FEATURE

The Klamath Basin Is Not a Lost Cause: Controversy and Compromise in One of America’s Most Contentious Watersheds

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I AM PRESENTLY CONDUCTING FIELDWORK FOR MY dissertation, which tackles one of the big questions at the intersection of human interests and natural resources: As a society, what do we do when too little water has been promised to too many people? What should we be doing differently? In the United States, there is perhaps no better place to turn for answers to these questions than the Klamath Basin.

The Klamath Basin watershed is considered one of the most complicated areas for water governance in the United States owing to its transboundary location (the basin crosses the Oregon-California border), its history of complex litigation and persistent inter-institutional (and interpersonal) conflict, and the more than 60 different groups of people who have an interest in the basin’s water allocation. Some have given up hope that the challenges of water allocation in the Klamath Basin can ever be effectively addressed. But as resilient stakeholders show, the Klamath Basin is not a lost cause. **A History of Conflict**

To get a sense of how complex and controversial the topic of water resource allocation is in the Klamath
Basin, one need only glance at the recurrent national and international news coverage the topic has garnered. The basin first made contemporary headlines in May 2001. After a year of extreme drought and accompanying threats to the habitat of endangered c’waam and koptu suckerfish, the Bureau of Reclamation chose not to supply any water to the 240,000 acres of farmland in the Klamath Irrigation Project. In the aftermath of the decision, more than 15,000 people gathered to form the Basin “Bucket Brigade,” moving buckets of water into the closed irrigation canal in an act of protest.

The Klamath Basin made headlines again in the spring of 2020, when Shut Down & Fed Up, a coalition of Klamath Project farmers, ranchers, and community members, staged a 25-mile-long Tractor Rally and field of crosses. This series of demonstrations drew attention to how restricted water allocation harmed the basin’s farmers, ranchers, ecosystems, wildlife, and rural areas.

The media spotlight found the Klamath Basin yet again in the summer of 2021. After two years of extreme drought, the Bureau of Reclamation decided not to supply any water to the Klamath Irrigation Project for a second time. In protest, two basin landowners purchased property next to the project’s headgates and staffed a large canvas tent with volunteers from the local branch of People’s Rights, a national organization formed in 2020 by militant right-wing organizer Ammon Bundy. The protest made international news, drawing journalists from Al Jazeera, CNN, the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, and the Washington Post, to name a few.

As these stories attest, the Klamath Basin is one of the most fiercely disputed watersheds in the United States. The conflict there is frequently described as “fish vs. farmers,” “a boiling, imminent water war” where “there will be no winners.” But despite this harsh historical—and contemporary—sentiment, hope for progress remains.

Compromise on the Horizon

Since September 2021, I’ve lived in Klamath Falls, Oregon, in the heart of the Klamath Project. Many irrigators there seem to believe that the project’s current agricultural production and water management processes are unsustainable. The irrigators know that one way or another, something must change for their operations to continue.

Whenever I discuss the potential for
collaborative governance and stakeholder engagement
to restart conversations between parties, I often hear
something along the lines of, “Hannah, there’s so much
conflict. There’s interpersonal tension and institutional
ignorance. Is it even worth trying to ‘save’ the basin?”
And my answer is always an unwavering “yes.”
Why am I so confident that engagement can lead to
productive, collaborative decision-making in the Klamath
Basin? Because it’s been done successfully before. Twice.

**Lessons from the Past**

In 2010 a group of stakeholders known as the Klamath
Basin Coordinating Council—an institution tasked with
coordinating conversations with representatives from
major stakeholder groups—led the charge in creating
the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement (KBRA). All
parties signed on in support of the KBRA, which was also
approved by the governors of Oregon and California.
But because the KBRA was an interstate agreement,
it required congressional approval. Though signed by
all parties in Oregon and California, it ultimately failed
because of congressional inaction in 2015.

In 2016, the same group of stakeholders came
together to draft and approve the Klamath Basin
Hydroelectric Settlement Agreement (KHSA). Again, all
parties signed the agreement. The KHSA was approved
by both state’s governors. It made its way to Congress.
And again, like the KBRA, it failed owing to congressional
inaction.

After the failure of the KHSA in 2016, morale among
the basin agricultural community plummeted. There
emerged a general sense that no matter what producers
did, Congress would not support them. As a result of this
government inaction, many of the agricultural producers
in the Klamath Basin have a weakened sense of trust in
state and federal agencies, as well as in the individuals
who represent them.

Despite this limited trust and long history of
institutional and interpersonal conflict, many
stakeholders still stand ready to have productive
conversations about the future of the basin. In my
observations of public meetings and one-on-one
conversations with irrigators and agricultural and

Despite setbacks and congressional inaction, many stakeholders, such as those living near Upper Klamath Lake, refuse to give up hope that the region's water woes can be addressed. Source: Hannah Whitley.
environmental service providers, I’ve witnessed firsthand the willingness of individuals to restart the mediation and negotiation process that began in the mid-2000s.

A small group who calls themselves the Coalition of the Willing is composed of a remnant of stakeholders involved in the original KBRA and KHSA negotiations. To this day, these individuals meet behind closed doors to brainstorm ways to bring the community together to address Klamath’s water allocation woes. But the task is not an easy one. In addition to controversial irrigation allocations in 2020, 2021, and 2022, increased political polarization and positional retrenchment on the national scale has made willing engagement and compromise even more difficult.

A Brighter Future?

Still, there are signs of hope. An irrigator’s comments during a Klamath Irrigation District meeting in November 2021 is one example: “I don’t know what’s taken y’all [the irrigation district] so long to start working with the feds and the tribes. I’m ready to be at the table. I’ve been ready to be at the table. But no one has stepped up and set that table for us to be at.”

Within the Klamath Basin agricultural community, there is willingness to engage with other parties on water issues that have long plagued the region. The task of reengaging stakeholders who have given up hope will be challenging, and in the end Congress must step up to the future of water, community, and environmental well-being may be found in meaningful engagement and mediation in the Klamath Basin. The world is watching, and the basin is ready.

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