River Impossible

Everybody loves the Klamath. Everybody wants a piece of it. And they're willing to go to war to get it.

By Patrick Symmes

Photograph by Hugh Kretschmer

IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES

YOU'LL BE GLAD TO HEAR that all the problems of the Klamath River are easily comprehensible, that everyone involved knows the solution, and that the end of this crisis is preordained. Don't worry. On a geological time scale, this will only take a minute.

Dropping out of the southern-Oregon cloud veldt at 10,000 feet, you can see the whole rippling mass of the Cascades spread out below: the hulking menace of California's Mount Shasta to the south, the tectonic chaos of the Siskiyou Range and the Trinity Alps to the west. Nestled among the volcanic foothills is a string of small, table-flat swaths of prairie overlaid with precise squares of farmland, ruled by fences and combed by tractors. Hills are shorn into mathematical equations with road graders, lanes of blacktop meet at merciless right angles, and center-pivot irrigation systems carve unnaturally green, pi-perfect circles of grain from the arid sage. Starting in the late 1800s, the land of the Upper Klamath Basin—soft, high valleys sprawling on both sides of the Oregon-California state line—was gridded into 80-acre lots.

These were sold to homesteaders or, eventually, given away in lotteries to soldiers returning from the two world wars. More than a century later, each valley is defined by the varying greens of alfalfa, potato leaves, and barley—80 acres of one, 80 acres of another, 80 acres of the next. It's a lovely, productive, and unsustainable project that has turned the landscape into an aerial map of agriculture's struggle with the dry, inhospitable West.

There isn't enough water.

This is the simple problem at the heart of a complex struggle. The upper part of the Klamath—the top third of the river, flowing 4,000 feet above sea level—gets only 12 to 18 inches of precipitation a year, and that water has been promised too many times for too many uses. It's needed to sustain the 210,000 acres of crops and pasture kept going by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation—the federal government's main dam and canal builder—as part of its massive Klamath Project irrigation system. It also must support the 100,000 salmon that swim up the river and its tributaries every fall; the Hoopa, Yurok, and Karuk Indian tribes who depend on the salmon; two endangered Upper Klamath Lake sucker species; and a fourth, upriver tribal group, the Klamath, who once lived off the sucker and want their sacred fish restored. Finally, it has to replenish the wetlands that host one of the world's great waterfowl migrations—millions of geese and grebes and pelicans, 80 percent of the birds on the Pacific Flyway.

The Klamath dispute encompasses all the mind-numbing elements that define western water fights in the modern era: economic pressures, endangered species, tribal obligations, and competing political constituencies that make compromise seem impossible. "This is your prototypical water war," says Glen Spain, a 53-year-old Eugene, Oregon-based environmentalist who has fought the Bureau of Reclamation for years over Klamath fish issues. "It's a disaster in the making."

Actually, disaster has already happened—twice. In 2001, with Clinton administration policies still in effect, a multiyear drought prompted federal officials to cut off most of the irrigation water to farmers. (Lawsuits and a preponderance of scientific opinion convinced the feds to leave enough water in the river and lake to satisfy the threatened coho salmon, the suckers, and the tribes.) But when the land dried up and crops started dying, Klamath farmers launched a summer-long agro-rebellion. Some 15,000 people joined a bucket brigade to carry water from the river to parched irrigation ditches. The protests climaxed on the Fourth of July, when a few angry men put a blowtorch to the headgates at the Link River Dam, above Klamath Falls, Oregon, cutting the locks and letting the water flow.

In the long, dry spring and summer of 2002, the politics were reversed with almost perfect symbolism. In that second year of the Bush presidency, Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton assured farmers that they would always have their water, and personally

opened the headgates, restarting the traditional diversion of some 450,000 acre-feet per year into the canals. (That's roughly 146 billion gallons.) Just like in 96 of the previous 97 years, the farmers got first dibs.

Six months later and 220 miles downriver, where the Klamath meets the Pacific, 35,000 salmon went belly-up in the low water, one of the largest salmon kills ever recorded in the United States. Their carcasses rotted on the riverbanks for weeks, and when the Yurok and Hoopa tribes convinced FedEx to deliver 500 pounds of stinking fish to the Interior Department in October, the Klamath got Washington's full attention. The Bureau of Reclamation suddenly discovered that it had spare water to flush out the river, and an estimated 65,000 salmon surged upstream. Bush then convened the Klamath Basin Federal Working Group, giving Gale Norton 18 months to resolve one of the oldest water disputes in the country.

