NEC rejects Klamath restoration agreement

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The Northcoast Environmental Center announced Monday that it has rejected the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement, which it said would give Oregon's farmers an unprecedented guarantee of water while not guaranteeing any for the river's fish.

The NEC's decision is based on scientific analyses from three river flow analysts the environmental group hired to analyze the scientific modeling and conclusions contained in the historic agreement.

The NEC is among 26 agencies, environmental groups and tribes across the region that have been engaged in closed-door settlement discussions for nearly three years to reach an agreement — still in the works — to remove four of PacifiCorp's Klamath River dams and secure nearly $1 billion in federal restoration funding.

The scientists agree the restoration plan could result in Klamath River flows so sparse at crucial times that endangered salmon may not be able to recover from what are now critically low numbers — even with the removal of four dams.

"We want nothing more than to support a workable agreement that would result in (the) decommissioning of four mainstem Klamath dams and provide fish with the water they need to avoid extinction," NEC Executive Director Greg King stated Monday. "The independent scientists we have commissioned and consulted, who are among the most respected river analysts in the West, tell us this deal won't do that. This agreement would lock us in to supporting water allocations for agriculture, as well as state and federal legislation, that could result in stream flows so low as to cause extinction."

The NEC's announcement was more evidence of the divergence in support for the ambitious agreement that hasn't yet resulted in any commitment from PacifiCorp that the Oregon-based power company would agree to remove any of its hydroelectric dams.

The Hoopa Valley Tribe announced last month it won't support the agreement in its present form, while the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors has given its tentative approval.

To do the analyses, the NEC hired hydrologist Greg Kamman of San Rafael-based Kamman Hydrology, and fisheries biologist Bill Trush of Arcata's McBain and Trush, whose reports are available at **http://yournec.org**. Also commissioned by the NEC was Thomas Hardy, the associate director of Utah State University's Utah Water Research Laboratory.

Craig Tucker, the Karuk Tribe's Klamath Campaign coordinator, said he is disappointed by the NEC's decision and believes it is aggressively trying to shoot down the agreement in the 11th hour.

While he said the Karuk Tribe and the NEC have maintained a long history of working together, Tucker said he feels that the NEC is putting more stock in its hired consultants than the technical team

assembled by the negotiators.

Although Tucker said the NEC's consultants do raise some legitimate concerns, including drought and low-flow situations, those issues are addressed in the agreement.

Tucker said the tribe was never afforded adequate time to discuss the NEC's concerns with its board of directors, and said he sees the new leadership at the NEC as signaling a radical change in the way it does business.

But Tucker said he and the tribe still stand behind the agreement and its framework, which they think is workable.

"We don't have 20 years to study this thing," Tucker said. "We need to make something happen now."

Negotiators are continuing with meetings and will meet in Ashland, Ore., on Wednesday.

Jill Geist, the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors' chairperson and lead county representative, said the split in support for the agreement is reflective of the trials and tribulations over the past several years in getting 26 diverse parties to collaborate on something of such importance.

But Geist said the re-licensing of PacifiCorp's dams, still under review by federal regulators, offers a 50-year chance to take a pragmatic action.

Although she said the NEC is throwing its scientists to the front, Geist said she is confident the many scientists from the negotiating team have done a good job of identifying the issues and hurdles that negotiators will have to work through under a finalized agreement.

"I can appreciate the NEC's reservations, but an all-or-nothing approach could end up with nothing," Geist said.

Hardy indicated that in dry years, agriculture in the upper basin will be "taking too much water from the system," with flow models showing the river will probably go well below the 1,000-cubic-feet-per-second mark in late summer and early fall.

Low flows in 2002 that killed an estimated 70,000 adult chinook salmon were between 600 and 700 cfs, according to Hardy.

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