



Statement of Julie Hill-Gabriel
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National Audubon Society
Washington, DC

to the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife
Oversight Hearing: Klamath River Basin Conditions and Opportunities

March 8, 2022

Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit a statement on behalf of the National Audubon Society (Audubon) and several of our Audubon chapters in the Klamath region.

Audubon's mission is to protect birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow. Audubon represents 1.9 million members and has over 460 affiliated chapters, 23 state offices, and 41 nature centers across the country. As your Subcommittee considers the Klamath River Basin and related water needs, I urge you to ensure that the water needs for birds and their critical habitats, particularly those areas located within Lower Klamath and Tule Lake National Wildlife Refuges (hereafter, Klamath NWRs), are sustained. These refuges are also priorities for Klamath Basin Audubon Society, Portland Audubon Society, and the Oregon Audubon Council. The Klamath region is also recognized by the National Audubon Society as the Klamath Basin – Clear Lake Important Bird Area.

The Klamath NWRs are part of the Pacific Flyway, essential for millions of migratory waterbirds, shorebirds, and raptors, including the largest concentration of Bald Eagles in the lower 48 states. Birders have spotted over 260 species at the refuges and birding is an important source of tourism dollars for local economies throughout the region. For instance, the Winter Wings Festival, held in the Klamath Basin, attracts approximately 500 birders and photographers to the area every year. With sufficient water, the refuges are capable of providing habitat for between one and six million birds during the fall migration. Unfortunately, the water resources in the Basin are drastically overallocated. Drought and extreme heat, exacerbated by climate change, are creating a tragic situation. Migratory and wetland-dependent bird species have already lost around 75 percent of the Klamath Basin's historic wetlands. The refuges are last in line to receive water and are too dry in most years to sustain the birds, wildlife, and communities dependent on these ecological resources. Audubon scientists are tracking to see if some critical migration stopovers like the Klamath Basin have so little habitat that birds may be choosing to bypass these locations altogether, flying further southwards or to coastal estuaries, stretching their limited time and resources to try and reach healthy habitat.

As historic drought conditions continue in the West, increasingly stark impacts are felt by communities, birds, and wildlife. The combination of drought and heatwaves can push birds to their physiological limits, leading to lethal dehydration. In drought times, birds may also congregate at the remaining

dwindling water spots, causing conditions ripe for the spread of disease. These extreme conditions occurred at Klamath NWRs in 2020, when over 60,000 birds died from an avian botulism outbreak caused and exacerbated by a lack of water. The Klamath Basin is a molting region, which means waterbirds in particular stop in the area to shed juvenile feathers and grow flight feathers. While this process is occurring, birds are immobile. When diseases occur or habitat is threatened, the effects are magnified because the birds are unable to fly away to a new location.

Yet, despite the critical challenges facing the region, opportunities exist. The recent Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) included an additional \$162 million for the Klamath Basin. The IIJA, which provides additional authorizations and appropriations for a range of conservation and community programs, included historic amounts of funding for transportation networks, climate resilience and clean energy programs, and numerous conservation and clean water programs across the country to address climate change. The funding for the Klamath Basin can be used for a variety of purposes, including habitat improvement and ecosystem restoration, which hopefully will accelerate a comprehensive set of solutions to protect the water resources of the entire region. We encourage a portion of that funding to be focused on the Klamath NWRs for water acquisition and infrastructure improvements for the refuge complex. I thank this Subcommittee for your work on the IIJA.

The Klamath Basin is a beautiful region, home to Northern Pintail, Long-billed Dowitcher, Black-necked Stilt, and more species. Eighty percent of the migrating waterfowl in the Pacific Flyway depend on its existence. Unfortunately, there is not enough water to meet all the demands from farmers, Tribes, and wildlife, including endangered fish.

The refuges should not be the lowest priority to receive water given their biological importance. We continue to hear about significant amounts of federal funding for the Klamath Basin directed to other users, but refuges are in dire need as well. We support efforts to save the Klamath NWRs by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service leaders and ask that you look for continued opportunities to secure and prioritize public funding as an investment in permanent solutions that protect birds, fish, and other wildlife in the Klamath Basin, including the water and habitat needs of its refuges.

Thank you,



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