

Opening Statement
The Honorable Bruce Westerman
Ranking Member, House Natural Resources Committee
Before the House Subcommittee on Water, Oceans and Wildlife
Oversight Hearing on
“Klamath River Basin Conditions and Opportunities”
March 8, 2022

Thank you for holding today’s hearing, Mr. Chairman. You represent part of the Klamath basin, so I understand your focus on this topic.

I also note that Mr. Bentz and Mr. LaMalfa represent the upper part of the Klamath watershed and that Mr. McClintock at one time did as well. They are not strangers to these debates and have ably represented their constituents in this complex water situation.

As you know, I represent the Fourth District of Arkansas. That’s a long way from the Klamath basin but, as I’ve noted before, what happens in the western water arena has impacts throughout our Nation. As we are seeing with the recent and dramatic rise of fuel prices, because the Biden administration’s policies have made us dependent on foreign energy sources and handcuffed our domestic energy resources sector, consumers nationwide are hurting.

The same applies to food security. Every acre of food production matters in this country and our consumers pay higher grocery bills because federal laws and policies – coupled with drought – have made irrigated farming an uncertain, and sometimes an endangered enterprise. This is especially true around the Klamath water project. Less than 100 years ago, the federal government actively encouraged veterans from World Wars I and II to homestead and farm the fertile soils of the upper Klamath basin.

These homesteaders and their families created a vibrant community and a way of life in the region. Unfortunately, things started to go sideways in the 1990s with the implementation of the federal Endangered Species Act. To make matters worse, the needs of the endangered fish conflicted with one another – with sucker fish managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service needing higher lake levels but downstream coho salmon managed by the National Marine Fisheries Service needing water diverted from that lake. With the Bureau of Reclamation, irrigators, tribes and migratory waterfowl left in the middle with little or no water, in some cases. As one homesteader testified before this Committee in 2004 quote “I want to say we fulfilled the American dream and in 2001 the Endangered Species Act came very close to destroying our dream. Our dream was changed into a nightmare.” Unquote. This reminds me of the unfortunate saying that if any government is big enough to give you everything you want it’s also big enough to take away everything that you have. We need to make sure that it doesn’t happen here.

Since 2001, hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars have been spent and congresses and administrations have spent considerable time and effort to reduce water use conflicts and to help bring about certainty. Yet, here we are 20 years later, and the map of the Klamath basin is the near definition of uncertainty. We’ve thrown money at this problem in the past, to little avail.

Unfortunately, Democrats at this hearing today are promising that even more money be thrown at the problem, begging the question of whether the impacts of this funding will be any different from the past.

There are differences of opinion on the solutions, but I think everyone agrees that both people and species are suffering. We will not solve this longstanding problem today and any solution will take time, but I hope that we have a productive discussion aimed at bringing people together who can roll up their sleeves in good faith and work towards a solution where both people and species can get better together while still feeding our Nation. With that, I yield back.