But is a resolution even possible? That's hard to say. Ask around on the Klamath and you'll find that farmers, Indians, environmentalists, fishermen, and paddlers all agree on two things. The first is that the solution is within easy reach and simply involves a careful, rational, and objective application of the facts.

The second, unfortunately, is this: The only relevant facts are ones that support each side's competing view of reality.

SALMON v. SPUDS

FIRST THERE'S THE A CANAL. Just to review, the A Canal carries water from Upper Klamath Lake, a shallow sheet of snowmelt, into the B, C, D, E, and F canals, as well as the A-3 and A-4, the C-4, the F-1, the High Line and Low Line canals, two canals named North, and two named West, not to mention the East Lateral, the South, and the Center canals. That's 185 miles of canals total.

Then there are the ditches—the bigger, named ones like the Van Brimmer and the Yonna, plus 300 miles of anonymous, unlined farm trenches. There's also something called the Klamath Straits Drain, along with scores of channelized creeks, uncountable dikes, and an aqueduct called the Lost River Diversion Channel. The water is pushed and prodded by 11 major and at least 45 minor pumping stations and fed onto 210,000 acres of farmland through sprinklers, pivots, pipes, wheel lines, and, though far less often than in the past, flood irrigation, the wholesale dumping of water on the ground. The result of all this diversion is the spuds for your freedom fries, the dehydrated onions in your pizza shaker, the peppermint in your Dentyne Ice, and most of our nation's supply of horseradish.

Any water that isn't sucked up by crops flows downhill through a network of sumps and reservoirs, into a pumping station, through a tunnel passing beneath a ridgeline, and out into the Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge, where, despite carrying a heavy load of pesticides, it nurtures cattails and sedges and birds. Then it gets dumped back into the river 11 miles downstream from where it started, near Keno, Oregon. Though supporters of the Klamath Project like to claim that this diversion consumes only 4.5 percent of the river's annual flow, that's a misleading statistic. The water is removed during the critical dry months leading up to the fall salmon run, when it can reduce the river's total volume by up to 50 percent.

Our Favorite SWIMMING HOLES

Take the leap: Havasu Falls, Havasupai Indian Reservation, Arizona

1. HAVASU FALLS, SUPAI, ARIZONA Hike two miles to this perfect turquoise pool, with year-round 72-degree water, in Havasu Canyon.

2. JOHNSON'S SHUT-INS, REYNOLDS COUNTY, MISSOURI Rock towers create dozens of small pools on the East Fork of the Black River.

3. BASS LAKE, POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE, CALIFORNIA Follow the Coast Trail two and a half miles to a freshwater dunk hole that stays sunny even on the foggiest days.

4. CALF CREEK FALLS, UTAH The perfect desert oasis: a perennial waterfall and round, shaded pool.

5. REDFISH LAKE, STANLEY, IDAHO Laze on the south-shore beach and enjoy huge views of the Sawtooth Range.

6. BARTON SPRINGS, AUSTIN, TEXAS A chilly 1,000-foot-long spring-fed pool in Austin's Zilker Park.

7. WALDEN POND, CONCORD, MASSACHUSETTS After an impressive preservation effort, our most literary pond is definitely worth a dip.

8. BIG BEND, PETERSBURG, WEST VIRGINIA Try a lazy float on this hour-long river loop, on the South Branch of the Potomac.

9. OREGON CREEK, CALIFORNIA A stair-stepping series of pools in the Sierra, north of Nevada City, with plenty of natural, water-carved Jacuzzis.

10. PEEKAMOOSE BLUE HOLE, SUNDOWN, NEW YORK Rondout Creek rushes through a gap in the rock to form this refreshing forest pond.

