KLAMATH REDUX

In the federally dominated West, water remains the essence of wealth and the currency of real political power. Take control of the water and you have control over everything and everyone. Words and photos by Tim Findley.

We sit in the farmer's pickup parked at the fence behind centerfield at Tule Lake High School's ball field. From there, he can just about keep an eye on his onion field out in the wetlands and still watch his son covering third base. A stack of half-opened mail is piled on the dashboard, like an extra chore for idle moments.

That's a lot of what it is, the pickups around the fence, the summer fading quietly with distant sounds of early arriving geese, the smiles from neighbors, the wave from a boy covering the same ground you did years before when you were known as "Spuds."

He had played an important part in the crisis of 2001, and only narrowly averted an economic disaster to his family. He was working then for moments like this that can only be felt in such rural communities of family farms like the Lower Klamath Basin.

For 20 years, at least since passage of the 1988 Endangered Species Act (ESA) made it the law of the land, coalitions of outside "environmentalists" have prowled the Klamath like predators intent on removing the generations of agriculturalists they regard as threats to nature. They are not mere tree huggers who climb, childlike, into the branches. Many are agents of powerful and wealthy nonprofit organizations with solid histories of their own and propaganda capabilities that disguise a ruthless political motive and an arrogant prejudice that often expresses itself as bigotry against those who work the land.

President William Jefferson Clinton didn't care. Under his administration, even the most extremist greens were free to practice their form of class hatred, so long as they delivered votes to the Clinton campaign and belief in the invented legacy of the Arkansas poor boy as a trendy progressive champion of "deep ecology." Clinton sat unnaturally and obviously uncomfortable astride a horse for only one photo opportunity in his administration. Farms and forests were not among his real interests. But cynically being portrayed as an "environmental" president was nearly as important to his ambitions as being described as the first "black" chief executive for his support of minority achievements.

The enviros demanded only one high price in return—Bruce Babbitt. Babbitt, a turncoat heir to an Arizona ranching empire, was proclaimed by the League of Conservation Voters as their Babe Ruth in a one-sided game meant to establish a dominating dynasty of green power. State by state, town by town, Clinton's secretary of the Interior rampaged across the West with threats, political extortion, and the deathly club placed in Babbitt's hands—the ESA.

Nearly everywhere he went in those years, he told stunned crowds of rural resource producers the same thing as he said in the Klamath Basin: "Do it my way, or I will be back."

To underscore his purpose, Babbitt began remaking the Department of Interior with a team carefully coached and loyal to his cause. At Babbitt's suggestion, Clinton in 1993 named former Wilderness Society president George Frampton as assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks. It was an astonishing act to place absolute authority over more than 28,000 employees and 172-million acres of federal land into the hands of a man who had derided farmers as "earth busters," ranchers as "worst-use people," and logging as "a license to loot the federal treasury."

Even before his appointment could be confirmed by the U.S. Senate, Frampton issued a memo assigning tasks and deadlines to a staff that was not yet his to command. It was another arrogant breach of government procedures and regulations, but the new team in Interior knew there were not enough votes in the Senate to stop them.

To those who watched carefully as Babbitt led them up to bat, it was soon clear that

land was not the ultimate prize they wanted. It was water.

Particularly in the federally dominated West, water remains the essence of wealth and the currency of real political power. Take control of the water and you have control over everything, and everybody else, whether they know it or not. It could bring the earth busters and worst users to their knees.

But there was hardly time enough to accomplish all they wanted. To abuse the baseball analogy, Babbitt's greens knew they would need extra innings beyond when Clinton could stay on the mound. Babbitt had already cleared more land of opposition than any unaccountable appointee in history. Many who were not driven off were intimidated and seemingly defenseless.

Frampton had slipped away from his position as undersecretary in 1998 to become legal counsel to Vice President Al Gore on charges of campaign violations, but Clinton kept him close as an advisor on environmental actions, to which Clinton paid little attention. In a last-chance effort to be sure of stuffing the next administration, Clinton used a recess appointment in August 2000 to make Frampton chairman of the policy-producing Council of Environmental Quality, without any Senate review at all.

With Babbitt due a promised Supreme Court appointment, the team, now loaded with appointees from former environmental positions, could simply roll on. But then Gore was picked off in an attempted bunt and all the blue team could do was yell about a "bad call" in the Supreme Court.

