

Committee on Resources, Full Committee

- - Rep. James V. Hansen, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6201 - - (202) 225-2761

Witness Statement

**TESTIMONY OF
SHARRON MOLDER, PRINCIPAL
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TULELAKE BASIN JOINT UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
TULELAKE, CALIFORNIA
Before the Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives
June 16, 2001**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Sharron Molder. I am the principal of Tulelake High School and I depend on farming for my daily existence, just as you do.

I want to thank you on behalf of the students, parents, teachers, and staff members of the Tulelake Basin School District and our neighboring schools located within the Klamath Basin, for coming to Klamath Falls to learn more about the tragedy unfolding before us.

I have been asked to give my opinion on what caused the current water crisis. If you came to Tulelake High School and walked through the foyer where a tradition of graduating classes have been displayed since 1934, you would know the answer. The Veterans of WWI and WWII who came to farm in the Klamath Project, created by the Bureau of Reclamation believed that a written promise for water forever, made by the government that sent them to war, and signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover, or Ulysses S. Grant was meant to last longer than 50 years. These are the people who created the backbone of this community. Their pictures, on display from 1934 to the present honor the generations that followed these brave families. Who is affected by the loss of water in the Tulelake Basin? Out of 135 families in the high school we have 18 families with third generation children, 18 who are fourth generation and two who are fifth generation farming families. Some of these same veterans now face a severe loss in income because their land cannot be leased for farming providing retirement income. These proud Americans never saw the crisis coming. What caused this crisis? Greed and hidden agendas by environmental zealots who are not

much different than the carpetbaggers who rampaged the south after the civil war devastated our communities. Indifference to social and economic conditions has begun to destroy not only our rural communities but also 430 native species of wildlife as well.

My daughter, Jennifer wants to be a farmer. She is a sophomore at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, majoring in Production Agriculture, a 1999 graduate of Tulelake High School and a member of FFA. She has earned her American FFA degree, the highest national honor in the Future Farmers

Organization, still the largest youth organization in America. I share with you excerpts from the FFA Creed

written by E.M. Tiffany

I believe in the future of agriculture. I believe that American agriculture can and will hold true to the best traditions of our national life and that I can exert an influence in my home and community which will stand solid for my part in that inspiring task.

Jennifer is one of Tulelake's children. We don't just raise up potatoes, horseradish and onions. We also grow kids. Another student, our valedictorian for the class of 2001, Brianna Byrne, is on her way to Santa Clara University. She is a member of a Klamath Basin family, in farming for a century. At a hearing before the California State Assembly, Water, Parks and Wildlife Committee on May 22, 2001 Brianna stated "How can I and the other members of my chapter of Future Farmers feel any sense of security in pursuing agriculture as a career when the government of the strongest nation on earth takes away the core of our history and community based upon unproven and speculative science?"

The Tulelake community has tried to repair the situation by communicating the news of this devastating crisis through the print media, television and a massive letter writing campaign to our government representatives. A sophomore took photographs during a sandstorm, when the dirt blew so hard you couldn't see the end of your car on the highway, a common occurrence these days. Students and staff prepared a reception at Tulelake High School for Congressman Wally Herger, with mere 24 hours notice. The previous day the high school took busses to the rally at The Event Center in Klamath Falls to hear the governor of Oregon address the crowd of 6000. Columbia Plywood in Oregon gave the high school 30 sheets of plywood to advertise our plight along highway 139 to passing motorists. The students painted messages on both sides: "Give us our slice of the pie", "In preschool we were taught to share", "Save our ecosystem, fish, rancher, and farmer" and "Call 911! Some Sucker stole our water!" But still, the tap is dry. I liken the feeling to the "rolling power blackouts" that areas of California have been experiencing. Imagine that the lights are switched off, but they do not go back on in an hour, or a day. You do not know if the switch will ever go back on, ever. So it is with our irrigation water.