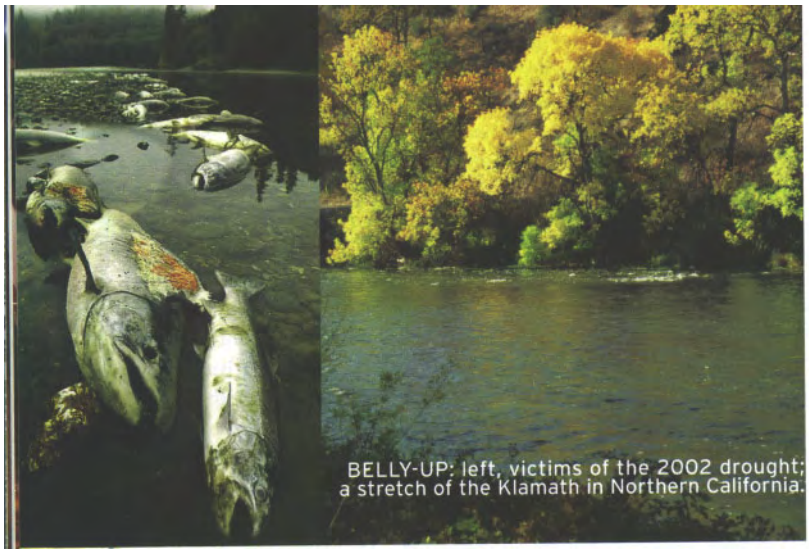
The river itself doesn't look like much at first. Below the headgates of the A Canal, during drought summers, you can easily wade across it. But the Klamath is parched only at the top, where all the good farmland is. After passing through five dams crowding the Oregon-California line, it gets down to business, snaking through the Siskiyou and Scott Bar ranges, the Klamath Mountains, the Marble Mountains, the Salmon Mountains, and the very wet Trinity Alps, carving deep canyons as it gathers water and force. Down toward the Pacific, where there isn't enough flat land to farm anything, the Klamath is pelted with rain. It finishes as a monster, the longest whitewater river in California, with salmon runs that in good years are larger than even the mighty Columbia's.

The Klamath's legal and political landscape is incredibly convoluted. When the newly created Bureau of Reclamation launched the Klamath Project in 1905, government surveyors encountered more than 500 disputed water claims, some dating back to the 1860s. Klamath lawsuits started early—by 1917, the courts were settling rights on the Lost River, which flows from Clear Lake Reservoir into Tule Lake—and they tend to last a while. *United States v. Adair*, a suit that affirmed the water rights of the Klamath Tribes, was filed in 1975, decided in '79, upheld by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court in '84, left standing by the Supreme Court in '85, and reopened and upheld in 2002, with all parties now awaiting yet another appeal. There are currently eight major lawsuits in play, filed by tribes, commercial salmon fishermen, farmers, and environmental groups—a collective morass that I took to calling *Everybody v. Bureau of Wreckthenation*.

Klamath lawsuits "are going to be with us for the foreseeable future," says Carl Ullman, 54, a Klamath Falls-based attorney who has represented the Klamath Tribes for 15 years. "Certainly for the rest of our lives and our children's lives."

Enter George W. Bush as the latest president who has to try and sort this out. Based on the administration's track record, you'd expect any Bush-brokered solution to favor farmers. Gale Norton tried that in 2002, and the result was stinky sushi on the Interior Department steps. OK, on to Plan B. According to a Department of Interior official who declined to be named, the Klamath offers a chance to "put the pieces together" for a compromise solution. It could be a model for resolving other water wars.

In a spiffy, chart-heavy May 2003 report called Water 2025, Norton outlined a grim future for the American West, where a mix of Klamath-style problems will come to a head in 17 states over the next 20 years. The hot spots include the region's most embattled rivers: the Colorado, the Columbia, and the Rio Grande. But thanks to its rowdy farmers and decomposing salmon, the Klamath is coming first.



BELLY-UP: left, victims of the 2002 drought; a stretch of the Klamath in Northern California.

The White House may wish it had sent Norton to pose beside some other river. Maybe the Colorado, where the powerful thirst of Californians might overwhelm all resistance. Or the Rio Grande, where New Mexico's political establishment has vowed to fight a recent court decision protecting the endangered silvery minnow, taking the issue to the Supreme Court or even pressuring Congress to revise the Endangered Species Act. On the Klamath, Norton's task force is hemmed in by stone walls: On one side is a body of case law insisting that tribal rights and endangered species come before irrigation. On the other is the administration's rigid ideology, which forbids federal buyouts of farms and water rights. That leaves room for only half-measures.

Then there is the cold logic of money. The Klamath Project generates about $100 million annually in agricultural sales. Meanwhile, the U.S. Geological Survey estimates that sustainable fishing, recreation, and other renewable activities on the Klamath bring in $800 million a year and could bring in as much as $36 billion with significant restorations to water quality. So the math of *Salmon v. Spud* strongly favors the salmon.

