Migrating waterfowl die from lack of water

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The deaths of up to 20,000 migrating birds this year in a wildlife refuge near the Oregon border has renewed debate about resource management on the Klamath River, where myriad competing interests are fighting for water rights.

The waterfowl began dropping dead from avian cholera in February after a lack of water forced as many as 2 million birds to bunch together in the Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge, said representatives of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Experts said a lack of rain during peak migration and water delivery obligations by the Bureau of Reclamation left sensitive wetlands along the Pacific Flyway dry. The result was the worst die-off in the region in about a decade.

In normal years the whole refuge is flooded, but "only about half the acres on the refuge were flooded going into this spring," said Matthew Baun, the spokesman for the Fish and Wildlife Service. "We had more than the normal number of migrating waterfowl this year coming into the refuge. What that did was concentrate the birds on about half the wetlands, which enhanced disease transmission."

Biologists and volunteers disposed of thousands of carcasses in an attempt to prevent the further spread of the disease. The problem seems to have dissipated as the spring rain helped fill the wetlands and fewer birds showed up in April as the migration wound down, Baun said. Birders and other environmental groups nevertheless point to the die-off as another example of resource mismanagement.

"There is a long-term systemic problem here of just not enough water in the refuges," said Steve Holmer, the senior policy adviser for the American Bird Conservancy. "There is just this ongoing diversion of water. It's really just a space problem. If the birds had more water they wouldn't be facing this."

Water use is a huge issue around the lakes, refuges and wildlife reserves that make up the Klamath Basin National Wildlife Refuge Complex, a once enormous wetland in northeast California and southern Oregon that essentially made up the headwaters of the mighty 255-mile Klamath River.

The vast wetland system connected to the natural estuary known as Upper Klamath Lake was tapped by canals built by the Bureau of Reclamation in the early 1900s as huge chunks of land were converted for agricultural use.

The canals were followed by construction of four dams - Iron Gate, Copco 1, Copco 2 and J.C. Boyle - along the Klamath River in 1909, blocking miles of salmon-spawning habitat.

Fish and farmers first

At that time, an estimated 7 million waterfowl used the area as a stopover along the transcontinental migration route known as the Pacific Flyway. It was recognized even then as an important ecological region. The Lower Klamath Refuge was established by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1908 as the nation's first preserve set aside for waterfowl, but life did not get any better for the birds.

The water that flows out of Upper Klamath Lake is used to preserve fish habitat, allow farmers to irrigate their land and for Native American ceremonial events. What's left over fills up the wetlands.

This year there wasn't much water left for the 50,000-acre refuge. The avian cholera - which was first detected in North America in the 1940s after apparently spreading from European poultry and fowl - began affecting birds in February at the nearby Tule Lake refuge. It spread to the Lower Klamath, where the birds congregated, officials said.

The bacterial disease, which does not affect humans, killed only a small proportion of the 1.8 million to 2 million birds that used the Klamath Basin. Still, volunteers and refuge workers picked up 3,774 dead birds between Feb. 21 and April 7. They estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 birds died from the disease.

Worst-hit species

The worst-hit species were snow geese, American coot, American wigeon, the white-fronted goose and northern pintail, refuge managers said.

"The consequences to shutting off water to the Lower Klamath Refuge are enormous and unacceptable," said George Fenwick, president of the American Bird Conservancy. "We cannot continue to place wildlife at the bottom of the pecking order."

The Klamath River system is already at the center of a free-for-all among farmers, American Indians, environmentalists and fishermen over a $291 million plan to dismantle the four hydroelectric dams. The idea of the dam removal, which would begin in 2020, is to open up 420 miles of habitat and allow chinook salmon to swim all the way from the ocean to Upper Klamath Lake in Oregon.

Dam removal

The biggest dam-removal project in California history would result in a huge increase in the number of spawning chinook, steelhead trout and coho salmon, allowing the local Yurok, Karuk and Hoopa Valley tribes in California and the Modoc and Klamath tribes in Oregon to reclaim at least a part of their historic fishing cultures.

The proposed deal would also provide water guarantees for the other users, including, apparently, the Klamath refuges.

Some agricultural groups, ranchers and residents who live next to the reservoirs oppose the plan out of fear that it would limit irrigation, raise the cost of energy and take away their historic rights. It is an issue that has existed for decades, mainly because there has never been enough water to go around.

"Over the years, one group or another gets the short end of the stick," Baun said. "This year we had 10,000 birds die. It's just another example of the difficulty of balancing priorities for water."

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