



Drought in the Klamath River Basin

June 8, 2021

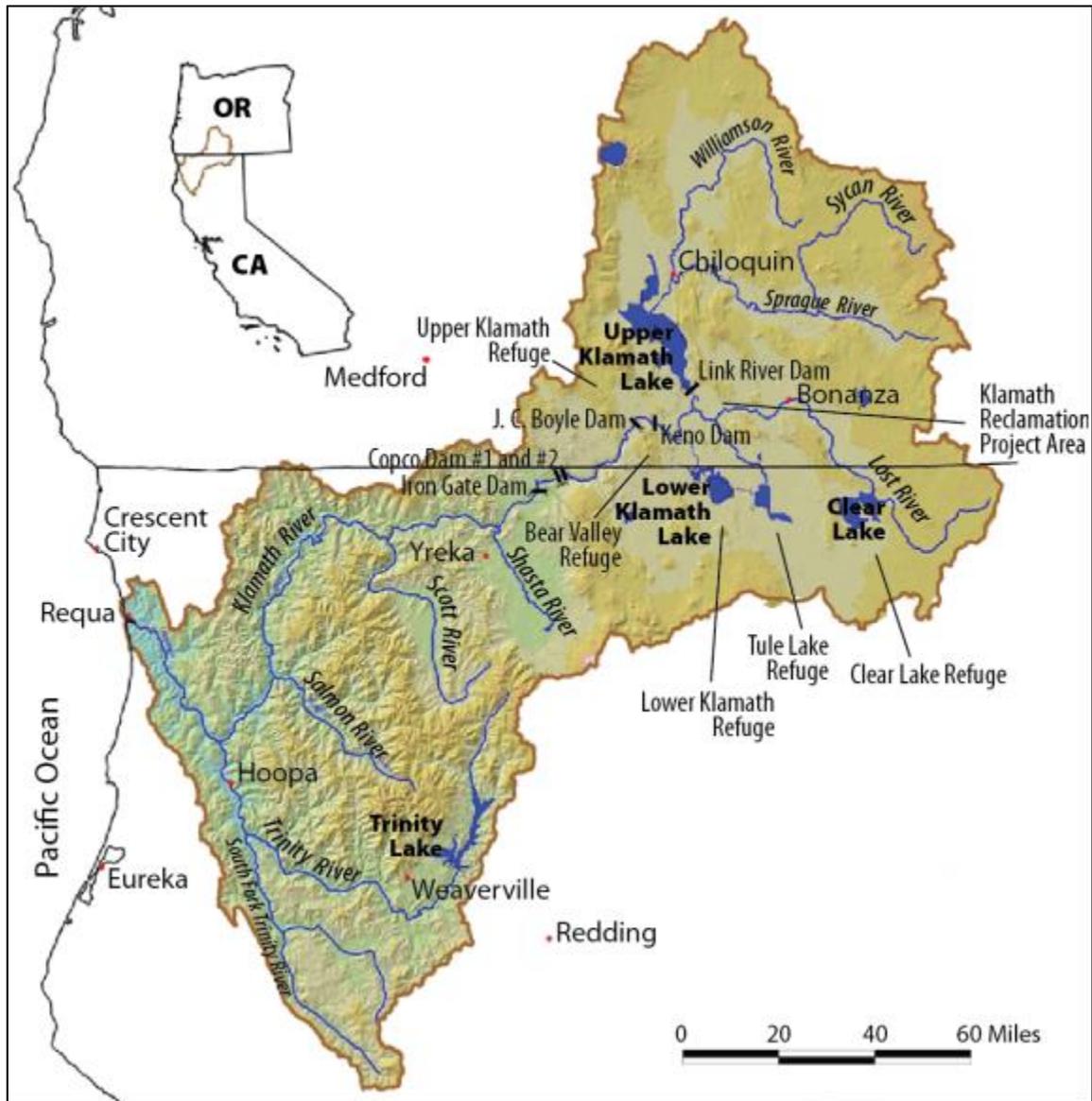
Historic drought conditions in the Klamath River Basin (**Figure 1**) have received national attention and have led to increased conflicts among water users and other stakeholders. The basin includes the Bureau of Reclamation's [Klamath Project](#), which delivers irrigation water to approximately 230,000 acres in Southern Oregon and Northern California. The Klamath Basin has a history of debates related to water allocation and species protection. In the past, these issues have generated conflict among farmers, Indian tribes, fishermen, water project and wildlife refuge managers, environmental groups, hydropower facility operators, and state and local governments.