None of that, Bush opponents charge, will stop the administration from placating farmers if it can find a way to do so. "You see it on the Rio Grande; you see it on the Klamath," says Kristen Boyles, a 38-year-old Seattle attorney for Earthjustice, a national nonprofit that has litigated Klamath lawsuits since the early 1990s. "In areas where there are too many demands for too little

water, instead of balancing it out, their answer is 'Irrigation comes first.' "

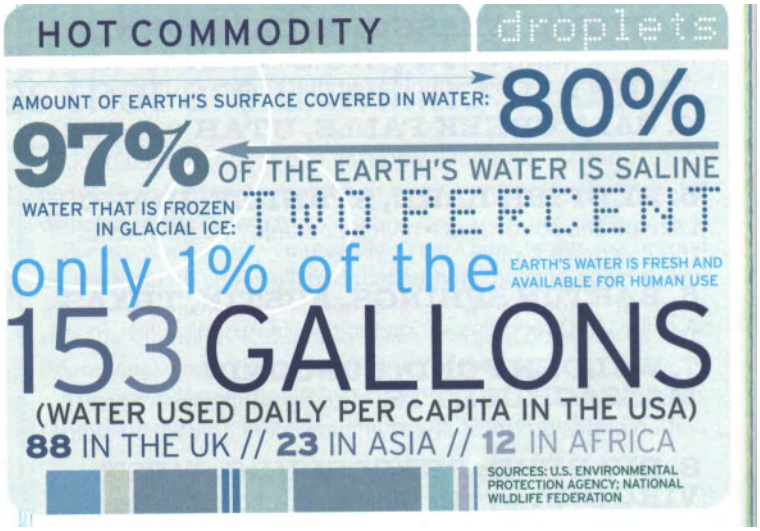
Until the task force files its report in September, that status quo continues. Heavy 2003 rains have temporarily eased the drought, putting off the Klamath's breaking point for another year. The farmers will get water, but not as much as they say they're owed. The river will get higher flows, but not as much as biologists say the salmon need. And when Interior chimes in, if *Water 2025* is any guide, the public will get a nice Web site and very little in the way of federal money or new ideas.

So for now, at least, the lack of a plan *is* the plan.

A VIEW TO A KILL

AT REQUA, ON CALIFORNIA'S Redwood Coast, the Klamath pours over a black bar of volcanic sand into the Pacific, dumping 20 million acre-feet of water a year into the ocean. There's salt spray in the air when 43-year-old fishing guide Mike Kuczynski, owner of the Eureka Fly Shop, meets me below the levee, on the last bit of road to touch the Klamath for the next 26 miles. We clamber into his 18-foot jet boat, then rip upstream through a long, green bend.

It's raining, by the way. That's so normal here—50 to 80 inches a year—that Kuczynski doesn't seem to notice. ("Oh, this isn't rain," an innkeeper told me. "It's only rain when it bounces.") Kuczynski guides about 100 days a year, following the steelhead trout migrations in the summer and fall. Spawning chinook and coho salmon, coastal cutthroat trout, and shad also make their way up the Klamath and its major tributaries, the Trinity, Salmon, Scott, and Shasta. Only the big fall runs are fished commercially, on the coast, and anglers work the lower river from late summer to early winter. The landscape here is perpendicular—sharp cliffs or broad, alluvial gravel bars. Towering redwoods fringe the banks. Requa was once a thriving town built on lumber and salmon, but both began to run short in the early 20th century. After 1964, when a hundred-year flood took out what remained of the old fish canneries, the only structure left was the Requa Inn, built out of redwood planks, high on a hillside. The inn still serves fishermen and boaters, but for two weeks last September the main view was of thousands of suppurating salmon, 94 percent of them adult chinook.



First the salmon stacked up in a long pool, waiting for the rush of water that signals the fall migration. When it didn't come, they started dying, five deep on the stony banks, filling the air with an inescapable stench.

Everyone lost something. The inn lost business. The Yurok and Hoopa cut back on their annual quotas, to protect future runs. Commercial fishermen along a 250-mile stretch of the Oregon and California coasts lost their entire fall season.

I ask Kuczynski to show me where the kill happened, but he just shakes his head, casting off drops of water as we hurtle upstream. "They were everywhere," he says, "along both sides of the river, all the way up to the Trinity. Forty miles or so. We first started to notice several dead fish on the bottom of the river. That was on a Tuesday. By Thursday, there were dead salmon floating down everywhere. People had to stand in dead salmon to fish."

I ask him to describe the smell. "Dead salmon," he says.

So what killed them? Kuczynski first disclaims any special knowledge, then points to how low and nutrient-rich the Klamath was last year. Although both factors are related to farming, nature arguably played a role, too: The size of the run was only slightly above average, but the sizes of the individual fish were staggering, a reflection of a slow, irregular recovery in the baitfish stocks that salmon gorge on during their three years at sea.

"I've never seen so many salmon that were so big," he says. "The average size on the Klamath is eight to 12 pounds. These were 30- and 40-pounders. Everywhere. Fish up to 50 pounds." Trapped in isolated pools, the big salmon crowded against one another, vulnerable to oxygen deprivation and disease.

