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Learning from the Past

Can the Klamath be Restored?

By FELICE PACE

This week state, federal, tribal and local biologists, restorationists, politicians and bureaucrats, as well as agricultural and fishing interests, will gather at the Holiday Inn in Redding, California for the three-day Klamath Basin Watershed Conference. The Conference title--Sustainable Watersheds Bring Sustainable Communities--will be pursued through three themes presented on successive days: 1.) We Are One Basin, 2.) Progress in the Basin, and 3.) Moving Toward Sustainability.

These themes, confirmed by the [conference agenda](#) indicate that the emphasis will be positive and future oriented. You can bet there will be heaps of praise for cooperative and collaborative restoration. In fact, the Conference is likely to be a love fest. That's because almost everyone present will represent an organization or agency that has been the recipient of taxpayer financed restoration funding and hopes to secure a stream of that funding on into the future.

That all sounds good--who can argue with working together for sustainable communities! But something is missing from the Conference Agenda. Even though the 20-year federal-state-local restoration partnership which began with passage of the Klamath Act in 2006 is ending, a hard-nosed, scientific assessment of what has been accomplished will not be presented.

Whether the measure used is the size of salmon runs, the state of the Basin's water quality or the amount of water flowing in Klamath River Basin streams and rivers, the 20-year effort to restore the Klamath River and its fisheries has failed. Salmon runs now are at greater risk of extinction, fishing is more restricted and water quality is more degraded than when "restoration" began in earnest 20 years ago. Most importantly, the dewatering of major Klamath tributaries--including the Scott and Shasta Rivers--has continued unabated during those 20-years.

What should be going on in Redding this week is an honest, practical and hard nosed assessment of failures as well as successes and a probing analysis of why so much taxpayer

money has been spent with so little positive impact. Such an analysis by those responsible for future restoration could result in positive changes in how restoration is planned and restoration projects are selected. Those insights could then be incorporated into federal legislation under development for a new 20-year round of restoration. Lessons learned could also be incorporated into California Department of Fish and Game restoration rules and priority projects lists.

This sort of practical, hard nosed reality check will not take place this week in Redding. Instead there will be yet another attempt to promote the ideology of collaboration that dominates restoration politics and practice not only on the Klamath but throughout the West. Sometimes that ideology has produced results. In Oregon's Deschutes Basin, for example, collaboration is actually returning water to streams and fisheries may actually be restored. This is not true in the Klamath River Basin, however. In the Klamath Basin only lawsuits have reallocated water and irrigators remain determined to take restoration funds for anything and everything except reallocating water to increasing river and stream flow. Even worse, irrigators in the Upper Basin, Shasta Valley and Scott Valley want restoration funds spent paying them on an annual basis to put water into streams so that fish can survive. While the sustainability of taxpayer-funded annual water rentals for fish is questionable, of more concern is the precedent that will be set if irrigators are paid for water that by law and right should never have been removed from the streams and aquifers in the first place.

It has been well stated that those who do not understand history are doomed to repeat it. Judging from the love fest planned this week in Redding, this old adage will once again prove true. But there is a better way. Instead of treating restoration funds as political pork to be dolled out among the various interests, it is possible to build a restoration program that will take on the tough issues of water reallocation and water sharing which are essential to restoring Klamath River Basin aquatic ecosystems. That, however, would require those who meet in Redding this week coming to grips with how their own past behavior has contributed to current problems. Collective amnesia is the easier course. But taking that easy road will inevitably lead to continued decline of Klamath River Basin aquatic ecosystems and ultimately to more bitter and intractable conflicts over water in the future. Let's hope those meeting in Redding reassess reality and take the tougher road.

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