the federal government guaranteeing their water rights “forever.”



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- Federal policy has also cut off water to two important wildlife refuges that are major migratory stopovers for millions of waterfowl, causing the once-lush refuges to all but dry up. This will result in truly catastrophic environmental damage, as thousands (if not tens and hundreds of thousands) of birds die due to insufficient water.
- In addition to lack of water, the millions of birds migrating along the Pacific flyway will suffer for lack of food, and many will starve. The farm crops, which normally provide over half of the birds' food supply, were not planted, due to the federal decision.
- Hundreds of other wild animal species are suffering because of a federal policy that has turned vibrant habitat into parched dust and weeds.
- It is the farmers and ranchers who traditionally have provided the nutrients and habitat necessary to sustain the wild bird and animal populations, and it is the farmers and ranchers — not the federal government — who are now diverting their own scarce water supplies to the wildlife refuges to avert the looming ecological disaster.
- Instead of releasing the desperately needed water to the farmers and the wildlife, federal policies are sending the water down the Klamath River to hydro-power dams owned by a European corporation that is making millions of dollars in profits from the sale of electrical power to California.
- The farmers, ranchers, and rural, small-town folk who work the land, and whose forebears settled the territory, are under siege by federal politicians and bureaucrats allied with wealthy, big-city, envirosocialist groups masquerading as friends of the environment.

Water Overflowing

News photos and video coverage have captured some of the wretched conditions of the basin, with scenes reminiscent of the Oklahoma "Dust Bowl": baked, cracked soil; dead crops, shrubs, and trees; blowing dust. "It looks like hell, I've never seen it look this bad," Olin Royer told *The New American*. Royer, a resident of the area since 1927, is a World War II veteran, having served in the Pacific, in the 421st Rocket Field Artillery. "This is completely crazy," added his wife, Colleen Royer. "Everything is dying and turning to dust. Why? Anyone who looks at the lake can see it's full of water. What they're doing to us and this whole region is just criminal."

Rick Rodgers agrees. "It is truly, *literally* criminal," he says. "That's why people are so angry around here. The officials who are supposed to be administering the law are violating the law while claiming they are following it. And they're lying to us right to our faces. Upper Klamath Lake, the biggest lake in Oregon, was officially at 4,143 feet [above sea level] in April and May, the highest it's ever been. We had an absolutely full reservoir. And here it is August and it is still full. We still have areas [around the lake] that are covered with water that are usually dry by this time, but they won't give us *our* water. Upper Klamath has 837,000 acre/feet of storage and by *contract*, agriculture is supposed to get 437,000 acre/feet of water. But they didn't give us any. The people here have homestead deeds from the government promising — *guaranteeing* — them, and their heirs, water 'forever.' That's why many of them settled here after World Wars I and II."

Rodgers is in better shape than most of his neighbors. His 600 acres planted in hay and grass are situated right beside the lake where he has plenty of water. The vast majority of farms and ranches in the area, however, totaling around 240,000 acres of agricultural land, are dependent on the 1,400 miles of canals and ditches that bring water from the complex of reservoirs, streams, and rivers in the 19 irrigation districts that make up the Klamath Basin Project. One of Rodgers' employees, who farms 200



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acres of his own, is facing possible foreclosure. “He owes over \$4,000 in ‘water tax’ — the operation and maintenance fee we pay for the irrigation system — but how is he supposed to pay that if he doesn’t get water for his crops?” Rodgers asks. “If you don’t pay, they put a lien on your property and foreclose. That’s why I say it’s a crime that this plight is forced on hard-working, tax-paying people when the water that’s rightfully theirs is sitting there in abundance. That’s why everybody around here supported the forced opening of the headgates.”

Rodgers was referring to the July 4 action in which about 150 people formed a human shield in front of the A Canal headgate, while others used a cutting torch to remove the lock and open the gate. Klamath County Sheriff Tim Evinger looked on and did not intervene. It was a federal matter, outside of his jurisdiction, he later explained. Besides, he said, he understood and sympathized with the dire straits his neighbors and constituents are in. “It’s desperate times for these desperate measures,” he said, noting that he did not plan to interfere with the protests and demonstrations, as long as they remained peaceful. Federal law enforcement was called in to guard the gates. The FBI, U.S. Marshals, National Park Police, and Bureau of Land Management Rangers have rotated in. They are not welcome in town and cannot get service in most stores and restaurants. Locals have put a sign near the headgate where the agents are stationed reading: “Federal Agent Viewing Area.”