Now, in the early spring, steelhead are returning to the river, but as we pass into the Yurok Indian Reservation, which runs one mile deep on each side of the Klamath for 44 miles, we cruise right over some great fishing spots. One hole at a wide bend looks perfect, but Kuczynski doesn't even slow down.

"You see that house?" he shouts over the motor's roar. I hadn't: Buried in the trees is a round, Yurok-style dwelling. "The owner doesn't like people fishing in her hole. Last year she took a shot at a fishing guide—a new guy who didn't know what he was doing. He parked right on top of her hole and started fishing. Bam. Four or five shots, actually." He throws a wave at the hut. "Don't worry," he says. "She's a terrible shot."

So this is Northern California. These wet forests have always drawn prickly individualists, along with a fair number of redwood rednecks and chainsaw hippies. Add a few DEA squads roving over huge federal land holdings in dark helicopters and the result is a cocktail of paranoia straight out of Vineland, Thomas Pynchon's 1990 novel about a fictional town somewhere near here, where addled sixties refugees battle rogue federal agents. Locals still talk about living in "Jefferson State," which began as a 1940s plan to secede from both California and Oregon and endures as a peculiar Klamath state of mind.

The fish kill brought out some of Jefferson State's wiggier citizens, including Barry Clausen, a self-styled crusader against ecoterrorism who lives in nearby Redding. Clausen told the *Siskiyou Daily News* that the salmon were killed not by low water but by "foreigners" in "armed boats" traveling up and down the Klamath. What he meant was that Mexican drug dealers had killed the fish. At least five clandestine labs for producing crystal meth, or crank, have been found in the backcountry, largely staffed by illegal immigrants and replete with toxic chemicals that get dumped who knows where.

Kuczynski finally pulls the boat into a gravel bar. We wade the cold water, fishing for an hour in the driving rain. Almost routinely, a steelhead tugs on my line with the soft double jerk of someone pulling my sleeve. This happens a dozen times, but nothing sticks.

The scene around me is silent, rainy, cold, and spectacular. A blue-green world. Kuczynski lights a pipe, and dragon puffs of tobacco ghost down the river. I keep an eye peeled for gun-toting crankheads. Maybe they don't come out in the rain.

TRIBAL RIGHTS (AND WRONGS)

"MYTH NUMBER ONE is the meth-lab theory," says Mike Belchik, the 38-year-old senior fisheries biologist for the Yurok tribe, as he works on a plate of hash browns. Breakfast in the Klamath Basin means eggs and PowerPoint displays, and in this café in Willow Creek, south of the Klamath's confluence with the Trinity, Belchik is the first of many to flip open his laptop and walk me through the issues. He dismisses the meth labs out of hand—there was no trace of toxins in the water or the dead fish, and only adult fish, the least vulnerable to poisoning, died.

"Myth number two," he continues, "is that they died because it was an unusually large run with high water temperature. Nope." Temperature was normal; so was the run, the eighth-largest in 20 years.

Belchik runs through data sets on river temperatures, 3-D schematics of Klamath canyons, and nauseating photos of dead salmon, with close-up shots of blood-red gills decaying into tangled gray masses. He walked the banks of the Klamath during the worst of it, and he doesn't buy the charge from some Upper Klamath farmers that massive fish kills have long been a natural

phenomenon. Yurok elders have examined generations of tribal legend and art without discovering a single reference to huge Klamath die-offs.

The tribes on the river have long argued that the salmon and suckers need more water, and they've been in court for years trying to force the Bureau of Reclamation to increase minimum river flows and lake levels. The arcana of these flow levels have become the very center of this heated dispute, as advocates attack each other's acceptable flow-rate figures with gusto. One federal biologist, Michael Kelly, who was studying stream flows for the National Marine Fisheries Service, filed for whistle-blower protection in 2002, alleging that his flow recommendations had been altered under pressure from Washington. (His request for an investigation was later denied, for lack of evidence.)

With its own Fish and Wildlife Service and Bureau of Reclamation at odds over flows, Interior finally summoned a panel from the National Academy of Sciences, a private advisory body, to referee the claims. In February 2002, the panel rejected the requests for increased flows, saying there was "no substantial scientific evidence" that the fish needed them.

"They just blew it," Belchik fumes. "The science is judged on whether it allows agriculture to happen at status quo levels. It turns the burden of proof on its head."

Like the Hoopa and Karuk, farther upstream, the Yurok once had a complex trading economy built around salmon. Now, with no roads, few telephones, and less electricity, they don't own much except the right to fish. They don't have casinos, and the best timber land was sold off long ago.

