

A SHORTAGE OF WATER PITS FARMER AGAINST
FISH IN ORE., TENSIONS RISE AS US RATIONS
DWINDLE

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KLAMATH FALLS, Ore. - After repeated threats this summer, a local environmentalist and his family moved out of town. A Native American storyteller declined to appear at a local youth center because of unrest in the community. Some members of Republicans for Environmental Protection have taken to shopping in Medford, 75 miles away.

The cause of all this turmoil is water - or more precisely, the lack of it. Water is never plentiful in the Klamath Basin, which straddles the Oregon-California border. In a good year, the 9,500-square-mile area receives about 12 inches of precipitation; 2001 is the driest season on record.

So for the first time since 1917, when the Bureau of Reclamation invited homesteaders to farm the high desert and marshes of the Klamath Project, farmers have had to stand behind endangered fish and wildlife in the line for water.

And as farmers prepare for a recent ration of water to run out next week, emotions are as inflamed as the nearby forests.

"I am talking about rioting, homicides, and destruction of property like dams that hold the precious water from the agricultural community," Lieutenant Jack Redfield of the Klamath Falls police told a crowd last month, earning a suspension from the force and admiration from many farmers.

The effects are heart-wrenching on all sides, as the region is forced to change its worldview. The agriculture born of the 19th century belief in taming a land of unending abundance is being transformed by today's reality of limited resources and international competition.

It's a battle that has pitted the project's family farmers against family fishermen, who have watched their livelihoods disappear along with the fish, as water sources are drained and polluted.

As farmers struggle to maintain their way of life, so do the Native American tribes, who have lost their main food and economic supports, fish and deer. The millions of mullet and coho salmon, which were religious and cultural mainstays as well as foodstuffs, are now endangered species, as is the bald eagle, which winters in Lower Klamath Lake.

The federal government has guaranteed water to the tribes, the endangered wildlife, and the farmers. The problem is, there's not enough to go around.

The conflict in the "Everglades of the West" is only one example of many water disputes taking place in the West, and a portent of things to come.

"With nine of the 10 fastest-growing states in the nation being in the West, population growth will put pressure on a resource that's already stretched

too thin," said Reed Benson, executive director of WaterWatch in Portland, Ore. "The Endangered Species Act is bringing teeth to environmental demands, and irrigation has the most to lose because they're now using 80 percent of the water."

From April, when drought and a failed lawsuit caused officials to tell the farmers to stand in line, until late July, when Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton provided about 75,000 acre-feet (over 2 billion gallons) of water for irrigation, only one in 10 farmers had received any water at all. Accustomed to delivery of about 550,000 acre-feet of irrigation, vandals broke into the headgates and turned on the water three times until federal marshals arrived. The water is expected to run out around Thursday.

The most vocal farmers are protesting at the headgates, in a trailer with four phone lines and a Web site that received more than 100,000 hits in July. Their spring Bucket Brigade brought 18,000 people to town. Since then, the protest has evolved into an antigovernment, anti-Endangered Species Act movement. Via phone and the Internet, these farmers are teaming with other organizations to host convoys from three states for Freedom Day next Tuesday.

But the fishermen see things differently. "There are plenty of places that you can raise potatoes, but the salmon only have one Klamath River," said Glen Spain, spokesman for the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Association, whose lawsuit triggered the government's new set of priorities this spring. "We're family food providers just like [the farmers] who've been there for just as many generations as they have and they're putting us out of work."

The endangered mullet fish was once so plentiful here that in 1921, the Klamath Falls newspaper reported that 10 minutes of fishing could provide meals of this "splendid fish" for several days.

Today, the Klamath Tribes are allowed to catch one fish each spring for ceremonial purposes only. Mullet population is estimated to be around 250.

Downstream, in California, the Yurok and Karuk tribes, whose food supply relies on coho salmon, have watched the salmon population perish due to low water levels and high water temperatures.

Of the groups competing for water, the Indians have senior rights, based on who was there first. But with the conflict unresolved, they have had no protection and have received little water.

"There's a remarkable similarity between what the farmers say about the impact of the drought and what the Indians have been feeling," said Bud Ullman, director of the water adjudication project for the Klamath Tribes.

"The farmers say that the US betrayal of water promises is hurting their community. Indians say, 'That's just what happened on to us. We understand what you're going through.' "

John Anderson, a third-generation farmer, has formed an organization of landowners that is trying to develop a plan to allow farmers to sell their water rights to enable them to keep their land. Farming in the basin has

become less profitable, and globalization has moved much of the region's production offshore. Sugar beets have been replaced by sugar cane from Cuba, and beef can be produced more cheaply in Asia, Anderson said. Potatoes are often left in the fields because of overproduction.

Norton has ordered a review of the government's biological opinions. In Oregon, mediation talks are underway. US Senator Ron Wyden has presented a plan to restore some tribal lands, assure farmers of certain water levels each year, and purchase some of the land.

For the farmers at the headgates, mediation is not the answer. "No water," said one farmer, "is like paying for a car and then having the government own the car at the end of the payments and then take the car away."