“Look at the facts from our standpoint,” says Bill Eling, a farmer/rancher who helps man “Ground Zero,” a mobile headquarters set up next to the A Canal headgate to coordinate activities. “Our land values have plummeted from \$1,200 per acre to around \$28 per acre. I had to sell most of my cattle at distressed prices, like everybody else. A lot of peoples’ crops died in the fields when they couldn’t get water. Then when the water was turned back on it was too late for row crops and grain but at least we could grow some hay and pasture to sell or feed what stock we had left. But now they say they’re going to cut it off again on August 20, which is two to three weeks before our alfalfa will be ready to cut. So they’re planning to knock us down again, even though the reservoir is at a historic high and we’ve only received 15 percent of our contracted annual [water] allotment. The lake is four times higher than it was during the big drought of 1992, and back then we still managed to get water to everybody: the farmers, the Indian tribes, the wildlife refuges, the fish. And there’s no good reason we can’t take care of everybody now. We took some reporters from Los Angeles up in a plane over the area and they were amazed at how much water there is all over. But they said, ‘We can’t show this, the people would revolt.’ I said, ‘Well, what’s wrong with that?’ We don’t advocate, condone, or want any violence, we want to peacefully, constitutionally take back our government and get the federal control off our backs. Steve Lewis, a [U.S.] Fish and Wildlife employee, is the one who sets the lake levels. He’s also ‘commodore’ of the Upper Klamath Yacht Club. Usually this time of year they have to take their big boats off the lake because the water levels have dropped way down, but not this year because the lake level is still so high. So, while we’re struggling for our very survival, the bureaucrats — supposedly our employees — are *yachting!* You can see why we’re angry.”

“Science” for Suckers

As already mentioned, the ostensible reason for refusing water delivery to the farms and ranches is that the water must go instead to increase the water flow in the Klamath River for the “endangered” shortnose and Lost River suckers and the Coho salmon. Like so many other environmental shams and scams, though, this one is a fraud built on junk science.

On June 16, biologist David A. Vogel testified before the House Committee on Resources Oversight Field Hearing on “Water Management and Endangered Species Issues in the Klamath Basin.” Vogel, a



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fisheries scientist for the past 26 years, worked 15 of those years for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). During his tenure with the federal government, he received numerous superior and outstanding achievement awards and commendations, including Fisheries Management Biologist of the Year Award for six western states.

The Klamath farm situation is an “artificially created regulatory crisis that has been imposed on the Upper Klamath basin,” Vogel pointed out. “In my entire professional career,” he said, “I have never been involved in a decision-making process that was as closed, segregated, and poor as we now have in the Klamath basin. The constructive science-based processes I have been involved in elsewhere have involved an honest and open dialogue among people having scientific expertise. Hypotheses are developed, then rigorously tested against empirical evidence. None of those elements of good science characterize the decision-making process for the Klamath Project.”

A comprehensive survey of the research on the suckers shows that the original “endangered” listing of the species in 1988 was as flawed and fraudulent as the 2001 decision to cut off irrigation water. Vogel found that “the information used by the USFWS to list the two sucker species as endangered in 1988 under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is now very much in question. The USFWS so selectively reported the available information that it can only be considered a distorted view of information available to the agency at that time.” In other words, the USFWS fudged from the beginning, using the suckers as a pretext to justify regulatory control of the Klamath Basin. Vogel testified:

Surveys performed just after the sucker listing found substantial populations of suckers in Clear Lake (reported as “common”) exhibiting a biologically desirable diverse age distribution. Within California, the USFWS surveyors considered populations of both species as “relatively abundant, particularly shortnose, and exist in mixed age populations, indicating successful reproduction.”

After citing much other data showing that the suckers are really doing quite well, Vogel then showed that, if the fish were truly endangered, the USFWS plan for recovery would be completely wrong-headed anyway. He noted that “it is evident the sucker populations do not experience a population-limiting condition from lower lake elevations as incorrectly postulated by the USFWS. In fact, one of the strongest year classes of suckers occurred during a drought year in 1991 when lake levels were lower than average.”

In fact, the federal policy in Klamath is almost certainly hurting the suckers as well as the farmers. “This measure of artificially maintaining higher-than-historical lake elevations is likely to be detrimental, not beneficial, for sucker populations,” Vogel testified. Fred Fleck, a retired fish biologist who conducted fish studies on the Klamath as far back as 1946, explained to this reporter why that is. “Suckers are warm water fish that thrive when the water is low and warm,” he said. “They don’t do as well in cold water, so to say they need more water, deeper water is ridiculous. I don’t believe the USFWS biologists can really believe that. This is obviously politics at work here, not science.”