The enviros, disappointed and angry, took the field in an aggressive defense of the lead Babbitt gave them. They saved the long ball meant by Rep. Richard Pombo to knock ESA out of the park. They froze Babbitt's replacement, Gale Norton, at the plate without even a serious swing. And, just as they had with Clinton, they used their influence to pay off a new president who appeared not to give a damn either about the game in rural America, even though it had been the underdog red team that put him in office.

In the Klamath, still their most sought-after prize, they orchestrated a crisis that would serve later as a trap.

ECHOES OF CURSES IN THE KLAMATH

To senses strained and wearied by the cacophony of years of name-calling and political posturing, the view across wetlands of the Lower Klamath Basin seems to sing in a quiet harmony of its own, like a patriotic hymn.

There is a gentle aroma from the dark green fields of mint and onions that reach to tawny acres of barley cut in alternating rows to preserve habitat and feed for migrating birds, and beyond that, tulles shelter the edge of the shallow lake that forms a shimmering blue ribbon beneath the horizon where the magnificent monolith of 14,000-foot Mt. Shasta bears its snow-draped dominion over all.

This is a picture of the success that followed the bitter attempt of politically driven bureaucrats to punish and even destroy the agrarian economy and culture of the entire Klamath Basin in 2001. These carefully managed sections of land leased from the government represent what they call a "walking wetlands." Here on some of the most fertile ground in America, crops are periodically rotated with stretches of open water serving the needs of this vital link in the North American flyway.

Pelicans patrol offshore from standing wheat fields; geese feed on the stubble and standing crops of oats and barley; and mule deer clip across the levees and into the shade.

Farmers and federal agents of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service jointly created this innovative answer to part of the dilemma of claims on Oregon's richest waterway. They take joint pride in it and meet among it as they should, as friends. It is one answer, but not the solution in the vast puzzle of the Klamath Basin, reaching from Oregon into California like a jigsaw of pieces that don't fit together in the rubric of more than a score of interests. They have been working for years to resolve a century of conflicts and finally bring peace to a place so blessed. Yet now, when they are nearer solution than ever, the echoes of others who demand sacrifice and capitulation are heard again. The echoes, and the curses, mean to end it.

"I'm concerned about the critters getting lost in all this," says Klamath farmer Steve Kandra. "I spend thousands of dollars every year on critters—on ducks, on geese and mule deer—and I'm glad I do. And yet, they want to kick me off this place. We farmers know from 90-years experience on this project that we can produce crops and protect wildlife with irrigated agriculture. We must do that. If you take the water from me, you only produce hunger for us all." OPPOSITE: Irrigation begins in early morning in the Lower Basin.

> To those who watched carefully as Babbitt led them up to bat, it was soon clear that land was not the ultimate prize they wanted.

Tens of thousands of people from around the nation joined in support of Klamath farmers in the summer of 2001. Symbolically forming a Bucket Brigade and filling stadiums with rallies, the largest demonstration in Oregon history protested the "fish over farms" decision of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) to deny irrigation water to

This sign was left over from the Bucket Brigade of 2001. The locals have been working for years to resolve a century of conflicts and finally bring peace to a place so blessed. Yet now, when they are nearer solution than ever, the echoes of others who demand sacrifice and capitulation are heard again.

farmers for the first time in the federal project's 95-year history. For many of the 1,400 farmers, as well as hundreds more employed in providing supplies, processing and transportation in the basin, the sudden action of the bureau portended economic disaster. Even many who survived it did so only with generous food given by the local supermarket and free medical care offered by the local clinic. It was still not enough to save some from the devastating loss of livelihood that the false drought created.

With little time left even to replenish the fields enough for new planting in the spring, President George W. Bush's new Interior secretary, Gale Norton, nervously faced a flag-bedecked crowd and opened the headgates for a lifesaving 30 days of irrigation.

The local director of the Bureau of Reclamation admitted before being moved to another post that he shut off the water only after being threatened by the Fish & Wildlife Service. He would be held legally and personally responsible if use of irrigation during a dry season "jeopardized" threatened sucker fish in the upper lake and Coho salmon spawning more than 60 miles downstream. That threat was established by ruling of an Oakland, Calif., federal judge who had been "shopped" for her liberal views by environmentalist lawyers representing the Klamath Indian tribe and downstream salmon-fishing interests. The evidence presented to the female judge was based on supposed "scientific" findings supplied by a Utah State University biologist hired by the tribe.