The Hoopa aren't faring much better. After breakfast, Belchik and I drive two dozen winding miles to their reservation, which sits at the junction of the Trinity and the Klamath. We ditch our car in front of a new tribal office and jump into a six-wheeled pickup with Barry McCovey Jr., 24, a Yurok-Karuk wearing the baggy jeans and fat grin of a skateboarder.

"We're salmon people," McCovey says, steering the truck along a sinuous road that traces the Klamath canyon. "But no one makes a living from salmon anymore." He's a rare exception: A fisheries technician, he works with Belchik monitoring the river.

Belchik chimes in from the backseat. "It ends up that whole empire up there was built on the backs of people down here," he says. "We get nada. Ditka. Bupkes."

After the kill, the tribes cut back on the number of fish they took. Coho are declining—listed as threatened in 1997—but chinook are slowly recovering. The tribes have a combined quota for chinook, which are also known as king salmon. But since the salmon runs' low point, in the polluted days of the 1970s, fishing hasn't been reliable enough for anyone to invest in a cannery, and tribal fishermen get as little as 60 cents a pound from wholesale buyers. Some prefer to just toss a few kings on ice, drive down to Eureka, California, and sell them by the roadside for $20 apiece.

At river mile 34, we pull over at a broad bend, where standing haystack waves decorate the green river. It's a beautiful spot, but the water is less than ideal. Already naturally rich in nutrients, the Klamath is drained, heated up, and polluted by farming and logging. The resulting algal blooms cause "swimmer's itch," a rash that plagues kayakers and rafters and depresses the recreational economy—yet another renewable resource that could benefit the tribes if only the politics around here were different.

CHARGE OF THE BUCKET BRIGADE

IRON GATE DAM, the southernmost of five small irrigation impoundments below Klamath Falls, marks the end of the Lower Klamath. Here, 190 miles upstream from Requa, rain and river guides give way to cowboy hats, drought, and tension. The Bureau of Reclamation's grand scheme only really flourished financially between the 1950s and 1970s, when crop prices were high and the American market was shielded from imports. Now NAFTA and global warming are undermining the entire premise of using snowmelt to nurture alfalfa at 4,000 feet, in a growing season that rarely lasts 120 days.

Tough times have shaped K-Falls, as the lakeside town of 17,000 people is known. Main Street is half empty, and half angry. On

a windy Friday night, I drive past the Leatherneck Club, where locals nurse draft beers, and park near the town courthouse to meet Bill Ransom, a stout, semiretired storekeeper of 62 who acts as a spokesman for the area's loudest anti-environmental group. The bucket brigade of 2001 has become the Bucket Brigade, a full-fledged nonprofit with an office and its own line of attractive caps and lapel pins. "I think you need to look at some real facts and figures," Ransom begins. "I put together a PowerPoint presentation." Before I can stop him, we're off: bar charts on water flows in 1918 and today, gratuitous swipes at "known radicals" in the environmental movement, month-by-month comparisons of dam releases. There are pamphlets denouncing the Nature Conservancy and the United Nations, and a list of the top 24 "misrepresentations and lies" foisted on the world by environmentalists, like the idea that recycling sun-warmed irrigation water into the Klamath makes the river too warm for salmon. Upper Klamath Lake, Ransom explains, has always been too warm for coho and chinook.

Um, didn't salmon pass through the lake for thousands of years without a problem? Ransom barely misses a beat. "I think there must have been something different then," he says, and hits the next slide.

The Bucket Brigade's hard turn to the right has been equal parts comedy and tragedy. Supported by property-rights groups, wise-use veterans, and even off-road-vehicle users, it hooked up with the Jarbridge Shovel Brigade, a posse of "county sovereignty" creeps from Nevada, and then with the so-called Sawgrass Rebellion, a group of Everglades farmers opposed to restoration programs. Just days after the Klamath fish kill, responding to an invitation from the Dade County Farm Bureau, Ransom led a cross-country caravan of nine pickup trucks to offer solidarity to the Floridians, towing a giant silver bucket behind one vehicle.

But in late October 2002, when the Bucketeers arrived in Tallahassee, the Farm Bureau folks stopped returning their calls. ("Jeb Bush was under pressure," Ransom says, but he won't go into detail.) They hung around a few days, and then they drove home. It was an 8,800-mile round-trip but, Ransom insists, definitely not a failure. To prove it, he unleashes a second PowerPoint segment, called "Was the Florida Caravan a Failure?"

