

Oregon dam removal may cost California

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The California Oregon Power Co. was founded in 1911 to supply electricity to the southernmost Oregon counties and the northernmost California counties. It built four hydroelectric power dams on the Klamath River.

The Klamath cuts across California's northwestern corner and is incredibly remote. Until those dams were built, blocking spawning runs, it supported an immense salmon and steelhead fishery that sustained Indian tribes living along its banks.

COPCO merged with Pacific Power and Light Co. in 1961. PP&L eventually changed its name to PacificCorp, and in 2005 was acquired by Warren Buffett.

Those Klamath River dams have become very contentious factors in a controversy over how the river's waters should be managed, involving not only their effect on fish, but the water supplies of farmers in the Klamath Basin, the southern Oregon region where the river begins.

While Indian tribes and commercial fishermen demand elimination of the dams to restore fish runs, farmers worry about irrigation water.

The factions have worked out a deal to remove the four dams and restore fish habitat, while protecting water supplies for those farmers. California Rep. Mike Thompson, a Democrat who represents the North Coast, and Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkeley, have introduced legislation to implement it.

However, a big sticking point is its cost, about a billion dollars. Thompson and Merkeley want the federal government to pay half, which already is drawing opposition in a Republican-controlled Congress. PacificCorp would pay about 25%. The remaining \$250 million?

The two legislators say it would come from "non-federal sources."

They don't say that it would come from California taxpayers, specifically a \$250 million chunk of the \$11.1 billion state water bond that is scheduled to go before voters next year.

And why should California taxpayers be on the hook?

The dams' removal would have no effect, positive or negative, on our water supply. The semi-official rationale -- weak at best -- is that improving fish runs on the Klamath would offset losses of habitat in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

But the bottom line is that, with interest on the bonds, it's a half-billion-dollar gift from California taxpayers to Oregon farmers and Warren Buffett, because PacificCorp would otherwise have to pay for the dams' removal or attempt to get them relicensed, a virtual impossibility.

Given the season, one could say that it's a real turkey.