Dr. Thomas Hardy was eager to please his clients in the U.S. Justice Department, who had already given him a contract in excess of $550,000 to establish Indian water rights' claims. Klamath water users had no part in what the Utah State researcher called his "gang" in memos on the progress of the study, which apparently relied as much on anecdotal stories and observations of the tribes, Fish & Wildlife, National Marine Fisheries and the Bureau of Indian Affairs as it did on Hardy's limited research.

"OK, gang," he wrote in a secret memo in December 2000. "Please look over the methods section carefully to see if I have captured what each of you has done for bits and pieces I have relied on. Also look over the sections that described what we have done at USU to see if it makes any sense…."

Other scientists, including a fish biologist employed by the irrigation district itself, soundly disputed Hardy's findings as based on hasty and even nonexistent research as if intended to meet an agenda, but that counterevidence was not even considered by the court. Though he himself doubted Hardy's findings, the reclamation bureaucrat in charge admitted he was intimidated by career-threatening warnings from U.S. Fish & Wildlife. "They administer the ESA," he said, "and it's the law of the land."

He had received the order to cut off irrigation on Jan. 19, one day before George W. Bush was sworn in as president.

Secretary Norton had little guidance for herself. Her boss in the White House had shown no greater interest in rural issues than his predecessor, and her own background was largely in urban matters as Colorado attorney general. But they both understood the crowds lining the empty canals in Klamath Falls. At last in the Klamath, the people spoke louder than the politicians and pettifoggers. Thirty days of irrigation were restored in July, and in September, after the attacks of 9/11, the whole incident was made to seem a memory of a more innocent time.

In the years that followed, George Bush would prove by his spending to be more of an environmentalist than Bill Clinton ever had been—at least in the Klamath. Farmers most affected benefited from a $20-million supplemental appropriation in the farm budget, but more than $500 million was poured into the Klamath Basin by the Bush administration for conservation solutions such as the walking wetlands, fish ladders, or aquatic studies on lands acquired by the ubiquitous Nature Conservancy.

Farmers like Steve Kandra, who had been president of the Klamath Irrigation District in 2001, were expected to match the federal investments with innovations of their own, and they did.

"I survived, but some of my neighbors didn't," says Kandra, who raises grain in the walking wetlands. "Since that time we've been battling back as best we can, and at least we have had this administration's attention. We've access to resources that allow us to do water-conservation projects here like crazy, cooperative projects. But I'm concerned that once the money runs out, the regulations come back, and there are people who want to use those regulations to drive us off.

"Honestly, I'm concerned about the critters getting lost in all this. I spend thousands of dollars every year on critters—on ducks, on geese and mule deer—and I'm glad I do. And yet, they want to kick me off this place. We farmers know from 90-years experience on this project that we can produce crops and protect wildlife with irrigated agriculture. We must do that. If you take the water from me, you only produce hunger for us all."

But while basin farmers looked for ways to bring peace among the numbing array of interests in the basin, other self-imposing environmentalists took it on themselves to rekindle the fight with lawsuits if they could, and with other means if necessary.

It was again a relatively dry but still-productive season in 2002. Despite the Hardy warning, endangered sucker fish had survived well and even increased their numbers in Klamath Lake. Another appeal in federal court to halt irrigation was rejected, and farms began to recover with the help of new wells and better rotation. Increased return flows from the fields even added to the generating power of the river by an estimated $18 million.

Then, as the season ended, events of nature provided a new and still-mysterious twist.

For years, the run of salmon in from the ocean to spawning pools in the Klamath River had been less than was hoped for, even in years when water was plentiful. Runs up the Sacramento River to the south had reached record proportions only the year before, but nobody expected the overpowering flood of Chinook and Coho that raced up from the mouth of the Klamath in September of 2002. Native American fisherman who once had to fight off sea lions for a day's catch at the mouth of the river now filled their nets in an abundance of fish that they were unable to sell to the glutted market. It was a bonanza of a few days that suddenly came to a tragic conclusion when huge numbers of fish—some say 70,000 or more—floated dead back down the river.