It's rare to hear a dissenting voice in K-Falls, but the next day I run into a shopkeeper who rails bitterly about how farmers are milking the water crisis even as they denounce it. Some got up to $2,500 an acre for lost water rights in 2001, he says, plus payments for emergency wells and crop losses, a total of more than $4 million in federal and state relief. This year, 400 farmers—almost a third of the project—signed up for a new Interior-run water bank that pays them to forgo water during dry years. Over time, it would be cheaper to buy out the farmers, but the shopkeeper blames an "irrigation elite"—chemical suppliers, crop dusters, and the tractor dealers out on South Sixth Street—for blocking proposed buyouts.

"Of course," the man finally tells me, "you can't use my name. If I said any of this publicly, every window in this store would be shot out tomorrow. Every one."

He's exaggerating, but only a little. Environmentalists have been threatened, and last year three white duck hunters from nearby Bonanza drove through Chiloquin, the heart of the Klamath Indian community, shooting up an outhouse and then roughing up members of a junior varsity basketball team. The men were arrested, but distrust continues.

"A lot of the people in the basin still view it as cowboys versus Indians," says Elwood Miller, 49, the Klamath Tribes' natural-resources director.

The Klamath, sadly, are used to shoddy treatment. They don't even have a reservation. In the McCarthyite fifties, the federal government decided to combat "socialism" by buying out the 1,700-square-mile communal reservation for a one-time payment and having the tribe "terminated," or legally disbanded. Decades later, the Klamath, 3,400 strong, have recovered their official status and are quietly negotiating with Interior for a partial return of their lands, which are rich with ponderosa pine. In the meantime, they depend on federal payments and gross about $400,000 a year—a third of the tribal budget—from a small casino outside K-Falls, a place that some whites boycott to protest Indian lawsuits.

The farmers' resentment is directly proportional to the looming reality that they may end up losing. The courts continue to put tribal water rights and endangered species over Bureau of Reclamation projects, a precedent that may echo to other western

rivers. Norton's task force is hoping to implement changes to the Upper Basin: increased conservation, greater storage capacity, ecosystem restoration, and help for the tribes. But in the end, after being litigated forever, the bottom line can't stray far from strict adherence to a priority list: endangered species, Indians, farmers, and wildlife refuges. In that order.

NO, WE *CAN'T* ALL GET ALONG

ALAS, THE STYLISTIC SINS of the greens don't help matters. In February, the Audubon Society held a conference in K-Falls devoted to bald eagles—the Klamath Basin hosts some 800 eagles in a good winter, the highest overwintering population in the U.S. The Klamath mess was on the table for discussion, as was the environmental community's stance on irrigation. Advocates for all viewpoints had been invited to speak. Dan Keppen, 38, head of the Klamath Falls-based Water Users Association, an advocacy group for farmers, arrived in a dapper black turtleneck, looking like the Matt LeBlanc of farm country. He stretched his facts a bit—claiming that irrigators received "no" water in 2001, when in fact they received about half their usual allotment—and drove home the point that irrigation takes only 4.5 percent of the Klamath's water, while getting 100 percent of the blame. Keppen mentioned options for dealing with the water shortages, used deliberately moderate language, and left with a round of applause.

Then Andy Kerr got up. A rumpled 48-year-old speaking for the environmentalists, he discarded his prepared remarks, announced that he was "infuriated" by Keppen's presentation, and, rubbing both hands over his bald head, launched into an impassioned, rambling rebuttal. Kerr runs a well-regarded environmental consultancy and serves as point man for the Oregon Natural Resources Council (ONRC) on this issue, but the only words I can use to describe his presentation are blunt ones: ineffective, unprofessional, and condescending.

I call him on it later during a phone conversation. "I am rightly criticized for not playing well with certain parts of the opposition," Kerr tells me. "Let's all sit down and get along? That did not work in the South for desegregation and did not work in the Pacific Northwest for the cutting of old-growth forests. I don't expect Andy Kerr and Dan Keppen to be singing 'Kumbaya' anytime soon."

Kerr has been a leading voice, along with the ONRC and a coalition of environmental groups, in proposing the only realistic, short-term solution: buying up farmland at $4,000 an acre (about twice the market price), then retiring the irrigation rights and pouring the water back into depleted wetlands or the river. This "willing seller" initiative has been condemned furiously by ag leaders. A very few farmers have openly expressed interest, but Norton bluntly refuses to add any new lands to the federal portfolio, anywhere, and Congress shot down a $175 million allocation for willing sellers last year.

