

Ranchers, Klamath Tribes Agree to Share Water

JEFF BARNARD, Associated Press

(AP) — Cattle ranchers and American Indian tribes long at odds over scarce water in Oregon's Upper Klamath Basin signed an agreement Friday to share access to rivers and cooperate on restoring habitat for endangered fish the tribes hold sacred.

Joining representatives of the Klamath Tribes and the ranchers at the ceremony along the Williamson River outside Chiloquin, Ore., were Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, Gov. John Kitzhaber, and Democratic Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley.

Speakers talked emotionally about the agreement healing longstanding divisions within the basin over water.

Rancher Becky Hyde noted the group was gathered on the banks of a river where the Klamath Tribes had lived for thousands of years.

"You have chosen to share with your neighbors after enduring decades of hardship," she said, referring to the hard times the tribes knew after the federal government dissolved their reservation in the 1950s. "We are blessed to live in a community with your people."

Don Gentry, chairman of the Klamath Tribes, said they could not rebuild their own prosperity and populations of the sucker fish and salmon they hold sacred, without sharing with their neighbors.

"We lost much, but we have an opportunity to move forward," he said. "We are not going away. We will be here forever."

Wyden said he would introduce legislation in the Senate in May based on the agreement. Its fate in the House is uncertain.

House Republicans have blocked two other agreements to improve assurances of irrigation for farmers along the Oregon-California border and to remove dams on the Klamath River to help salmon. Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., whose district includes the Klamath Basin, did not attend. His office had no comment on how Wyden's bill might fare in the House.

For the past 30 years, ranchers and the tribes were locked in a legal battle over who held senior water rights on rivers running through the former reservation. Last year, an administrative law judge determined the tribes held the most senior rights, dating to time immemorial, on the Wood, Williamson and Sprague and Sycan rivers.

When drought diminished flows last year, the tribes invoked those water rights to protect endangered sucker fish they once depended on for food, forcing ranchers to stop irrigating pasture that feeds cattle. Talks leading to the agreement started

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soon after, facilitated by the governor's office and Wyden's office.

Kitzhaber recalled how different times were from 2001, when water tensions reached their peak.

Federal marshals were called in to enforce the shut-off of irrigation to most of the Klamath Reclamation Project so suckers and threatened salmon could survive. Some people angry over the shutoffs directed their ire at the tribes.

When irrigation was restored in 2002, tens of thousands of adult salmon died in the lower Klamath River of diseases spread by abnormally low and warm water.

"For me, this is a springboard to heal a people and a special place," Kitzhaber said.

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