Enraged tribal members and newly professed fish experts immediately blamed what they called "welfare farmers" in the Lower Basin, at least 150 miles upstream. The farmers were as shocked as the tribe, but could find no precedence that could explain such a die-off.

Scientists had no immediate answer. In fact, critics say they know of only one fish that was examined before hydrologists and biologists concluded that the combination of the warmth of the water in a hot, dry season combined with the overwhelming volume of fish in the run altered the oxygen supply of the river itself. The fish massed in great numbers offshore awaiting a pulse of cool water that could only have been brought by rain. Disease spread rapidly among the crowded overstressed fish by the time they began the run, the scientists said. Nothing else, except poisoning the water, could account for such a catastrophe.

To politically obsessed environmentalists, however, the gasping fish were like a godsend.

George Frampton may have given up on Al Gore's chances by that time. He soon emerged along with his Clinton-cabinet partner Bruce Babbitt as one of the leading figures of something called "Environment 2004," a hardly disguised pressure group meant to influence the issues of the next presidential campaign. In August 2003, Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass) wrote to the inspector general of the Department of Interior, demanding an investigation into reports that presidential advisor Karl Rove exerted "political influence" to help the Klamath farmers. By the time Kerry received a reply in March 2004, telling him that the investigation found no such attempt by Rove other than a mention of Klamath among other issues presented to a hearing on policy, Kerry had apparently lost interest. Presidential candidates evidently just don't see any "win" from getting involved in rural issues or one-sided environmental causes.

But big newspapers willing to shape the

Dan Keppen, of Family Farm Alliance in Klamath Falls, Ore., has seen the politics of wonderland tear the Basin apart. "They simply will not let us work this out among ourselves. Each time we try, there is another trumped up outrage. And I'm tired."

seats of power do. In June of this year, The Washington Post began a series of articles slicing at the sturdy seat of Vice President Dick Cheney. A piece headlined "Leaving No Tracks" accused Cheney of intervening in a number of clean air and environmental issues inherited from the Clinton administration. Among them was the matter of 2001's last-minute irrigation releases on the Klamath, which Cheney, as Rove had been before him, was accused of directing despite scientific findings (the Hardy report) that the releases would imperil threatened fish.

Washington Democrats, seemingly obsessed to the point of irrational hatred of the Bush administration, called for congressional hearings to grill Cheney on the Post's "farmers over fish" accusations.

In Oregon and California, previously dormant radicals used the powerful Washington newspaper to propel themselves like locusts dropping into every available op-ed page, Web site, and blog to accuse Cheney of "political favoritism" on behalf of "powerful agribusiness interests."

The great Klamath scandal orchestrated into the pages of the Post in 2007 drew a long distance between reality and truth. If any undue political influence was exerted on the water gatekeepers of the BOR in 2001, it seemed clearly to have been from leftover bureaucrats in Fish & Wildlife. Secretary Norton's basic problem was that she was too new in the job to be sure of what to do, and too uncertain to expect directions from Washington or Cheney's compound in Wyoming.

The "Cheney did it! Cheney did it!" hysteria in the hearing conducted at the end of July this year was calmly confronted with testimony from the National Academy of Sciences Research Council on Endangered and Threatened Fish in the Klamath River Basin—the same esteemed body that had conducted a peer review of the Hardy conclusions and found them to be lacking adequate research and possibly agenda-driven. The argument that a cool pulse of water that might have saved the fish was held back by management of Lower Basin irrigation was found to be "very unlikely" by the independent and esteemed National Academy.

The former chairman of the council, Professor William M. Lewis, noted that first of all, water from the irrigation project is not cool, but warm from being held in storage lakes behind downstream dams. In any case, Lewis told the committee, water from the project accounts for only 10 percent of the flow at the mouth of the river, which is mostly fed by large tributaries miles below the Klamath Basin. "The [NAS] committee concluded that a relatively small amount of warm water propagated over a distance of 150 miles would not have made a critical difference to the salmon," Lewis, now a researcher at the

"If they try it again. If they cut off our water again, I think there's going to be guns."

University of Colorado, testified.

In a reasonable world, that testimony might have stilled, or chilled, the swarming radicals from calling Cheney and the farmers "fish murderers" and "salmon killers." But by the time Lewis was allowed to present his evidence, most of them, along with most of the Democrats on the committee convened to "get" Cheney, were not there to hear it. When

they did have a chance to read it later, some of them accused Cheney of manipulating the National Academy of Science.

