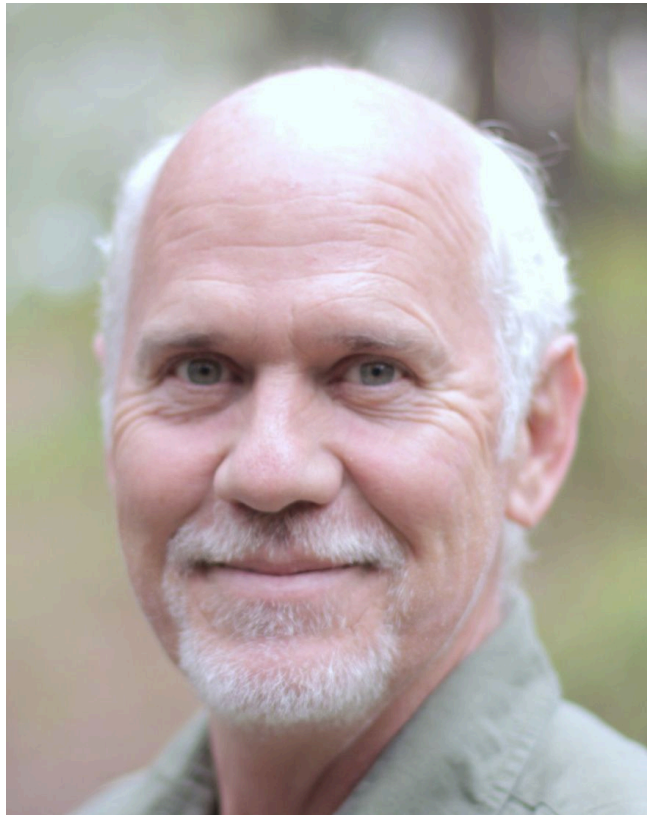


In My View: Short term pain for long term gain

April 12, 2024



The Klamath River dam removal is the largest riparian restoration project in the United States. There are a few who still oppose this project, but it is moving forward as planned with a few bumps.

The release of sediment from the dam removal was an anticipated short-term impact. Though this is having a temporary effect on fish, in the long term a free-flowing Klamath will greatly improve the habitat for salmon. Increased salmon populations will be good for everyone who likes to fish for and eat salmon.

The Harbor District expressed concerns that this excess sediment may be carried north and deposited in the harbor. Precautions are being taken to determine whether this problem arises. The harbor has established a baseline depth prior to dam removal to measure any inflow of silt. There is a plan to mitigate if this occurs.

What's Happening

How did this happen? The permits for the dam operation were expiring and PacifiCorp, which owns the dams, decided that it would be cheaper to remove the dams than to bring them up to code. The Yurok Tribe

and others, successfully advocated for dam removal to restore the salmon fishery.

The States of California and Oregon and others developed a plan for dam removal and delegated responsibility to carry out the plan to the Klamath River Renewal Corporation (KRRC). I gleaned the following current information on what's happening with the dam removal from the KRRC website. klamathrenewal.org

“The natural wealth of the Klamath River has underpinned the physical well-being and cultural identity of native tribes for thousands of years. The Klamath River was once the third largest salmon river on the west coast and teemed with salmon and trout in what seemed to be an inexhaustible supply.”

KRRC

The Klamath River Renewal Corporation (KRRC) is a private, independent nonprofit organization formed by the Klamath Hydroelectric Settlement Agreement and is part of a cooperative effort to “re-establish the natural vitality of the Klamath River so that it can support all communities in the basin.”

Signatories of the Klamath Hydroelectric Settlement Agreement include the States of California and Oregon, local governments, Tribal nations, PacifiCorp, irrigators, and several conservation and fishing groups. They appointed KRRC to take ownership and oversee removal of four hydroelectric dams on the Klamath River.

River Renewal

KRRC has taken ownership of four PacifiCorp dams, JC Boyle, Copco No. 1 & No. 2, and Iron Gate, and will “remove these dams, restore formerly inundated lands, and implement required mitigation measures in compliance with all applicable federal, state, and local regulations.”

“Removal of the four hydroelectric dams is the first crucial step to restore the health of the Klamath River and the communities that depend upon it. KRRC’s sole focus is to accomplish this first step.” KRRC provides regular updates on their progress through press releases posted on their website.

Last November the KRRC completed removal of the first dam, Copco No. 2. The remaining three dams, Copco No. 1, Iron Gate, and JC Boyle are slated for removal this year. In January, KRRC began the slow draining of these reservoirs. Once the drawdown is complete, restoration and deconstruction activities can begin.

Drawdown Complete

In February, the initial phase of drawdown of Copco No.1, Iron Gate, and JC Boyle reservoirs was completed. Draining the reservoirs is a critical step on the path to deconstructing these remaining Klamath

River dams.

“With the reservoirs emptied, the Klamath River now winds its way through the former reservoir footprints, cutting through a century of accumulated sediment and finding its historical path. Extensive testing of the sediment that had accumulated behind the dams revealed that it is predominantly dead algae and is not a concern for human health.”

“The restoration of the former reservoir footprints is currently underway and will continue for several years until vegetation is successfully established and water clarity has returned to baseline conditions.”

Gas Bubble Disease

Not everyone is happy about this progress and at least one major mistake has been made. On February 26, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) released 830,000 fall-run Chinook salmon fry into Fall Creek, a tributary of the Klamath River above Iron Gate Dam. The salmon fry experienced a large mortality.

According to CDFW, “Indications are the cause of mortality was gas bubble disease that likely occurred as the fry migrated through the Iron Gate Dam tunnel, old infrastructure that is targeted for removal along with the Iron Gate Dam later this year. Gas bubble disease results from environmental or physical trauma often associated with severe pressure change.”

“There is no indication that the mortality is associated with other Klamath River water quality conditions such as turbidity and dissolved oxygen. The problems associated with the Iron Gate Dam tunnel are temporary and CDFW will plan all future salmon releases below Iron Gate Dam until this infrastructure is removed.”

Skeptics Retort

A story by William Simpson published in the on-line Siskiyou News (3/4/24) opined, “The narrative by CDFW suggesting that 850,000 taxpayer-funded fall-run Chinook salmon fry perished due to ‘gas bubble disease’ is certainly plausible, but questionable.”

“Arguably, there [sic] powerful financial motives to deny the deadly impacts of sedimentation-turbidity (toxic clay-mud) on the salmon fry, especially because there are ten [sic] of millions of metric yards of the stuff still sitting on the lake bottoms of Iron Gate and Copco Lakes!”

“The gas bubble tale seems to also work as a cover story in the event there was incompetence in the release of costly salmon fry into a polluted Klamath River.”

Get the Facts Straight

This Siskiyou “story” is an example of science denialism and disinformation through speculation. This only serves to inflame the concerns real or imagined regarding the possible impacts of this project. Yes, there will be increased silt loading in the Klamath River and it will impact fish, but no evidence has been presented to show the sediments are toxic or polluted.

In the end the Klamath River will flush itself clean again and it will be better than ever. There must be short-term pain, so that we can achieve a long-term gain.

Kevin Hendrick is a 31-year resident of Del Norte County. kevinjameshendrick@gmail.com