



Writers on the Range

Removing four dams is worth some compromise

Essay - April 29, 2010 by Erica Terence

Most days, I move ahead with a strong conviction that supporting the settlement to remove four dams in Oregon and California and shift the balance of flows in the Klamath River basin is the right thing to do.

The science supports it, and in the big picture, it makes sense, because in spite of our legal and grassroots actions, Klamath salmon have continued to slide towards extinction. This settlement will move us closer to recovery.

But sometimes the complexities of the settlement, with its companion hydropower and restoration agreements, seem overwhelming to me, even after years of scientific and legal analysis and debate.

On those days, I wish I could talk to my mentor, Tim McKay, the respected longtime director of the Northcoast Environmental Center in Arcata, Calif. McKay spent decades advancing public and environmental interests by figuring out when to fight and when to settle, always watch-dogging regional timber sales. When mounting pressure spurred PacifiCorp to seek a settlement instead of a new license for its outdated Klamath dams, McKay sat at the table in confidential settlement talks.

After he died in 2006, I negotiated for the Northcoast Environmental Center for two years, and led a scientific review of the controversial water allocations that were tied to dam removal. Now, I wonder what McKay would think about the settlement that is up for legislative approval and funding sometime this year. It's impossible to know, but I remember McKay's advice when I asked permission to travel to Washington, D.C., to advocate protection of roadless places.

"I think you should go," he said. "But like most things in life, passing this wilderness bill involved compromise. Some think we gave up too much and should start over. Others think we should take what we can get now and go on to designate new areas in the next round."

I knew he referred to a horse trade in our last wilderness bill, where protections for areas in the high country had been nixed in exchange for passage of the bill.

"What do you think?" I probed, hopefully.

"That doesn't matter. You have to figure out what you think," he said firmly.

I squirmed, knowing he was right.

So what is being traded in the Klamath settlement, and how do I judge those compromises? Twenty-some negotiating parties, including state, federal and tribal governments, irrigators and commercial fishermen, tied dam removal to new water allocations for fish and farming. Critics have called the irrigation allocation a guarantee, which is accurate in the sense that it provides some water certainty for agriculture, thus guaranteeing that farming will have some future in the Klamath Basin.

But fish also gain a more secure future in these agreements. For the first time in the Upper Klamath Basin, irrigation withdrawals would be capped and groundwater pumping regulated. Surplus flows would go to fish desperately in need of bigger water years. Wildlife refuges would also receive their first-ever water guarantee.

This switch contrasts with the historic tendency of management agencies to limit fish to the barest of legally required minimum flows, and leave the refuges with whatever's leftover after irrigators take their share.

Critics of the settlement point out that the best-available science recommends 1,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) in the Klamath River, and that settlement flows could fall short of that target in drier years. That is true. But the settlement triggers a separate drought plan in flow emergencies, driven by scientifically derived flows and bottom-lined by the Endangered Species Act.

Scientists suggest that settlement flows -- when combined with dam removal -- would be an incremental yet significant improvement over the flows we see now. Removing the dams, as the settlement would do in 2020, will also reduce toxic algae, lethal temperatures and fish diseases downriver.

The settlement breaks with the status quo of poor water management while winning the endorsement of qualified scientists (including the one who recommended 1,000 cfs). By including irrigators in the solution it leverages the bipartisan appeal necessary for legislative success. And Klamath fish advocates get more involvement in flow management than they've ever had.

I've chosen to support this settlement. It's the best chance we've got to get the dams removed before the salmon all go belly-up. Now we can get back to the real work of restoring our river, our cultures and our salmon-based economies. Whether he would back my decision or not, I hope McKay would be happy with the independent thinking and strategic approach he instilled in me.

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