Dan Keppen has the look of a man stuck in a rabbit hole without the right cookie. For more than a decade, first as executive director of the Klamath Water Users' Association and now as director of the Family Farm Alliance, he has seen the politics of wonderland tear the Klamath Basin apart. "They simply will not let us work this out among ourselves," he says. "Each time we try, there is another trumped-up outrage. I'm worried about how far they might go to stop us from succeeding. And I'm tired. Real tired."

Greg Addington, Klamath Water Users Assn., is largely alone in bringing the farmers' side to a table crowded with government agents, tribal representatives and nine enviro groups. BELOW: Mint grower Lee McKoen used to process potatoes. It was in the midst of the 2001 crisis that his brother Mike suffered a heart attack and died at the age of 51. His business was almost ruined by the shutoff.

There remain strong hopes that the sincere representatives of 26 separate sides of interest in the Klamath resources will reach agreement before the end of this year. But the political drums and bongo beaters are gathering again on the horizon.

"The administration and its agribusiness allies have hijacked closed-door talks over the removal of four Klamath River dams," railed Steve Pedery of Oregon Wild in a July opinion piece written for the Eugene Register-Guard.

Pedery, apparently in some position to know the will of public opinion, went on: "In addition, the administration has insisted that all participants agree to guaranteed water deliveries for Klamath agribusiness and support significantly weakened protections for Klamath salmon, bull trout and other endangered fish. That's not how most Americans want our government to operate."

Greg Addington, who took Keppen's place on the Klamath Water Users' Association, is largely alone in bringing the farmers' side to a table crowded with government agents, tribal representatives, and nine environmental groups including The Nature Conservancy. By agreement of all parties, he is constrained from talking about the secret negotiations, except to call them "the most arduous and frustrating experience of my life."

But Karuk Tribe coordinator S. Craig Tucker, in rejecting the Cheney attack, wrote to the press: "It's tough for groups that often look at each other across a courtroom to instead work on mutually acceptable solutions to problems. But we're doing it. And when the solution comes from the grassroots up and crosses political, ideological, and cultural divides, politicians of all stripes are sure to follow."

Steve Pedery and his Oregon Wild had been part of the negotiating group until they were politely asked to leave. Now, Pedery, still preaching "scandal" wherever he can imagine it, insists that "phasing out commercial farming" in the Lower Basin, combined with removal of dams on the Klamath, is the only way to save the salmon. Dismissing the negotiations that reject him, he is waiting for a new administration in Washington that won't do favors for agribusiness.

In the aluminum-warehouse headquarters of Three M Mint in Merrill, Ore., Lee McKoen makes his office behind a folding table scattered with magazines and a telephone. This six-still plant, where mint grown in the fields is refined into an oil for convections and toothpaste, has that same nose-filling aroma to it, but with a sharp spear to the concentrated mint oil that might make you, like McKoen, swear off anything but Double Bubble. He's about used to it since replacing his potato processors three years ago, and he is, after all, just about as close as can be found to being a "powerful agribusiness interest" in the Lower Basin.

"I'll tell you what," says McKoen, a large and naturally gruff man, "if they try it again. If they cut off our water again, I think there's going to be guns."

It was in the midst of the 2001 crisis that McKoen's brother Mike suffered a heart attack and died at the age of 51. His business as the largest potato processor in the basin had been nearly ruined by the irrigation shutoff.

But the shrill voices of the so-green like Pedery can also be deafening in understanding what may be the greatest problem for the Klamath negotiators—the four dams below the Lower Basin Irrigation Project. The dams have nothing really to do with water for irrigation, but they do supply the vital power to run irrigation pumps in the system. Two years ago, the dams were sold to the second richest man in the nation, Warren Buffett.

Buffett's dams, run by his subsidiary Pacificorp, were quickly blamed for producing a toxic algae that could result in fish kills. As the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission began considering the issue of a new 30- to 50-year license to the hydropower dams, the tribes and the environmentalists demanded they be torn down. Buffett, a man familiar with the bottom line, hinted he might be receptive to a request from the entire 26-member negotiating team. In the meantime, Pacificorp began a series of rate increases that could amount to a raise of more than 1,300 percent for irrigators. Losing the dams wouldn't bother them if another source of power production was identified. Coal- or oil-fired plants? Not likely so long as environmentalists are armed with Al Gore's dire warnings of global warming.