Unfortunately, in the same conversation, I get a sense of how easily farmers can distrust the environmental movement. Kerr and I fall into an obscure argument over flow levels in the Link River, the mile-long natural channel that drains Upper Klamath Lake. This is exactly the kind of agonizing minutia that people here argue about all day. Back before the Bureau of Reclamation had dug a deeper cut leading out of the lake, the Link actually ran dry during some summers. Kerr denies this. I discuss it with him while holding the phone in my left hand and a 1918 photo of the river in my right hand. In the photo, K-Falls pioneers are standing in the dry bed, picking up fish.

"That's not true!" Kerr tells me. "It never ran dry!"

The point is not about whether the Link ran dry in 1918. The point is that solutions depend on compromise, compromise depends on trust, and farmers and greens cannot trust each other when they lack even a basic agreement on reality.

THE BITTER END

TULELAKE, CALIFORNIA, is where the crisis hits bottom. Before the Bureau of Reclamation got its hands on it, this broad valley near the Klamath's headwaters was a mosaic of seasonal wetlands, permanent marshes, open lakes, and dry islands. Eighty-five to 90 percent of the wetlands have been lost—drained and pumped and plowed into some of the best farmland in America. On the road down from K-Falls, I pass hand-painted signs that read HONOR YOUR OATH/PEOPLE BEFORE FISH.

Farmers here are weary. "People are polarized," says Marshall Staunton, whose grandfather settled here in 1929. "Last year, the water was delivered to the project, and there was a fish kill two mountain ranges away. We got tagged. It was simple: water delivered, fish killed. All sides are looking at a horrible outcome. It was ag in 2001, fisheries in 2002. We'll be fighting for a

hundred years." At the foot of Sheepy Ridge, a shard of Cascadian upthrust reaching out into the flat farmlands, I hook up with Staunton's neighbor Rob Crawford, a 46-year-old farmer in a camo hunting jacket. Mercifully, there's no PowerPoint display. Instead we pile into his huge Ford pickup and drive straight into the fields he leases, lumbering down the eroded dirt levee between 80-acre potato patches. Although the spring migration has barely begun, tens of thousands of geese and huge flocks of ducks are already here.

There are wetlands within sight—the polluted, stressed, water-starved national wildlife refuges—but as Crawford eagerly points out, more than 90 percent of the birds are thriving on agricultural land. Geese waddle over the flat ground, digging up the potatoes that were too small for the mechanized harvesters, pruning alfalfa stubble to the ground, ripping cast-off onion skins from the dirt.

Turning the basin into a giant bird feeder is hardly natural, but in the real world of the Klamath, holistic ecosystem management is still decades—and hundreds of millions of dollars—away. In the short term, agriculture effectively takes water from fish and gives it to birds. When the A Canal was closed in 2001, salmon benefited—but half the bald eagles moved away.

In the end, no single argument stands up to the confounding, backward Klamath. Everyone imagines some perfect solution, but, as with the large-scale problems on the Colorado and the Rio Grande, there is no short-term way out. All the PowerPoint lawyers and Washington task forces and well-meaning farmers and determined environmentalists and data-loving ichthyologists in America can't save this river—yet. Gale Norton can't save it, and won't.

Crawford drives up a set of switchbacks onto Sheepy Ridge itself. You can see it all from up here: the ancient lake bottom lifted up and sliced open to view, tens of thousands of years of rich organic matter compressed into strata. Croplands, marshes, national forest land, and even, off in the folds of the Siskiyou, a lovely snowcapped volcanic cone. Like most farmers, Crawford is less country than meets the eye, and we sit discussing New Zealand wines and pintail breeding strategies until it gets dark.

"Farms, wildlife refuges, and parkland," Crawford says, looking out. "I think it's a perfect mix." Like everybody along the Klamath, he's invested in his version of the future. The farmers see an ally in the White House, potato prices are stable, and there are snowstorms forecast for next week. His dream is that maybe things will somehow stay like they are at this very moment.

On the way down, we find a mule deer caught in a tall wire fence. Its back leg is broken, and the poor creature dangles half suspended, panicked and desperate. We both just sit there and watch for a minute, as though we don't know what to do.

"Got a gun?" I finally ask.

"No," Crawford says. We crawl through the barbed wire, grab the animal's broken leg, and, dodging the flailing of its remaining good hooves, gradually yank, twist, and lift until it comes loose.

You are free to make up a happy ending to this story. Maybe an eco-fable about restoring the deer back to health or an Indian tale of magic and rebirth. But what happens is that the deer collapses on the ground and simply lies there, panting and terrified. It won't survive the night.

"There's a lot of coyotes here," Crawford says, quietly. He vows to come back later, with a rifle, and spare it that cruel end. For now, we just wipe the blood on our jeans and drive on.