



October 12, 2021

Ms. Camille Touton, Deputy Commissioner
U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
1849 C Street NW
Washington DC 20240-0001

Ms. Martha Williams, Principal Deputy Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street, NW, Room 3148
Washington, DC 20240

RE: Surplus Water From Upper Klamath Lake/Klamath Refuges' Water Needs

Dear Deputy Commissioner Touton and Principal Deputy Director Williams:

We are writing you to strongly urge that a significant portion of the surplus water in Upper Klamath Lake be made available starting this fall for delivery to the Lower Klamath and Tule Lake National Wildlife Refuges (Refuges), as well as for other Klamath Project (Project) purposes.

The plight of the Refuges is a national tragedy. Lower Klamath, the first waterfowl-specific National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), is now a dry, dusty wasteland. This year, Tule Lake NWR, which in one winter in the 1950s hosted more northern pintails than exist in North America today, experienced drought that revealed bare ground never before exposed to the light of day. Wetlands and waterbirds need water to

exist. The Klamath Basin Refuges' tragedy may turn into a disaster of epic proportions if water is not provided when it is available.

As you are aware, waterfowl and other wildlife that depend on the Klamath Refuges continue to face drastically reduced habitat conditions, especially in the last two years. Historically, water from Upper Klamath Lake that is not needed to serve Endangered Species Act obligations has been made available for other purposes, including to flood the Refuges' managed wetlands. We believe that this well-established practice must continue if the Lower Klamath Refuge, in particular, is going to have the ability to meet the bare minimum habitat needs of migratory waterfowl this fall and into the future. It is hard to argue that holding this small amount of water over in Upper Klamath Lake into the spring would serve a useful purpose, whereas delivering this water to the Refuge now will immediately benefit the fall migration. Additionally, delivering a portion of water from this surplus will still allow Lake levels to be above minimum requirements and would be very beneficial to a broad suite of species that rely on the refuge.

The Klamath Basin is historically the most important staging ground in the Pacific Flyway, supporting over 4 million migrating ducks and geese as recently as the 1950s. Lower Klamath Refuge and neighboring Tule Lake Refuge, form the core of the waterbird habitat and managed wetlands there. They not only offer critical food resources for numerous waterbirds on their fall and spring migrations, but also provide key spring and summer breeding and molting habitat for species like mallards, gadwall, cinnamon teal, and long-billed dowitchers. Many other wetland-dependent species of migratory birds and other wildlife also rely on the Klamath Refuges' wetlands and as recent studies have shown many populations of birds, including shorebirds reliant on the Klamath Basin, are in steep decline.

Unfortunately, water deliveries to the Klamath Refuges have declined significantly since 2001, which has resulted in a corresponding decline in waterfowl use over that period. In 2013-2014, and again in 2018, the Refuges had too little water for the fall and spring migrations. Waterfowl broods were also stranded and disease outbreaks (e.g. avian botulism and avian cholera) occurred. In 2020, an avian botulism outbreak—which was made much worse by reduced flooded wetlands—killed an estimated 60,000 waterfowl and shorebirds at both Refuges. Aerial surveys later that fall showed waterfowl numbers at both refuges down 86 percent, the lowest fall counts ever recorded. Currently, Lower Klamath Refuge is almost completely dry while Tule Lake Refuge only has one wetland unit (i.e. Sump 1B) flooded.

The current Biological Opinion (BiOp) governing Project operations includes a formulaic approach for water deliveries. Under this approach, water the Refuge receives through the BiOp is only in excess of listed species and agricultural needs, occurring typically during times of extreme surplus. Because of this, managed wetland habitat has not only declined significantly, but it has made it impossible for the Klamath Refuges' manager to plan and optimize wetland values for waterbirds and other wildlife. We are hopeful that the upcoming revised BiOp will take steps to remedy this problem.

We greatly appreciate what the Department of Interior (DOI) has done over the years to deliver surplus water to the Klamath Refuges' wetlands, as it has provided critical habitat in previous years and would be especially impactful in this drought year. We support this delivery of excess water being done in a way that recognizes and protects listed species and ecosystem function, as it has been done in previous years. However, we are frustrated by DOI's decision to withhold this traditional allocation of discretionary surplus from the Refuges, particularly in a year where no water was provided in the Project Supply. We

urge you, in the strongest way possible, to continue this much-needed action in order to maintain the health of the Pacific Flyway over the long-term.

We would appreciate a follow-up meeting to further discuss the hemispheric importance of the Klamath Basin for migratory birds and how delivery of a portion of the surplus water is critical to maintaining this critical linkage in the Pacific Flyway.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to discuss this issue further, please feel free to contact Mark Hennelly at mhennelly@calwaterfowl.org or 916-612-0230.

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cc: Deb Haaland, Dept. of Interior
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