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## Refuge battle pits farmers, wildlife

By **ERIC BAILEY**  
Los Angeles Times

TULE LAKE, Calif. -- Under the rolling cloud-scape of the Klamath Basin, a curious rite of spring is under way. [oas:casperstartribune.net/news/regional/top:Middle1]

Migratory birds are flocking to the basin's necklace of federal wildlife refuges straddling Oregon and California -- one of the most important stops on the Pacific Flyway. As usual, the geese, mallards and terns are sharing the sanctuaries with tractors.

Agriculture fields have elbowed onto what once were marshes and shallow inland seas, shrinking the basin's wetlands by nearly 80 percent. Environmentalists have long fought to stop that farming, saying the refuges belong to the birds.

But now, activists say, farmers in the Klamath Basin appear poised to cement their presence on the refuges, the basin's most productive farmland.

Farmers are gaining an edge in closed-door settlement talks over the fate of four dams on the Klamath River, which meanders across two states before pouring into the Pacific Ocean north of Eureka.

Environmentalists universally support dam removal, which would let endangered salmon reach upriver spawning grounds blocked for nearly a century.

Activists with a pair of Oregon-based groups, however, fear that a looming compromise backed by the Bush administration will come at an unacceptable cost: an agreement to forever allow farming in the refuges.

The 23-page settlement proposes up to \$250 million to ease electricity costs for irrigation pumps and possibly finance a renewable energy plant.

Farmers and other big landowners also could be shielded from endangered-species restrictions invoked to revive imperiled fish species: the salmon, two types of suckerfish in Upper Klamath Lake and the bull trout, which is found in upstream tributaries.

"The Bush administration has hijacked these talks about dam removal to advance unrelated policy goals bad for the environment and bad in the long term for the Klamath Basin," said Steve Pedery of Oregon Wild, a Portland nonprofit.

Other participants in the talks, including several national environmental groups, say it's too early to go to the mat over a deal that's anything but done.

"If folks are talking about one thing or another being sold out, we think that's very premature," said Amy Kober of American Rivers. "There's still plenty to be worked out."

Forging a consensus on the Klamath has proved extraordinarily complicated. Compromises, experts say, will be inevitable for the proposal to get federal and state support.

"It's a huge stretch to imagine that commercial agriculture is benefiting wildlife populations in the long run," said Nancy Langston, a University of Wisconsin environmental studies professor who has studied the Klamath crisis. "But getting buy-in from as many people in the basin as possible is critical in the long run."

After more than two years of discussions, 26 of the 28 groups -- U.S. water and wildlife agencies, the states of California and Oregon, fishermen, four tribes and an array of environmental groups -- have agreed to push forward to settle details in the agreement.

Meanwhile, Oregon Wild and WaterWatch of Oregon, the two groups vocally objecting to what they describe as concessions to farmers, have "essentially been voted off the island," said John DeVoe, WaterWatch's executive director.

In addition to pushing for reduced water demand in the basin and higher river flows, the two groups ran aground in their quest to protect the refuges -- and lighten the footprint of agriculture.

Before the arrival of settlers, the Klamath Basin's wetlands totaled nearly 360,000 acres, a mix of shallow lakes and marshes under skies filled with migratory birds. Besides harboring wildlife, the marshes naturally carried clean Cascade runoff that emerged like a volcanic broth on its way to the Klamath River.

Change came in 1905, when the precursor to the federal Bureau of Reclamation began to drain marshlands for homesteading farmers.

That same year, a conservationist named William Finley visited the basin and came away awed by the abundant bird life and vast wetlands. His reports helped persuade President Theodore Roosevelt to establish the first of the basin's refuges in 1908.

In less than a decade, wildlife began to suffer. Completion of a railroad levee in 1917 cut off the biggest refuge's marshy connection to the Klamath River, and within five years a vast expanse had dried up.

Early attempts to farm around the refuges mostly flopped as wildfires burned across parched peat soil.

But the federal Reclamation Service pressed ahead, rerouting whole rivers and building dams and canals. In the 1940s, it bored a mile-long tunnel through Sheepy Ridge to help drain Tule Lake.

Homesteaders settled in the basin, most of them veterans of the two world wars. They built communities and successful agricultural enterprises in a cold, dry land where the growing season barely lasts more than three months.

As Tule Lake receded over the decades, farmers fought to have the fertile lake bottom opened for sale as farms. In 1964, Congress barred homesteading but allowed leased farmland on the refuges.

Today, nearly 15 percent of the 240,000 farm acres in the Klamath Basin is leased land on two federal wildlife refuges.

A quarter of the Lower Klamath Lake refuge is farmed. At the Tule Lake wildlife refuge, crops sprout on nearly half the land, growing in the rich soil of what used to be lake bottom.

"That's the heartland of the basin," said longtime farmer Sid Staunton, 50. "To shut us out of the refuge would wipe out Tule Lake."

Staunton and his brothers, Marshall and Ed, have farmed the Klamath Basin for decades, just as their father and grandfather before them. They grow potatoes, onions and barley, routinely planting upward of 1,000 acres on the refuge.

Like other farmers, the brothers talk of how agriculture's grains provide feed to migratory birds, about how they've changed their practices to better accommodate wildlife.

They've gone heavily into organic farming, spreading far less fertilizer and pesticide, which can end up in wetlands and rivers.

Meanwhile, crop rotation on the refuge now means flooding farm parcels every couple of years, which allows marshland to sprout anew for a few seasons before being returned to agricultural production.

Agribusiness enthusiastically supports more water for the refuges, which have been parched in recent droughts, said Greg Addington, executive director of the Klamath Water Users Association, which represents basin farmers.

Addington said reduced farming on the refuges would be a regional economic disaster, knocking out not just growers but the infrastructure that supports them -- the seed merchants, fertilizer and pesticide sales, tractor dealerships.

Staunton said Oregon environmentalists don't want to hear such things -- they want all the farmers out.

"It's their ultimate goal," he said. "If they can force the farmers to bail, they can flood it all."

Environmentalists counter that agribusiness has gotten its way too long. The pendulum seemed to be swinging back in favor of wildlife during the last years of the Clinton administration, which conducted a formal review that might have curtailed refuge farming. That possibility faded after President Bush took office.

The basin remains home to the largest population of bald eagles in the lower 48 states as well as three of the West's last surviving white pelican breeding colonies. But scientists say the annual migration to the Klamath, which 50 years ago filled the sky with 7 million ducks and geese, has decreased by more than two-thirds.

Environmentalists blame myriad problems: farm equipment that can destroy nests, silt from agricultural runoff, pesticides. But mostly it's a matter of farm fields replacing wetlands. A federal study found that a typical farm acre produces about 200 pounds of waste grain that birds can eat, while a bountiful wetland acre can yield 2,600 pounds of rootlets and tubers.

Pedery of Oregon Wild said restoration of refuge wetlands could help Klamath River salmon rebound, with marsh plants filtering pollutants to improve water quality.

"It's irresponsible to treat these refuges like trading stock," he said. "It's land that was set aside for geese and eagles, not potatoes and onions."

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