The USFWS biological opinion on the suckers that forms the basis of the destructive Klamath policy has also come under criticism from Dr. Alex Horn, professor of limnology at the University of California at Berkeley. And an Oregon State University (OSU) assessment of USFWS biological opinion said the opinion was comprised of “illogical conclusions,” “inconsistent and contradictory statements,” and “factual inaccuracies and rampant speculation.” The OSU review also stated that the document had the potential to severely damage the public credibility of the USFWS.

The “threatened” Coho salmon pretext is equally preposterous. Many Oregonians were astonished and



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outraged last year when it was revealed that state workers were clubbing to death tens of thousands of the “threatened” Coho. A video of the slaughter was obtained by Oregonians In Action (OIA) and run as a television commercial. While the video scenes showed Oregon state employees netting and clubbing Coho and chopping the heads off the fish, the OIA narration indignantly explained:

Oregon taxpayers laid out \$47 million to operate these hatcheries, but the government slaughters the fish and then sells the carcasses for cat food and the salmon eggs for fish bait! Politicians have spent hundreds of millions of dollars trying to bring the salmon back, but it’s been a miserable failure. It’s time ordinary Oregonians start to examine the scientific facts.

And the scientific facts are, says biologist Fred Fleck, that we had a much higher than average Coho run, in spite of the state sponsored slaughter. “There are other factors adversely affecting the Coho and other salmon that the environmental extremists don’t want to look at,” he says. “Such as the huge number of protected sea lions and harbor seals that are taking an enormous predation toll on all of the salmon. Also, the federal government is allowing foreign fishing fleets to take massive salmon catches off our coast. These and other factors are having a much, much greater impact on salmon than the Klamath farmers. The farmers are just being made the scapegoats.”

Conservationists React

Genuine environmentalists and conservationists are appalled at the ecological devastation being caused by the federal government’s Klamath Basin policies. In April, the California Waterfowl Association (CWA) joined the Klamath Water Users Association and agricultural irrigators in a lawsuit against the USFWS and BOR, claiming the federal agencies failed to comply with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), causing “horrendous social, environmental, and community impacts.”

“Each year the Klamath Basin serves as a migratory stopover for nearly three-quarters of all Pacific Flyway waterfowl, with peak fall concentrations of over 2 million ducks, geese, and swans,” said CWA president, Dr. M. Robert McLandress. “The Klamath Basin is home to over 430 species of wildlife. The ramifications of dry wildlands in this area will be devastating, not just to the basin, but to people and habitats that depend on abundant waterfowl throughout western North America.”

Each year, over 100,000 acre-feet of irrigation water from the farms flows through the Klamath Basin system into the wildlife refuges. This year, though, those refuges are being left high and dry. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is not serving either the fish or the wildlife. When the migratory birds arrive in the autumn, catastrophe may be right behind. Huge concentrations of waterfowl with inadequate water quickly breed deadly bacteria. But even if federal authorities should decide to release additional water flows into the refuges, it is too late to provide something else: food. It is the farmers who provide over half of the diet of the migrating birds. “The geese and ducks love our alfalfa and other grains,” Nancy Kandra told *The New American*. “And we’re always glad to feed them. Unfortunately, I think we will see terrible bird losses this year. The farmers here in the basin have always been the best friends the birds and other wildlife have had. We feed them out of our own pockets. But not this year; our pockets are empty. Show me any of the so-called environmentalist groups who do even a fraction of what we do for the wildlife and their habitat. We are the real environmentalists.”

Real People, Real Americans

Yes, the much-maligned farmers of the Klamath Basin, like their counterparts throughout rural America, are the real environmentalists. They are also real, salt-of-the earth, patriotic, hard-working family people, the kind who fought our wars, provided our food, and built this land. They are people like Woody Chambers, Olin Royer, Marion Palmer, Leonard Will, and hundreds of other World War veterans



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who came to the basin with their brides to homestead. Jess Prosser was one of them. Born in Salina, Kansas, in 1915, Prosser answered the call to serve after bombs fell on Pearl Harbor. He spent 51 months in the Army Field Artillery. He was wounded in action in New Guinea. Shrapnel ripped into his side, left arm, and head. After the war, he was one of the veterans who won an 80-acre homestead in the basin, in a lottery sponsored by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

“We have overcome many obstacles throughout the years, but without this water, this will be the end of a way of life and an entire community,” says Prosser. “My two sons are now struggling to save the family farm.... I want the government to honor the contract that promised me and my heirs water rights forever. This land is our life.”

Photo of Klamath Basin



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