House Interim Committee
on Agriculture and Land Use
Oregon State Capitol
900 Court Street NE, Room347
Salem, Oregon 97301

Re: *Submitted testimony/November 15, 2021*

2021 had far reaching effects on the Klamath Basin. Not only did Klamath suffer from a drought in the region, an unprecedented drought, but one that was exacerbated by the water shutoff to the Klamath Reclamation Project. The Klamath Reclamation Project was one of the first reclamation projects undertaken by the USBR after the Reclamation Act was passed in 1902. It's no coincidence construction started on the Klamath Project only 4 years later in 1906. It was recognized then, and it continues to be true today that irrigation projects are extremely valuable to arid regions. Ordinarily, and in every drought since the Klamath Project was built, it has been able to serve as a reliable source of feed for the region's cattle, and a reliable source of food and fiber for our citizens. The water shutoff in Klamath not only decimated the family farms and ranches of Klamath but affected the entire region as a whole.

In the face of climate change, it should be noted that few places are as adept as the Klamath in being able to reliably produce food year in and year out. In rain fed regions, it's far too common to have too little rain, or too much. Either one can ruin a crop. As we move into an uncertain future with extremes in climate being the one constant, it highlights the need to keep agricultural producers in areas like Klamath on the ground, financially solvent, and able to meet the demands of the future. Irrigated agriculture, particularly sustainable irrigated agriculture, like we have in the Klamath Basin, is one of the best ways we can insulate our food supply against the effects of climate change.

Klamath County is rural, and very dependent on irrigation for its primarily agricultural economy. There is great diversity within the agricultural community that drives local economies, but for current purposes one can distinguish primarily between land that is served through the Bureau of Reclamation's Klamath Project (approximately 135,000 irrigated acres in Klamath County, south and east of Upper Klamath Lake) and land that is not served by the Klamath Project (approximately 200,000 acres in Klamath County, primarily irrigated land relying on tributaries to Upper Klamath Lake and water from the lake itself).

In a normal year, these lands generate hundreds of millions of dollars in economic activity and provide food and habitat for abundant wildlife. Unfortunately, this is far from a normal year, and the communities are suffering. Most of the approximately 335,000 acres described above (roughly, 500 square miles) experienced zero water delivery from the sources upon which they have depended historically. In other words, it was not a situation where there was a partial season of irrigation; it was for those producers, an absolute loss.

Winter precipitation and snowfall were very deficient, and by most relevant measures, 2021 presents the worst drought conditions on record. Exacerbating the problem, 2020 was also extremely dry, and the limited snowmelt and rainfall largely seeped into the dry ground, resulting in run-off quantities even lower than one would expect based on this year's precipitation alone. Based on federal laws and policies that were not factors until recently, the minimal amount of water that does exist is being used, almost exclusively, for instream uses. This severe drought has not only caused extensive harm to the agricultural economy, but it has created environmental challenges within the basin as well, including the rising danger of severe forage and feed shortages, increased fire danger for community and Tribal resources due to dry conditions, and damage to wildlife resources – including national wildlife refuges – that depend on irrigated lands.

Managing the Klamath Basin eco systems for a single species, and quantifying river flows for downstream salmon, denied desperately needed water resources for waterfowl, resulting in the loss of hundreds of thousands of migratory species on the Klamath Refuge. In addition, mis-managed forests, and the catastrophic fires in our region, led to the death of over 200 head of elk, hundreds of wildlife species residing in the Freemont-Winema National Forest and Gearhart Wilderness, as well as the loss of hundreds of cattle.

Further, many producers in Klamath County have had curtailed or no water deliveries over several of the last ten years. To the extent that people had groundwater or some other supply available, the amount available was far less than the need, and any use of those supplies was at greatly increased cost. Regardless of whether a producer was able to find water from other sources, the lack of water has put the entire region into an economic spiral that threatens the future of our communities, and the ability of those communities to work towards long term, equitable agreements on sharing our natural resources with all parties involved. Desperate people do desperate things and backing people into corners without a way to pay the mortgage or provide for their families does not lend itself to finding solutions that are greatly needed today.

Despite the hardships placed on Klamath farmers and ranchers, we know we are not alone in the impacts the drought and water shutoff has caused in our community. Hundreds of shallow domestic wells in the basin are ordinarily replenished by the water in the hundreds of miles of irrigation canals that run throughout the valley. Without the water in those canals, not only have fields turned to dust but those wells have gone dry. Funding to drill those wells deeper into more stable aquifers is a high priority for our community, and one that is important to fortify our ability to be resilient against future droughts.

Ordinarily, the Klamath Basin would be a place, producers outside of the Basin but within the region, could find feed, and economic stability in the face of challenges such as drought and wildfire. With little feed in the hills, and more burned in the fires, Klamath irrigators should have been able to help the economy of the entire area weather an unpredicted disaster. Instead, the Klamath Project has turned into the epicenter of disaster, and unfortunately the epicenter of need in our community.

With an intensity level of D-4 drought designation, and the unprecedented water shut-off it is estimated the total economic impact to the Klamath Basin is over $700 million dollars. The total economic loss due to the wildfires in our region is an estimated $28 million dollars because of lost forage, increased animal medical care, record high hay prices and cattle sell-offs. In addition, the water shut-off is considered a “manmade drought” and as a result, many producers were disqualified from available programs due to the “manmade drought” designation.

In short, Klamath County producers’ water shortages this year are extreme, come on the heels of other dry years, and are further exacerbated by fire. We have also experienced the same disruptions due to COVID and supply chain deficiencies, which makes an extreme crisis even worse. We would rather be able to produce, like we have for over 100 years, but that wasn't to be this year. Instead, we are calling on drought relief funding to keep our communities whole. Relief funding will put us in a position to be able to continue doing what we do best; providing the safest, most economical, and reliable food supply the world has ever been able to enjoy for another 100 years or more.

It is of utmost importance that our legislators look at agriculture as security and work to protect and encourage our states family farms and ranchers. With diminished production across all sectors of agribusiness, we will continue to see food and by-product shortages. When there are food and by-product shortages, the poorest and most disadvantaged of our communities suffer.

Respectfully submitted,

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