Klamath Refuges need water parity!

Felice Pace

Freelancer Jaqui Krizo's article on Klamath River Basin Waterfowl had plenty of good information. But historical and biological facts critical to a full understanding of the politics and practice of waterfowl management in the Klamath were missing. Here is the rest of the story.

While the "walking wetlands" that alternate marsh and commercial agriculture is now praised, the agricultural community in the Klamath Basin fought the plan for a decade. And while farms and wetlands are both utilized by waterfowl, seasonal wetlands produce more waterfowl food per acre as compared to grain fields and other crops are even less beneficial to waterfowl. And then there are the waterbirds including waders like the stilt and avocet. As opposed to waterfowl (ducks and geese), waterbirds do not benefit from grain fields. Finally, while farm and marsh are compatible, in the Klamath Basin we have a deficit of marshes and – from the wildlife viewpoint - an abundance of farms.

Krizo's article also featured a rant by California Waterfowl Association President Robert McLandress against the Endangered Species Act. CWA regularly attacks the ESA as being focused on species rather than ecosystems. This is disingenuous because CWA is well known for promoting management that favor certain species of waterfowl over other waterfowl, waterbirds and other wildlife. Not surprisingly, CWA favors those few species of waterfowl which their members like to hunt; CWA's ESA attack is a case of the pot calling the kettle black!

The most important omission from Krizo's story is the substance most critical to waterfowl, waterbirds and the Klamath Basin's Wildlife Refuges - WATER. Not mentioned is the fact that – while Lower Klamath and Tule Lake National Wildlife refuges predate by many decades the advent of farming in the Tule Lake Area - those Tule Lake farmers have been given priority over the Refuges when it comes to water. It is for this reason that in the early 90s the refuges were almost completely dewatered while the surrounding farms got all the water they desired.

The missing piece in the picture of farm and refuge compatibility in the Klamath River Basin is water priority parity. As long as the farms are priority "A" users and the refuges "C" users, the Klamath refuges will not be secure because they could be dewatered during the next drought.

Klamath Settlement negotiators are discussing the refuges. It remains to be seen if they will agree on parity in water priority for Klamath Basin Refuges and Klamath Project Farms; anything less will just be hot air.

Felice Pace
Klamath, California