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Fish win, birds lose in Klamath agreements

2 deals would remove 4 dams, restore habitat along the Klamath River

Agreements offer hope for survival of endangered salmon

But they offer nothing for the refuges along the Pacific Flyway

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Fish gotta swim. Birds gotta fly.

Most of us support their survival in equal measures. So, no doubt, do the conservation groups that were part of two recently approved deals to remove four dams and restore more than 400 miles of habitat along the Klamath River.

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But in the settlements signed last month, fish trump birds. Both the pact to remove the dams and one to protect Klamath Basin farmers snub the wildlife refuges that provide habitat for 80 percent of the waterfowl along the Pacific Flyway.

The agreements, which cap decades of often acrimonious efforts to restore the iconic river, leave the 310-square-mile Klamath Basin Wildlife Refuge complex high and dry. While the Klamath agreements offer the best hope for the survival

of endangered salmon, they offer nothing for the refuges already chronically shorted on water supplies.

“They’ve always been treated as second-class recipients of water,” said Mike Lynes, Audubon California’s director of public policy.

The Klamath River flows from southern Oregon through Northern California to Requa, where it empties into the Pacific Ocean. Of the six separate refuges within its basin, it is the Lower Klamath, established in 1908, that is the hardest hit. Before rail lines and roads were built between them, the Klamath River spilled into the lowlands that are now part of the refuge. Today the 11,000-acre Lower Klamath has no water source of its own. The bald eagles and white-faced ibis it hosts are dependent on a system of agricultural irrigation canals, which are already over-allocated to the farmers who share the refuge.

The nation’s first waterfowl refuge, created by Teddy “Conservation President” Roosevelt, suffers frequent water shortages that are devastating to birds.

This comes when the Lower Klamath and refuges like it are increasingly vital to migrating birds – sanctuaries amid the agriculture, development and drought that are drying up their habitat. Before the Gold Rush, California boasted more than 4 million acres of wetlands. Today there are less than 300,000 acres.

White pelicans and black terns, stopping off to rest and stage for the next leg of their journeys, are crowded into increasingly small spaces. Avian cholera, botulism and other diseases are taking their toll, killing tens of thousands of birds. As long as refuges remain a zero priority, birds will continue to suffer.

State, federal and conservation officials have a chance to remedy these refuge wrongs. The recent Klamath accords are widely viewed as the first of several steps designed to restore the habitat of the entire Klamath Basin. They replace a much more comprehensive plan that fell apart when Congress failed to act on a crucial piece of the pact by a Dec. 31 deadline. The failed legislation developed a template for water allocations, and it’s available to the next negotiators.

They should use it to identify a firm water supply for wildlife refuges. And they will, said John Bezdek, a solicitor with the Department of the Interior. The parties understand the need to continue to negotiate on the bigger suite of issues and are already beginning to address them, he told me.

But after years of tedious, rancorous meetings, new talks labor under a cloud of negotiation fatigue. What if there is not enough momentum to address the refuge issues? That would leave snow geese stranded without the respite they need to fly the 1,500 miles to their nesting grounds in the Arctic tundra. It would leave eared grebes fewer inland waters for nesting.

The Klamath Basin negotiators have done well to ensure a future for salmon returning from the Pacific to their natal spawning grounds. We can all rejoice in this success. Now they must turn their attention to the birds and the wetlands that sustain them.

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