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26 Organizations Sound Alarm on Klamath Water

Wildlife advocates urge Obama administration not to allow National Wildlife Refuges to go dry, halt removal of endangered fish

Portland, Ore— A coalition of over two dozen national, regional and local conservation groups, today called on Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to ensure Tule Lake and Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs) are not allowed to go dry this spring and summer. The letter also urged Salazar to block the repeat of a past program of trapping and removing endangered fish from their habitat in lake, rather than encourage water conservation to ensure Tule Lake does not go dry.

Despite the wet spring in much of the Pacific Northwest, low snow pack in the Klamath Basin has created the potential for a serious summer drought.

“The Tule Lake and Lower Klamath wetlands are among the most important wildlife areas in the entire Western United States,” observed Steve Pedery, Conservation Director for Oregon Wild. “Those wetlands have not received a full supply of water since 2006, and the Obama administration must act to ensure they are not allowed to go dry this spring and summer.”

The letter signers urged Salazar to direct the US Bureau of Reclamation to take immediate measures to ensure that adequate amounts of water is provided this year to Lower Klamath NWR’s seasonal and permanent marshes, and to maintain lake levels needed to sustain two species of endangered fish in Tule Lake NWR. Snow pack in the Klamath Basin currently stands at approximately 89% of average. In February, a memo prepared by the National Wildlife Refuge staff who manage Tule Lake and Lower Klamath NWRs stated that: “*Water has not been delivered to the Refuge since Dec. 2, 2011 leaving the Refuge in the driest condition entering spring migration in over 70 years.*” On March 19, 2012 the refuge began receiving a small amount of water, but only enough to flood a very hundred acres of parched refuge wetlands.

“Recent storms have helped bring much-needed rain and snow to the Pacific Northwest, but the Klamath wetlands remain in serious trouble,” stated Bob Sallinger, Conservation Director for the Audubon Society of Portland. “Unless the Obama administration acts quickly, the hundreds of thousands of birds that migrate through the region in search of food, shelter, and place to nest and raise their young will find parched mud flats instead of wetlands.”

The letter also raises questions over the legality of a 2010 decision by the Department of the Interior to allow Tule Lake to go dry. That summer, with no prior public discussion or legally

required scientific analysis, the US Bureau of Reclamation requested (and was later granted by the Klamath Falls US Fish and Wildlife Service's Field Supervisor) an exemption from their Endangered Species Act requirements to maintain the flow of water into Tule Lake to sustain endangered fish populations. Rather than pursue water conservation by agricultural interests, the agencies trapped and evicted endangered Lost River and shortnose suckers from the lake.

"Any child can tell you that fish need water to survive and the water managers with the Interior Department know full well they have a legal obligation to protect endangered fish and their habitat," said Noah Greenwald, Endangered Species Program Director, Center for Biological Diversity. "It is deeply disturbing that they chose to evict fish from the lake, rather than require common-sense water conservation measures to protect them."

Only 20% of Tule Lake's estimated 2000 endangered fish were successfully trapped and evicted from the lake. These fish were sent to Upper Klamath Lake (where the USFWS has stated that up to 10% to 20% of the lake's population of endangered Lost River and shortnose suckers die each year due to poor habitat conditions). Although the (unannounced) plan had been to allow all of Tule Lake's remaining endangered fish to perish, this only did not happen as unanticipated agricultural waste water flowing in to the lake maintained higher than expected water levels.

The Klamath Basin was once home to over 350,000 acres of wetlands, but approximately 80% of these marshes have been drained and destroyed. Much of what remains is within the boundaries of Tule Lake and Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuges. As wetlands have decreased, so have wildlife populations. While also due to habitat loss through the flyway, since the 1950's, the number of migratory birds using Lower Klamath and Tule Lake National Wildlife Refuge wetlands (at the peak of migration) has declined from seven million then, to just one million today in the entire basin.

"These refuges are too important to become a sacrifice zone for failed state and federal policies," said John DeVoe, WaterWatch of Oregon Executive Director. "Ensuring Tule Lake and Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuges have an adequate supply of water, and that commercial agribusiness doesn't displace wetland habitat on these refuges, are critical steps to restoring the Klamath's native fish and protecting the Pacific coast's migratory waterfowl populations."

Background:

Copy of the letter to Secretary Salazar

February 10, 2012 memo from Refuge staff on lack of water for refuges

Fact sheet on removal of endangered fish from Tule Lake

Background on the Klamath Basin's National Wildlife Refuges

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