

July 15, 2008

Senator Ron Wyden  
Senator Gordon Smith  
Senator Diane Feinstein  
Senator Barbara Boxer

US Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Representative Earl Blumenauer  
Representative Peter DeFazio  
Representative Darlene Hooley  
Representative Greg Walden  
Representative David Wu  
Representative Mike Thompson  
Representative George Miller  
Representative Wally Herger  
Representative John Doolittle

US House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

**Dear Senators and Representatives:**

We are writing to seek your assistance in restoring and protecting Lower Klamath and Tule Lake National Wildlife Refuges, two of the most important wildlife areas in the western United States. These refuges are plagued by a host of environmental problems, and little progress has been made to address them since the 2001 Klamath water crisis. We ask for your help to ensure that the next Presidential administration takes action to protect and restore these natural treasures, and the fish and wildlife that call them home.

**Background**

One hundred and fifty years ago early settlers in the Klamath Basin were met by a vast expanse of 350,000 acres of wetlands, shallow lakes and marshes; they fished a roaring, salmon rich river winding through hundreds of miles of western countryside, and were amazed by the spectacular migrations of geese, eagles, and other birds. Half a century ago, during the peak of fall migration, over 7 million waterfowl and 1000 overwintering bald eagles could be found in the Klamath Basin at one time.

Home to invaluable wildlife species and remarkable territory, the basin wetlands drew the attention of conservationists from across the nation, including President Theodore Roosevelt. In 1908 President Roosevelt designated 81,000 acres of marsh and open water in Lower Klamath Lake as the first National Wildlife Refuge for waterfowl. Twenty years later, Tule Lake joined the Refuge System when Franklin Roosevelt authorized the protection of 37,000 acres in what was Tule Lake.

Unfortunately, their visionary actions to protect these fragile and important wetlands have been undermined by a century of mismanagement and abuse. The US Bureau of Reclamation's massive Klamath Irrigation Project, initiated in 1905, paved the way for extensive agricultural development that destroyed thousands of acres of wetland, and drained much of what was Lower Klamath and Tule Lakes. In recent decades, continued agricultural development, excessive water diversions, agricultural pollution, and drought have further damaged the remaining wetland habitat.

Perhaps the most serious problem today facing wildlife on the Pacific Flyway, and in the Klamath Basin, is the lack of wetland habitat. While over two-thirds of the Pacific Flyway birds go through the Klamath Basin during spring and fall migration, the basin no longer supports a proportional number of breeding birds. This is a problem exacerbated in the Klamath Basin by the practice of leasing 22,000 acres of publicly owned land on Tule Lake and Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuges for commercial agriculture. While the creation of the refuges was intended to preserve vital fragments of the once-vast Klamath wetland system for geese, herons, and eagles, much of that land is today instead managed for potatoes, alfalfa, and onions. While agricultural practices of a small scale can be found on other refuges in the United States, aggressive commercial agriculture of this nature is unique to the Klamath Basin.

Over time, 80% of the historic wetlands in the Klamath Basin have been drained, largely due to early development during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Similarly, peak numbers of migratory birds have also dropped by over 80% during approximately the last 60 years. In spite of Congress's passage of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act in 1997, which made conservation the primary purpose of system refuges, commercial agriculture continues to dominate the landscape on Tule Lake NWR, and lease land agricultural development continues to place burdensome water demands on an already drought-prone basin. Worse, while wetlands are nature's most efficient system for filtering pollution, today Tule Lake and Lower Klamath NWR make water quality problems in the basin worse through run-off that includes pesticides and fertilizers, sparking algal blooms and other conditions toxic to fish.

### **The Centennial of Lower Klamath**

This year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge. A century after President Teddy Roosevelt established this sanctuary for wildlife; much work needs to be done to ensure that its management matches Roosevelt's vision.

In order to appropriately celebrate this centennial, reform in the management of both Lower Klamath and Tule Lake NWR is desperately needed. These reforms must include clear direction that fish and wildlife conservation should be the primary goal of all management actions on these lands. These refuges also need a reliable, clean supply of water to provide wetlands and wildlife during both wet and dry years, and a program to restore wetland habitat. Finally, ending the practice of leasing 22,000 acres of America's public land that was set aside for wildlife for commercial agricultural development should be a top priority. At present, a small percentage of refuge land participates in a coop program wherein farmers leave a small portion of their grain as a food source for migrating and wintering waterfowl. While agriculture certainly has a role in the basin, this role on refuges should be to the primary benefit of wildlife rather than commodities.

Further, in order for migratory bird numbers to increase throughout the Pacific Flyway, wetland habitats must be restored, particularly in the Klamath Basin (as elsewhere in the middle latitudes) to restore healthy waterfowl populations throughout the flyway. As hard as this may seem, restoration of the Klamath Basin's wetlands offers the highest

potential return compared to anywhere else in the west; because much habitat has been lost throughout the flyway, what remains in the Klamath are of increasing value.

In recent years, improvement of the management of Lower Klamath and Tule Lake NWR's has been stymied by the Bush Administration's opposition to measures that limit commercial agricultural development in the basin. However, the Bush administration's departure in 2009 will provide an opportunity to reexamine past decisions, and move forward with a more common-sense vision that balances agricultural development with fish and wildlife conservation.

One opportunity for progress lies within the mandatory Comprehensive Conservation Plan, required by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of all National Wildlife Refuges by 2012. Development of CCPs for individual refuges is intended to guide management through a process that must consider, based on sound science, the compatibility of current and future refuge activities with the refuge purpose and goal for conservation. At the very least, the CCP process provides an opportunity to strike a better balance between wildlife and agriculture on Lower Klamath and Tule Lake NWRs.

As the Klamath Basin faces continued resource disputes, we ask for your support of the basin's National Wildlife Refuges. As Mr. Russell Feingold and Ms. Olympia Snowe stated in an April 2, 2008 letter to the Appropriations Committee of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, "The Refuge System is our nation's wildlife trust, forming our core commitment to maintaining wildlife diversity and abundance for future generations." In order to maintain our national commitment to the National Wildlife Refuges System, the maintenance and restoration of the Klamath refuges is critical.

In the coming months we will be contacting your offices to seek your assistance on appropriations to fully support Klamath refuge management and restoration efforts, and to ensure that the next administration fully adheres to the requirements of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. For far too long, the fish and wildlife that depend on Lower Klamath and Tule Lake National Wildlife refuges have been treated as an afterthought in Klamath Basin water management debates. We owe it to our children and grandchildren to embrace President Teddy Roosevelt's vision, and restore and protect these priceless treasures.

Thank you for your support of America's National Wildlife Refuges. We look forward to keeping you updated on both the CCP process as well as additional opportunities for your support of these special places.

Sincerely,

Steve Pedery, Conservation Director  
Oregon Wild