“No Regrets”: Gordon Smith and the Klamath River Fish Kill

A Timeline

2001

In 2001 Senator Smith offered legislation that would have overruled federal scientists and the Endangered Species Act to reduce water flows in the Klamath River for salmon.

2002

In early 2002, he reversed course and partnered with Senator Ron Wyden on legislation providing tens of millions of dollars for the purchase of Klamath farmlands and water rights to bolster flows in the Klamath River. Although the bill passed the Senate, Oregon's Rep. Greg Walden gutted the funding in the House.

2003

Later in 2002, he reversed course again, joining Bush administration officials in Klamath Falls for a photo-op celebrating the decision to overturn salmon recovery efforts and reduce flows in the Klamath River.

2004

Smith reversed course yet again and joined Sen. Wyden to secure millions of dollars to purchase a ranch on the former Upper Klamath Lake lakebed. Barnes Ranch is now slated for restoration as lake and wetland. The Smith-backed purchase was undertaken specifically to reduce irrigation demand, create more habitat for endangered fish and other wildlife - and provide increased river flows.

2005

Klamath River-driven fisheries closures devastated Oregon's commercial salmon fishing industry and rural coastal communities. The closures represented a last-ditch effort to protect what is left of the Klamath's dwindling but commercially valuable chinook salmon run, decimated by repeated in-river kills. Salmon fishermen, unfairly forced to pay the price for Klamath water decisions made in 2002, regularly heckled Smith's staff at public meetings, condemning Smith's public support of anti-salmon policies. In 2006, Smith held a number of press events in Coos Bay, Oregon to express support for Oregon salmon trollers.

2006

Smith refused to support a salmon disaster relief bill that had earned near-unanimous support among the Oregon Congressional delegation. He did so because the legislation included funding for the restoration of the Klamath River. Smith introduced a copycat bill, but stripped of any restoration funding. The move effectively split critical support for salmon disaster relief. Both bills failed to earn enough votes to become law, forcing fishing communities to wait until 2007 for federal aid.

2007

Smith now says he has "no regrets," but clearly he has long known of the scientific connection between river flows and salmon health. He has also clearly flip-flopped in his support of real solutions to the Klamath's water woes. Meanwhile, Oregon's natural resources and rural communities have paid a heavy price.