Echoes and curses drift back across one of the West's most productive agricultural regions where fish and wildlife mingle with food grown to feed a nation.

Spuds watches the play at third with satisfaction, wanting not to be distracted by the question. "I don't want to fight it anymore," he says. "I mean, I just don't want to be up front." He sighs a little like he isn't sure it will be possible. "I just want to farm," he says simply.

Some mail on the dash remains unopened. It is all bills from the power company. The last one he reads and places on the top of the stack is from June. It totals $32,000. ■

*Tim Findley has been writing about the Klamath since 1999. In Fall 2001, he teamed with his friend and fellow Range writer/photographer Larry Turner to produce the first major story on betrayal of Klamath Basin veterans. Check out "*Water in the West" *at* <www.rangemagazine.com>.

Of Polar Bears and Lilacs

Measuring the future. Is it tomatoes versus a mortgaged split level, a grazing steer versus a ringing slot machine?

Words and photos by Tim Findley

In fertile Klamath Basin, overshadowed by Mt. Shasta, crops are periodically rotated with stretches of open water serving the needs of this vital link in the North American flyway.

The Klamath is not alone. All over the West, particularly as the politicized science of climate change takes a tighter grip on policy and regulation, water resources are being used to measure the future.

Will it be for food to feed the nation? Or will it be for urban growth, a dollar a flush? The fish and wildlife in between may be the mighty icons and symbolic heart of the issue, but the hard reality is more stark. It's a load of tomatoes versus a mortgaged split level. A grazing steer against a ringing slot machine.

We have choices to make and battles to fight before us, and the decisions made over water in the next few years will have consequences likely to last the lifetimes of us all. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that this issue may be "the mother of all" conflicts to decide the future of the United States.

Strident acolytes of Al Gore's version that people, American consumers especially, are responsible for global warming are pulling harder at heartstrings with claims that Arctic ice flows are melting faster than expected, threatening extinction of thousands of polar bears and even opening a clear Northwest Passage for the first time in known history. The conclusion by Gore and his supporters is that "anthropogenic" causes are to blame and that the only way to head off a catastrophic "tipping point" in the next 30 years is to change human behavior, especially in the United States. That implies creation of "climate cops," a "green gestapo" with unprecedented authority to restrict human activity of all kinds. Such arbitrary and unaccountable new powers of the government might create a tipping point of its own among people who will not tolerate further erosion of their freedoms and property rights.

Other quieter scientists who doubt the anthropogenic conclusions of Gore have recently revealed 50 years of grassroots research accomplished with the help of matronly farm ladies to record annual changes in lilac blossoms.

Somehow, it's the lilacs that seem more convincing. You don't have to buy into Gore's doomsday outlook to recognize that the climate is changing, just as it has many times over millennia. What the delicate purple and white blossoms of the lilacs seem to say is that spring has come earlier by a few hours or a few days each year since 1965. The lilacs can adjust, but the pollinating bees must do so also and the migrating birds and even animals farther up the food chain. They must, and they do.

In Reno this year, for the first time in recent memory, black bears were found on the campus of the University of Nevada rummaging through trash in search of food that can offset the summer season's low productivity of wild berries and nuts. Populations of sage grouse, chukar and other game birds were reported to be lowered by another hot, dry season. The desert states have endured drought many times before and there are signs of another dry episode beginning, perhaps a prolonged warming. Nature sends many messages better understood by people who live with it than by politicians who try to exploit it.

But that is only one blinding side to the problem. Also in this last year, the United States—for the first time in modern memory—became a net food-importing nation.

Our farms, in virtually free-fall decline for the last 30 years, no longer produce enough to feed us, though once they proudly proclaimed the ability to "feed the world."

In Nevada, where the Las Vegas Water Authority will buy the lawn in front of your house just to get rid of it, utilities' bosses have employed the help of U.S. Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV) to tap underground aquifers more than 400 miles north, leaving rural Nevada communities to worry if the money they are paid for it will be worth the loss of their own resource and maybe their livelihood.

