

High Country News

The message of 30,000 dead salmon

Katherine Vandemoer OPINION ESSAY Oct. 28, 2002

Call me a radical, **but I think fish need water**. I'd hazard a guess that most Americans would agree, since it's just plain common sense.

But when it comes to the over-promised waters of the Klamath Basin in southern Oregon and Northern California, common sense often seems to fly out the window. As a scientist, I watched in horror as the latest Klamath train wreck unfolded this summer. You may have seen photos of the rotting corpses of 30,000 dead salmon floating in the Klamath River (HCN, 10/14/02: Dead fish clog the low-flowing Klamath).

These fish were not killed by some freak natural disaster or a toxic chemical spill. They died because the Bush administration made a conscious decision to choke off water to the Klamath River this summer, despite repeated warnings about the effects. **All summer long, conservation groups, commercial fisherman, Native American tribes and even the California Department of Fish and Game asked for more water for the river. Their pleas were ignored.** Healthy salmon entered the Klamath River to begin their journey upriver to spawn, but water was low, very low, the fish stacked up, disease spread and the rampant die-off began.

How could this happen? Isn't this the administration that vowed to bring "sound science" to environmental debates?

Apparently, to the Bush administration "sound science" means science that sounds good to the anti-government, anti-endangered species activists now running our natural resource agencies. **In the Klamath Basin they have attempted to turn good science on its ear, declaring that fish don't need water, in an effort to maximize deliveries for irrigation in the high desert.**

Disputes over the Klamath Basin's scarce water resources are hardly a new phenomenon. State and federal governments have simply promised too much water to too many interests, and the reality is that even in a good year, there just isn't enough to go around.

But in debates over water in the West, reality often takes a back seat to politics. **During the summer of 2001, when the Klamath Basin was struck by one of the worst droughts in memory, biological opinions from federal scientists made water flows for threatened fish a priority. Not surprisingly, irrigation interests were outraged,** but they didn't blame the government for over-promising scarce resources. They blamed the fish and the laws that protect them.

It didn't take long for the Bush administration to kick the fish back down to the bottom rung of the ladder * along with the Native American, commercial, and recreational fishing communities that depend on them. Unhappy with the conclusions of federal biologists, the administration set out to find some science more to its liking. Interior Secretary Gale Norton hired the National Research Council to review the science surrounding water distribution in the basin, essentially asking, "Is it certain more water will restore the fish?"

It was a politically shrewd move, similar to asking, "Is it certain smoking cigarettes will give you cancer?" As any scientist will tell you, nothing is ever certain.

In one bold and cynical move, **the Bush administration rewrote the rules in the Klamath Basin, suddenly holding fisheries science to a standard that was impossible to meet.** Though the council's interim review concluded more research was needed to form solid conclusions, and the review itself has been harshly criticized by other scientists, irrigation interests and the administration seized on the results.

You can now see and smell the consequences rotting on the banks of the Klamath River. In 2002, river flows were choked down to a sickly trickle. **From mid-July until the end of August, more water flowed down the main irrigation canal in Klamath Falls than was being released into the Klamath River at Iron Gate Dam. Endangered fish in Upper Klamath Lake and the six national wildlife refuges that dot the region didn't fare much better.**

But as tragic as the 2002 Klamath River fish kill is, the worst could be yet to come. This is only the first year of the administration's flawed 10-year water-management plan for the basin. Despite the slaughter, agency officials are not backing down on their plans to continue maximizing irrigation deliveries, no matter what the cost. Even worse, the administration has signaled its intent to apply this "sound science" model to other endangered species debates around the West.

Most children, by the time they enter kindergarten, know that fish need water. It is painfully clear that the Bush administration needs remedial education on the subject.

Katherine Vandemoer is executive director of WaterWatch in Portland, Oregon.