

GUEST EDITORIAL, MEDFORD MAIL-TRIBUNE, 2002

One proposal for Klamath Basin could work

By RICH MCINTYRE

The tragedy of Sept. 11 moved the water crisis in the Klamath Basin off the radar screen of the nation. Gone are front-page stories in national papers, and lost is the attention of Congress. Never again will the nation be as focused on water issues as it was in the summer of 2001. The mediation effort of Judge Coffin is dead, polished off by an attitude of entitlement by everyone at the table.

Both ends of the political spectrum shamefully co-opted the issue for their own agendas. Consensus on even one piece of the puzzle - something desperately sought by our congressional delegations - never happened.

What remains is the problem. Foreclosure auctions are under way, and the Klamath Basin ecosystem remains hopelessly out of balance. A "good" water year is not the answer: Seven out of 10 years there is inadequate water for agriculture, not to mention the Klamath Wildlife Refuge System, tribal interests and endangered species.

The American Land Conservancy proposal for rebalancing the Upper Klamath Basin Ecosystem is the only workable proposal standing. It recognizes the need for a stable agricultural base with a dependable supply of water; the legitimate need of tribal interests and endangered species; and states, without equivocation, that our refuge system requires dependable water supplies.

The three elements of the ALC proposal are: increase the water supply, decrease water demand, and restore the ecosystem.

ALC has identified properties that can provide up to 100,000 acre feet of "new" water. The Swan Lake Valley can provide up to 45,000 acre feet of non-Klamath Project water in an average year from snowmelt, water that now evaporates. Delivered into Lost River, this water could be provided early in the irrigation season, allowing Upper Klamath Lake water to be stored.

In drought years, existing wells could provide up to 55,000 acre feet to the refuge, decreasing demand on project water. Existing ditches could also be utilized to store excess winter water from Upper Klamath Lake. ALC now has 8,000 acres of the lake bed under option, and the Swan Valley community is supportive of a feasibility study to determine the project potential.

Decreasing demand is another key. ALC has options on an additional 20,000 acres of land in the Klamath Project. They are the "willing sellers," interested in nothing more (or less) than the right to sell their land to whom they choose. The purchase of these properties would increase the basin water supply by up to 25,000 acre feet.

Restoring the ecosystem is the third leg. ALC has met with groups such as the Tule Marsh Hunt Club, who are considering ways their hunting could be improved while helping improve water quality. The South Suburban Sanitary District has been seeking ways to decrease nutrient loading into the Klamath River through wetland treatment of waste water. The American Land Conservancy supports that farsighted effort and will work with them to achieve that objective.

The Klamath Basin will wither without consensus on approaches to at least some of the problems. Congressional representatives must be told that projects like Swan Valley deserve study funding and consideration.

The paradigm has indeed shifted, the time for political posturing, long past. Let us agree on some elements of the plan, and send a message to the United States Congress that the people of Oregon and the Klamath Basin are ready to work together. It is the message they have been waiting to hear.

Rich McIntyre is a longtime basin resident and a consultant for the American Land Conservancy. He lives in Ashland. He can be contacted at salmo99@aol.com.