In Colorado, a state report found that between 1987 and 2002, the Centennial State lost 460 acres a day of agricultural land. The report estimates that another 3.1 million acres will be lost by 2022. Yet the growth of the Denver metropolitan area goes on to such an extent that the big developer money in the city has tapped aquifers beneath farms and pastures hundreds of miles to the south and east. Environmentalists continue to stand in the way of any plans to build a new reservoir on the Platte River in the mountains above Denver and demand instead that the river be "restored," potentially drying up thousands of acres of farmland in Wyoming and Nebraska as well.

Klamath Lake. Freeing the water for fish alone, cutting new swaths of wilderness to divide the continent, outsourcing the elements of our survival, seems like a generous strategy for national suicide.

In Arizona, the Salt River Project begun by former governor and former Interior secretary Bruce Babbitt estimates that in a few short years due to urban growth the project will cease to provide any water at all to agriculture.

In California, despite two decades of attempts to compromise and accommodate politically powerful environmentalists, farmers in the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys are being pressured to become "willing sellers" of what not long ago was regarded as the most valuable agricultural land in America. The state Department of Conservation documented that more than one million acres of it were converted to other uses between 1988 and l998. Claiming to be the "partner" of farmers, Big Green trusts like The Nature Conservancy now offer millions for "perpetual" easements on farmland, steadily reducing the options of property owners, while at the same time working to eliminate dams and agriculture in the most fertile floodplains.

The lilacs tell us that spring comes a little earlier each year. In the Northeast, that may be a message for gardeners, but in the West, where winter means everything, it is a disturbing sign. Snowpack in the mountains is the greatest reservoir of all. Even if the amount of precipitation remains roughly the same, if it comes, as it has, in late winter rains instead of snow, the result may be not only floods, but a seriously reduced growing season.

We can face all of this and still survive, even thrive, as seems to have been the case in other historic warming periods. But we are no longer an agrarian nation, and among those eager to join a "green gestapo," food production is not the top priority.

Largely in anticipation of that, agricultural producers have banded together in organizations like the Family Farm Alliance as well as rural water associations, irrigation districts and farm and ranching communities working together in search of ways not only to confront climate change with new water management techniques, but to head off a food crisis falsely created by global-warming alarmists with their own agendas.

For the United States to seriously face the problem will require a national commitment to first saving ourselves. Perhaps even to conduct a major reassessment of our priorities. Will the next 10 years be marked by more divisive regulatory laws, or by new attention to bringing us back together as a free and productive nation able to meet crisis with creativity?

It is not mere opinion that the United States government has become a politically strangled institution of greed, corruption, partisanship and ignorance. And it is not mere opinion to observe that the longer elected people lacking wisdom, vision or insight continue to hold the nation ransom to their personal power and wealth, the closer we all come to hunger and oppression, and maybe much worse.

It is almost a waste of space to recount all the well-known outrages. The United States desperately needs at least one leader with the wisdom and courage of a man like Theodore Roosevelt, who set the style for American conservation, but also established the infrastructure of reclamation that would "let the desert bloom."

The lilacs tell us better than the polar bears. We can adjust. We can save our farmlands and feed ourselves with innovative efforts to better manage the water and the growing seasons. We can live with and maybe thrive on a change in climate. Lilacs can't feed the polar bears, but we can be inspired as we were before in history to meet great challenges with productivity and at least moderate prosperity. Those reclamation projects that created dams and irrigation systems in the first half of the 20th century are now neglected and targeted for destruction by young green activists who want to trust in a bleary vision of solar and wind power and drastically reduced production of livestock.

Freeing the water for fish alone, cutting new swaths of wilderness to divide the continent, outsourcing the elements of our survival, seems like a generous strategy for national suicide. If we would save some polar bears, it would be wise to save ourselves first.

Though we are made ashamed these days to say it, we are at the top of the food chain. Human beings, notably Americans, have a greater capacity to learn and act upon the environment beyond simply accepting the guilt Al Gore falsely wants to force on us.

No farmer or resource producer of any account is unfamiliar with sacrifice, but we must grow beyond the self-aggrandizing need of some to punish others. Farmers, ranchers and rural people in general are less and less willing to accept another wave of blaming them for the social excess of consumers and the crass venality of politicians. Working together we can live as free people willing to change. But if the immediate future is to be more of politically inspired attacks on property, family, and livelihood, then we can all nearly as easily starve as serfs and slaves in a crumbling society.

Look to the lilacs. ■