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Figure I. Klamath River Basin



Source: Bureau of Reclamation, adapted by CRS.

Background

Much of the Klamath Basin relies on economic activity generated by irrigated agriculture. Water supplies from both the federal Klamath Project and other “off project” sources of water support basin agriculture. Other major users of Klamath Project water include six national wildlife refuges that sustain migratory bird habitat and several Native American tribes that rely on Basin fish species. Currently, two species of upper basin fish (Lost River and shortnose sucker) are listed as *endangered* under the [Endangered Species Act](#) (ESA; P.L. 93-205) and one species of lower basin fish (coho salmon) is listed as *threatened* under the ESA. The basin also contains seven dams on the Klamath River and its tributaries, built between 1918 and 1962. [PacifiCorp](#), a regulated utility, owns six of these dams (known as the Klamath Hydroelectric

Project). The original Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) license to operate these dams expired in 2006; FERC has since extended operations in multiple temporary annual licenses.

The Klamath Project has a [history](#) of conflicts associated with water deliveries. Most prominently, in 2001, Reclamation, at the direction of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), significantly curtailed water deliveries to the Klamath Project to provide more water for endangered fish. Irrigators [protested](#) these actions. Later in 2001, the George W. Bush Administration directed additional water for irrigation. In 2002, irrigators received significantly more water than in the previous year, but thousands of Chinook salmon [died](#) on the lower part of the Klamath River, largely due to poor water conditions and fish health in that part of the basin.

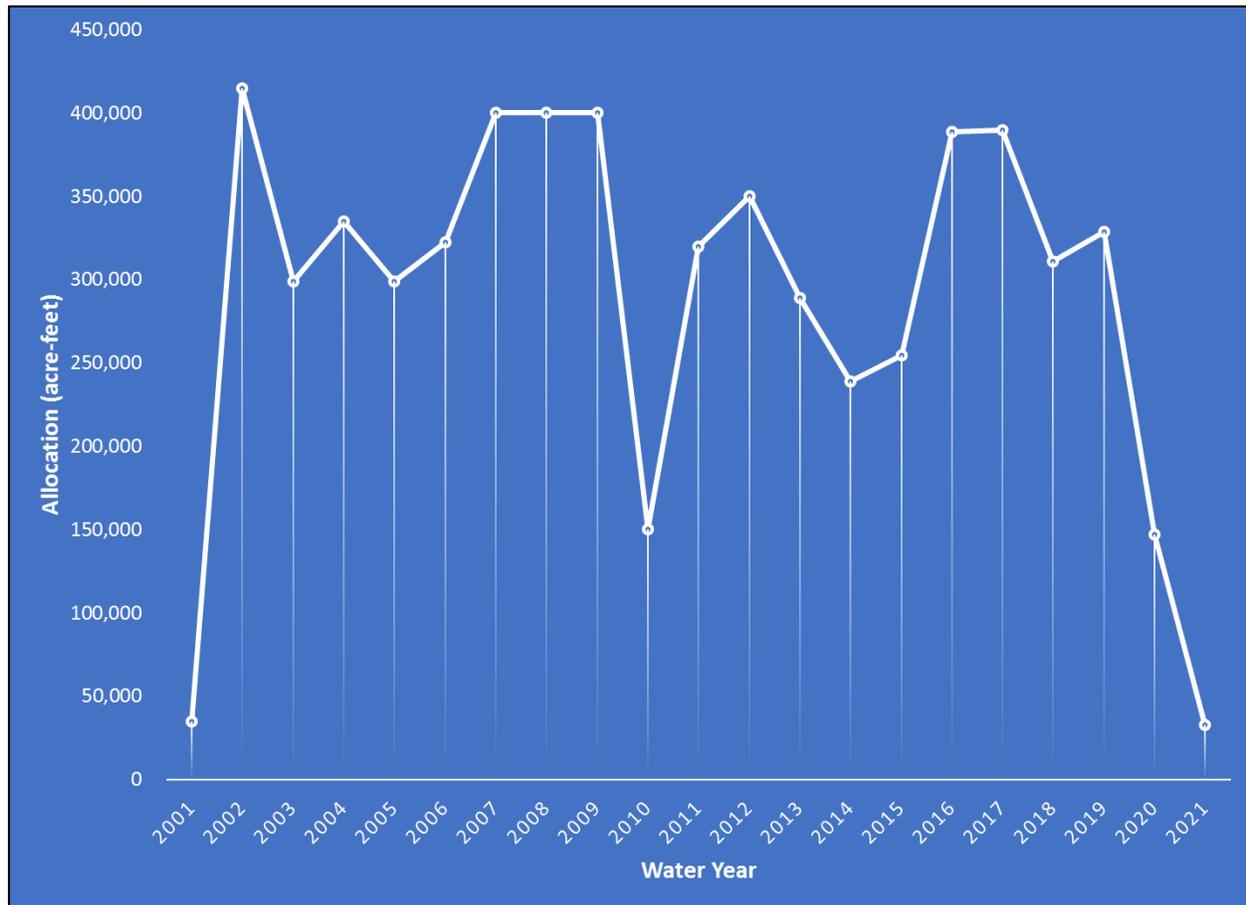
Congress has provided multiple appropriations in response to previous issues in the basin. In the 2001 and 2002 farm bills (P.L. 107-20 and P.L. 107-171, respectively), Congress provided the U.S. Department of Agriculture with \$20 million and \$50 million in funding, respectively, for water conservation in the Klamath Basin, in addition to funding under other [emergency authorities](#). Congress also appropriated supplemental funds, including \$60 million to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 2007 (P.L. 110-28) for a 2006 fishery failure determination under the [Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act](#) (16 U.S.C. §§1861(a) and 1864), as well as \$10 million for Reclamation drought activities in the basin in 2010 (P.L. 111-212).

