



Challenges Facing the Harney Basin are Significant but Not Insurmountable

Stakeholders working together in collaborative effort

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Malheur Lake and the surrounding wetlands provide livelihoods for farmers and ranchers, and critical habitat for a large diversity of bird, plant and amphibian species. The challenges facing this area are significant. As Bob Sallinger, Director of Conservation at Portland Audubon, recently stated, Malheur is “one of the most complex and conflicted landscapes in the region.” But this complex and conflicted landscape has benefitted and is benefitting from informed restoration efforts through collaboration and the work of the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative.

Pacific Flyway is threatened



According to several recent studies, nearly half of the world’s bird species are in decline. For migrating birds along the Pacific Flyway, whose pattern runs between Alaska and Patagonia, Southern Oregon and Northeastern California (SONEC) refuges provide essential resting places along the 4,000 mile route. Without these essential stops, the migratory bird population would be unable to refuel and rest, thus leading to an even larger decline in their numbers.

But SONEC refuges and wetland complexes are under severe threat and Oregon ecosystems are suffering greatly. Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge is experiencing historically low water levels, resulting in a botulism outbreak that killed an estimated 60,000 birds in 2020 alone. The 2022 habitat conditions outlook for the Klamath basin states; “The Klamath Basin is entering a third year of severe drought and water shortages. Habitat conditions are the worst they have ever been.” The refuge further states “National Wildlife Refuges in the Klamath Basin continue to face the greatest threats they have experienced since the 1920’s. Waterbird populations are not only the lowest in the refuge’s history but importantly Klamath Basin wide indicating a collapse of the most important staging area in

the Pacific Flyway. The current biological opinion has effectively modeled Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge out of the fall migration picture by reducing water deliveries to both Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge and Tule Lake National Wildlife Refuge to a level that proper waterfowl and wetland management is impossible”. Lake Abert ran dry in both 2014 and 2021, something not seen since the 1930s Dust Bowl era. “Without these wetlands, we’re risking collapse of the Pacific Flyway,” said Sallinger. The challenges to arid land wetlands pose a significant and immediate threat to the many birds using the Pacific Flyway.

Collaboration is making a difference in Harney Basin



Harney Basin contains a world and continentally renowned waterbird flyway providing habitats critical to bird populations in Oregon and all along the Pacific Flyway. In addition to serving as a stop on the flyway for migrating birds, Malheur also serves as a nesting and breeding ground to a variety of avian species.

Pictured: Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative partners during a Harney Basin field tour April 2022.

Harney Basin is also home to farmers and ranchers who depend on water for their economic livelihoods. When

people's livelihoods are at stake and when what are traditionally viewed as competing interests arise, finding equitable solutions can seem impossible. The Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative has been working for more than a decade to bring people together to find common solutions based on common interests and they're having success—on the ground. The collaborative partners have acknowledged the interconnectedness of the ecosystem and are working together to restore the system to the benefit of all stakeholders.

The collaborative is a catalyst for bringing traditionally divergent interests together, focusing them on the complexity of the Harney Basin wetlands system rather than fighting over various pieces. They work together to leverage research funds to better understand the wetlands system so they can make informed restoration and management decisions that improve overall conditions. "We're learning very rapidly," said Ken Bierly, president of the Board of Directors for the Institute of Applied Ecology and a collaborative participant. He added, "We've probably gained more information in the past five years than the last 50 years about how this wetlands system works."

Multiple interests participate in the process, learning from one another by sharing ideas, visions and perspectives, and brainstorming new ideas and strategies. The value of investing in these relationships is the key, and helping to produce outcomes not likely available in other places that lack the long term collaboration found in Harney Basin. "We are out of the gate and running," said Sallinger, who is a long standing participant of the collaborative. "We're building unprecedented collaboration among historically conflicted parties that has proven to be both durable and productive over time and has faced incredible challenges, including the occupation."

The Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative is focused on improving aquatic health and maintaining wet meadow habitats throughout the watersheds for Harney and Malheur Lakes and the streams and rivers that flow into them. Across the west, historic and current water policies have divided communities, and in certain watersheds, made it near impossible to address complex water centered resources challenges. The Harney Basin's challenges are not insurmountable because of the unified partnership working together to build a more resilient Basin for all water users. Along with increased community engagement, the understanding of the ecological science of both Malheur Lake and flood irrigated wetlands has increased

significantly over the last few years. Sallinger shares, "It's remarkable how much progress has been made in the last five years."

This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative.

