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# counterpunch

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Why the Klamath Restoration Proposal Won't End Water Conflicts, Remove the Dams or Restore the River's Salmon

## Power Politics in the Klamath

by FELICE PACE

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Two years in the making, the people of the Klamath River Basin and Northcoast are finally getting a look at the proposed Klamath River Restoration Agreement which representatives of a couple of dozen agencies, tribes, irrigation, fishing and conservation organizations are proposing. Because staff members of so many Klamath River Basin interests created it, the Proposal deserves careful consideration. Unlike what some of its promoters wish, however, it should not be quickly pushed into federal and state legislation.

The Proposal is promoted by some as a means to unify the Basin—to end decades of struggles over water and fish. Claims are also made that this 137 page proposal must be adopted in order to get PacifiCorp's Klamath River dams removed.

Both claims must be rejected.

The PacifiCorp dams will come down because complying with fisheries and water quality laws necessary to secure a new license outweigh the profits that can be made selling the dams' power output. Rather than helping secure a dam removal deal, the complex, costly and controversial proposal released last week has already delayed negotiations with PacifiCorp for two years and is likely to make getting to a dam removal deal more difficult.

Claims by some politicians that the proposal is a means to end the Basin's water conflicts are similarly naïve. Even before its release, this proposal has engendered conflict because key stakeholders—Oregon Wild, Water Watch of Oregon and PacifiCorp—were excluded from the secret negotiations mid-stream in their development. But the largest problem facing the Proposal may be its nearly \$1 billion dollar cost and the details of where those taxpayer funds would go.

Much of the \$1 billion in proposed new federal spending would be given to a sub-set of Klamath River Basins irrigators—those who already get subsidized water from the Bureau of Reclamation's Klamath Project. These powerful irrigation interests—which include timber companies and at least one golf resort as well as the Basin's largest and most profitable farm operations—would receive new subsidies for power, to develop new water "storage" and to reduce demand for irrigation water.

Four of the Basin's six federally recognized tribes would also benefit. They would receive funding support for tribal fisheries and other staff for ten years and Oregon's Klamath Tribes would also receive funds to buy cutover timber land for a reservation and a salmon fishing site below Iron Gate Dam. Klamath County in Oregon and Siskiyou County in California would each also receive many millions.

The large new subsidies for a subset of irrigators are particularly controversial because they would give one group of irrigators representing about 40% of the farmland in the Basin a competitive advantage over those who farm the other 60% of the Klamath River Basin's irrigated farmland. This special group would also get "regulatory relief" from state and federal endangered species laws—another benefit the other 60% of irrigators would not receive.

To sum it up, when one follows the money through the Proposal's many pages, one sees an expensive suite of special interest subsidies and other considerations like "regulatory relief". A deal that clearly favors some irrigators over others, some tribes over others and some counties over others does not seem like a recipe for Peace on the River.

Along with the problematic and troubling provisions outlined above, the Proposal does contain some things which the River

really needs. We do need a new Klamath Restoration Program that includes bringing salmon back to the Klamath's Cascade Canyon and Upper Basin. We do need a new flow regime that will help heal our sick river. But even in these areas careful study reveals that the Proposal comes up short.

The proposed restoration program, for example, does not contain the standards and accountability needed to insure that restoration projects actually lead to restoration and are not diverted to landowner benefit at the expense of fish. Of even more concern is the fact that an independent scientific review indicates that the proposed river flows for fish will not lead to "recovery" of Klamath River Salmon. A deal that will not lead to salmon recovery is a deal that should not be acceptable to river and coastal interests. Klamath River flows under the proposal would actually be lower than current flows during portions of the spring migration season and the "new water" for fish would only come on line a decade or so in the future.

Finally, one must wonder at the wisdom of tribal leaders who would waive their peoples' water rights in order to secure this deal. That is the price which the Bush Administration has demanded and that is the price that two of the tribes with water rights—the Yurok Tribe and the Klamath Tribes—appear ready to pay. In contrast, the Hoopa Tribe has rejected the deal claiming they will not cede water rights for a plan that won't recover Klamath Salmon. Looked at from a global perspective, the proposed waiver of water rights is part of the ongoing, worldwide movement to extinguish the rights of Indigenous Peoples; looked at historically, demanding a waiver of tribal water rights in exchange for money and other considerations looks like a continuation of the federal government's colonial approach to its Indigenous tribes.

Taken as a whole, the Klamath River Restoration Proposal developed in secret and promoted so heavily by certain interests does not provide a basis for a just and equitable solution to the Klamath's Water conflicts. Because the Proposal favors some interests over others and because it will not lead to Salmon recovery it must not be endorsed or turned into legislation. But that does not mean we should not move forward. One group of stakeholder representatives has put forward its vision for the Basin. Let's take this as an invitation to engage now in a public rather than a secret process that puts together a different approach—an approach that is more fair and equitable to all interests and all communities and which will lead to the recovery of the Klamath River and Klamath Salmon.

FELICE PACE, a thirty plus year resident of the Klamath River Basin and a PacifiCorp ratepayer, has been involved in Klamath salmon, water and restoration issues for thirty years. As executive director of the Klamath Forest Alliance, Felice helped organized and for several years chaired a coalition of conservation and fishing groups—the Klamath Basin Coalition. Felice currently resides at Klamath Glen near the mouth of the Klamath River. He can be reached at: [unofelice@gmail.com](mailto:unofelice@gmail.com)