

River bill a missed opportunity

By Kimberley Priestley / Bulletin guest columnist

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The Crooked River in Central Oregon could be one of Oregon's crown jewels. Winding through farmland, Smith Rock State Park and miles of wilderness canyons, the river provides a mixture of reasonably intact and also highly compromised habitat for fish and wildlife, including prized redband trout and imperiled steelhead. And, as with most rivers in Oregon, even in its compromised state, the Crooked brings considerable economic vitality to the region. With just a bit of vision, the Crooked River's contribution to the region's economy could be much larger.

Most of the Crooked River's flow above the Opal Springs area is controlled by releases from the federally owned Bowman Dam, upstream of Prineville. The dam was originally built to supply irrigation water and to control floods, with only minimal provisions to protect streamflows needed for fish. Almost immediately after dam construction, the toll on the river became clear. In the summer, the river appears well watered just below Bowman Dam due to releases for irrigation. However, once farmers divert that water a few miles downstream, the river is reduced to a trickle. The river fares no better in the winter, when most natural high flows are captured by the dam with little water left in the river for fish.

But it doesn't have to be like this. The Crooked is one of the few rivers in the West where flows could be restored without taking water away from existing farmers. Bowman Dam captures far more water than is needed to support existing irrigation in the basin. Over 80,000 acre-feet of water behind the dam remains untapped, or "unallocated," to any specific use. This fact presents a rare opportunity to release some of the stored water to restore flows to the river without affecting existing irrigation. Water for fish also would not preclude future releases for the city of Prineville, or any new "Facebook" that lands in the region.

However, despite decades of work to find a balanced solution that would bring water back to the Crooked River, and hundreds of millions of dollars spent attempting to re-establish steelhead runs above the Pelton Round Butte dam complex on the Deschutes River, U.S. Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., has just introduced a bill (HB 2060) in Congress that would continue to shortchange the Crooked River and its fish for no good reason.

The bill [the proposed Central Oregon Jobs and Water Security Act, as named by Walden] would give no water directly to fish. Instead, it would give

unallocated water to irrigation districts and Prineville, cut back the existing Wild and Scenic River boundary to allow for new hydropower development, and set up a new way of distributing water that would ensure that fish would forever be last in line for water stored behind Bowman dam. This unbalanced bill demonstrates a serious lack of vision for the Crooked and its potential to make new and sustainable contributions to Central Oregon's economy.

Walden certainly knows how to do the right thing by rivers when he wants to. On the Rogue River in Southern Oregon, he was instrumental in one of the largest river restoration efforts in the nation. The Crooked represents a significant opportunity to help restore a river and the economy in Central Oregon. But, as drafted, the bill omits the critical link that would not only help save the river, but also add a strong economic driver to this region.

The economic contributions of a healthy river should not be undervalued. Crook County and other areas of Central Oregon are experiencing high unemployment. And while Walden has coined HB 2060 a "jobs bill," in actuality the bill misses a huge opportunity to stimulate what could be a sustainable job engine for central Oregon — a healthy, vibrant Crooked River. Fishing, hunting and wildlife viewing — activities that are highly correlated to freshwater habitat — already inject approximately \$120 million (and lots of jobs) annually into the economies of Crook, Deschutes, Jefferson and Wasco counties. If the Crooked River had adequate water for fish and recreation, the economic and jobs contribution could be much, much larger.

HB 2060 squanders a rare opportunity to craft a solution that would promote all the economic interests of Central Oregon — cities, farmers and healthy rivers and fisheries. Instead, the bill promotes a narrow vision for the river and ignores the substantial and sustainable economic contribution that a healthy Crooked River could provide the region. There is no good reason for this result. Oregonians should demand better.

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