Also in response to earlier conflicts, the federal government facilitated talks among multiple groups, including formal negotiations between 2006 and 2010. The resulting agreements—the [Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement](#) (KBRA) and the [Klamath Hydroelectric Settlement Agreement](#) (KHSA)—aimed to resolve long-standing issues in the basin. The KBRA proposed actions to restore Klamath fisheries and support tribes, and it provided assurances for water deliveries to wildlife refuges and project irrigators. The KHSA outlined a process to remove four of PacifiCorp’s dams on the Klamath River. These agreements were [proposed](#) but not enacted in prior Congresses. Removal of the four PacifiCorp dams has [proceeded](#), with the federal government no longer directly involved in dam removal. At the same time, Reclamation continues to operate the Klamath Project under recent biological opinions (BiOps) under the ESA for listed [sucker](#) and [salmon](#) species.

Recent Drought and Federal Response

In 2021, the Klamath Basin is facing one of its worst droughts in four decades. Water deliveries are at historically low levels (**Figure 2**); Reclamation allocated 33,000 acre-feet for irrigators. On May 12, 2021, Reclamation [announced](#) the closure of the Klamath Project “A” canal, a major source of project releases. The agency also said it would not implement Klamath River surface flushing flows for salmon (an action it normally conducts pursuant to the ESA) during the current water year.

Reclamation determined that 2021 hydrological conditions are preventing, and will continue to prevent, it from operating the Klamath Project in a manner consistent with the BiOps. Per terms in the BiOps, Reclamation conferred with FWS and NMFS and created a [Temporary Operations Plan](#) (TOP) to manage water to address immediate and temporary competing needs, including the needs of all threatened and endangered species. Reclamation will use the TOP to operate the Klamath Project in an adaptive manner using real-time monitoring and forecasting, and it will coordinate with FWS and NMFS to implement deviations from this plan.

Figure 2. Klamath Project Water Allocations, 2001-2021

Source: CRS, based on Bureau of Reclamation data.

Notes: Does not reflect supply for areas served exclusively by Clear Lake and Gerber Reservoirs. The 2001 allocation does not reflect mid-season releases or water made available through emergency groundwater wells.

In response to the drought, the federal government has provided additional aid, including \$15 million in immediate aid to the Klamath Project Drought Relief Agency [announced in April 2021](#), plus \$3 million in trial technical assistance for ecosystem activities in the basin. The Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture issued a [joint statement](#) declaring their intent to coordinate resources and identify immediate financial and technical assistance for impacted irrigators and tribes. The Department of the Interior also [withdrew](#) several Trump Administration determinations related to basin water supplies because the determinations “were issued without government-to-government consultation with affected Tribes and do not reflect the current administration’s goals for long-term water recovery and economic restoration.”

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