From the desk of Felice Pace, Volunteer Activist
Klamath Riverkeeper - A Program of the Klamath Forest Alliance
28 Maple Road Klamath, Ca 95548 707-482-0354 unofelice@hotmail.com

February 5, 2005

To the editors:

Rebecca Clarren's article on the Bureau of Reclamation's Klamath River Basin Water Bank (HCN October 17th edition) fails to mention that over the past 5 years $50 million has been given to farmers in the Basin to reduce their water use through improved irrigation efficiency. Where is the water that has been saved as a result of giving this massive taxpayer subsidy to Klamath Basin irrigators?

Getting the answer would require a government investigation. The federal Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), which disbursed the money, says that details are trade secrets which can't be revealed even with a Freedom of Information Act request. The Klamath Forest Alliance asked Mike Thompson (D, Ca) and other members of Congress to conduct an investigation but we have been repeatedly rebuffed. It seems that the congresspersons who brought home the bacon are not interested in learning how it was spent. I suspect there are some big skeleton's locked in the Basin's NRCS closets.

I was in the Upper Klamath Basin recently and saw new center pivot irrigation systems perched on hillsides and in other locations which had not been previously farmed. Although it was October some fields were still being irrigated. Meanwhile the Klamath River is choking in toxic algae and many of the young salmon in the river are diseased. River flows are abysmally low.

We need HCN to send Rebecca Clarren down to the Basin to find out what has become of the $50 million. Where is the water?

Ms. Clarren characterized the Klamath River basin as "a flash point in the region wide struggle over water between environmental, urban and agricultural interests." This is a mischaracterization that is all too common in the Klamath Basin and across the West. It omits mention of major players in the Klamath water struggles – the Basin's federal tribes – the Yurok, Karuk, Hoopa and Klamath Tribes.

Like other journalists, Ms. Clarren can't resist the temptation to frame the Klamath according to the dominant western environmental paradigm, that is, the environment (fish, wildlife, the ESA) on one side and people (farmers, ranchers, developers) on the other. But in the Klamath River Basin as elsewhere in the West the deeper issue is people versus people – highly subsidized, mainly white farmers versus Native American tribes whose water rights have been denied for a century or more and whose people live with high rates of poverty and chronic diseases including diabetes and malnutrition.

In the Klamath River Basin those who control the water mostly live upstream in the Klamath, Lost, Shasta and Scott agricultural valleys, while those who are denied water live below on the lower reaches of the Klamath and Trinity Rivers. The Klamath River water struggle is at its soul a social and environmental justice issue. Why is it that Ms. Clarren, HCN and most other media sources cannot see or refuse to focus on this basic reality?

Felice Pace for Klamath Riverkeeper