

The Klamath Basin Water Crisis: Water Supply and Demand

by

MeghanMarie Fowler-Finn, Washington University in St. Louis

The following characters and the dialogue are fictional and were created to present an overview of the Klamath Basin water crisis. Historical events and people are represented accurately.

The date is November 14, 2006. Over the next few years, Congress is expected to write and vote on new legislature to resolve water issues in the Klamath River Basin and surrounding areas. The Klamath River Basin is a dwindling system of lakes and rivers in Southern Oregon and California that provides water to thousands of farmers and supports six National Wildlife Refuges and many species of fish. The high demand on this water source is depleting it, and fewer people and animals are able to draw adequate water from it each season. If water management continues unchanged, the Klamath River Basin may become dry, stranding thousands of people and destroying valuable habitats. Today a conference has been called so that the people of the Klamath River Basin may propose their own solution to Congress. To introduce two of the major issues at play are representatives of their respective fields:

- DR. JAKE MAVERON grew up on a local farm and went on to study agriculture and economics at Purdue University. He serves as a representative of the farming community and will introduce to you the farmer's view of water and irrigation.
- DR. AMY SAWSON is a representative of the Sierra Club and will introduce you to the views of those supporting wildlife and endangered species.
- DR. TOM CLEST is a local resident and medical doctor and will serve as the moderator.



DR. TOM CLEST: Welcome to the Klamath Water Solution Conference. Today we will be hearing from representatives from two sides of the Klamath River Basin water problem and come up with a proposal for Congress. To start us off, each representative will give us some background on the area that concerns them. I would like to introduce to you a representative of the farming community, Dr. Jake Maveron.

DR. JAKE MAVERON: Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. In 1905 the federal government set up an irrigation system in the Klamath River Basin known as the Klamath Project. The government wanted to encourage the settlement of the land and make it more able to support agriculture production. Over the next 20 years, unused marshes were converted to usable agriculture land, dams and reservoirs were built, and pipes were run to bring water to outlying land.

DR. TOM CLEST: Next I would like to introduce to you a representative of the Sierra Club, Dr. Amy Sawson.

DR. AMY SAWSON: Thank you for your attention. In 1908, the federal government recognized the damage that they were doing to the land within the Klamath Project. In order to protect some of the land, the government designated Lower Klamath Lake a National Wildlife Refuge. They eventually designated a total of six National Wildlife Refuges in the region.

DR. TOM CLEST: Now we will hear about the recent history of the Basin.

DR. JAKE MAVERON: In 2001 a drought struck the area. Temporarily irrigation was halted by the federal

government so that the river could run at a level that was considered adequate to protect fish habitats. Losses to the agriculture industry were tremendous. Thankfully, in 2002, Interior Secretary Gale Norton resumed irrigation to farmlands. However, we are currently threatened with the possibility of future water restrictions to farmers. Further water restrictions could prove deadly to the local economy as well as the national agriculture system.

DR. AMY SAWSON: The Klamath River is one of the last habitats of the endangered Lost River suckers and shortnose suckers as well as home to the endangered coho salmon. In 2002 when farmers were allowed to drain the river basin as much as they wanted, tens of thousands of these endangered fish were killed. The National Wildlife Refuges are the last in line to receive water from the basin and the water they receive is polluted by agriculture runoff. The Refuges are located in the middle of the migratory patterns of millions of birds and are the winter homes of the endangered bald eagles. Without decreased irrigation, many endangered and other valuable species will die due to low water levels and agricultural pollution.



Case copyright held by the [National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science](#), University at Buffalo, State University of New York. Originally published August 7, 2008. Please see our [usage guidelines](#), which outline our policy concerning permissible reproduction of this work.