The Tulelake community has tried to repair the situation by communicating the news of this devastating crisis through the media and a massive letter writing campaign to our government representatives. I'd like to share excerpts of some journal writings by students at Tulelake High School in hopes that you will have some insight into the real people that are affected by this speculative science accepted as truth by some branches of our government. Dozens of statements make a clear statement that our young people are losing their faith in government and I believe that should concern you Mr. Chairman and committee members.

Ross: The citizens of the area are looked upon as pawns to their own government, and not just any government, but the American government. I feel as if the government believes that some fish in a river are more important than the livelihoods of thousands. Is this how the American government was set up? Absolutely not. It just goes to show how unimportant the government believes the

small farmer is. We do all we can to produce the food the world needs, maintain the environment, and sustain our own lives. There is no farmer in the world that has to put up with more regulations and strict standards than the American small farmer. However, we still hold on, believing that these regulations are helping to produce a superior product, and we are helping to give the world the food it needs. And then the government takes it all away. The government has set a standard, and now little bits of land can be taken away throughout the entire United States, and soon we will be abolishing the American small farmer all together.

Wes: On Friday, the 6th of April, our government decided that they were not going to give any water, as in none at all, to the farmers of the Klamath Basin. They decided that they were going to let all the water run down river just because there might be a possibility that the fish population would deplete. There was no evidence guaranteeing that the fish population would go down. They still decided that the lives of fish were more important than the lives of countless farmers. The government totally turned their backs on the people of this Basin. They took away something that was truly important to the people here; they took away their livelihood. Our government, at the turn

of the century, invited homesteaders to come and settle here and start new lives. Now, that very same government is taking away what they once had supported. The farmers of this area use only two percent of the water in Klamath Lake. They only want 6 inches of the lake water so that they can provide food for their families and thousands of other families in the US. Everything that goes on in Tulelake is in one way or another linked to agriculture. My dad works for a fertilizer corporation whose business comes from the farmers. Every friend that I have here is also linked to farming. To most of them farming is all they know, its what they have done for their whole lives, its

what they have taught their children to do. What are they going to do when they are suddenly out of a job? All because the Government believes that the lives of fish are more important than the lives of your people. What kind of Government is that?

Angela: Our FFA chapter earns most of its money by our school farm. Without water we will not be able to farm this summer and we are unsure how we will be able to pay for chapter contests and educational conferences for next year. The saddest thing to think about is that my FFA jacket maybe useless next year because there doesn't seem to be a future for the farmers in this area.

Alejandra: The water crisis means a lot to me because of my parents. They don't have a good education to get a different job, so they can only work out in the fields or in the packing sheds.

Amanda: What about the businesses, the schools, the churches, the youth groups, school sports, and also the wildlife? What do the farmers and ranchers do now? Move from their homes and take their children out of the schools where they grew up with all their classmates and built strong relationships? Our towns will become ghost towns because there is no work. Tulelake, Merrill, and Malin are based on farming and when that gets taken away the towns become nothing. All the money the farmers and workers put into their houses and businesses will have all gone to waste for the sake of Sucker Fish! To me, this seems outrageous.

Jose Antonio: Our community revolves around agriculture. Many families have started moving, looking for jobs. The farmers don't have the money to have the workers work for them. I have been really worried that my family will want to move. I'm sixteen years old and I've lived in Tulelake for eleven years. All my friends have known me for most of my life and I don't want to be separated from them. I'm asking anybody that reads this or hears this to help us.

Laura: The water decision in this basin is a tragedy. So many families will be leaving and so many friends. It is very strange that we are having a recession in the economy and we are putting people out of jobs. Isn't it supposed to be the other way around?

Jerry: When people would eliminate people over fish, there is something wrong. If people would rather see a sucker fish prosper, than see a whole community survive, something is erroneous. This issue is more than being able to stay in Tulelake, it is the fact that people can get away with catastrophic devastation to smaller

communities, for unimaginable wants. If it starts here, it won't stop. Other communities will be struck with this, If we don't get any water and the protection agencies win, then they will have the power to do it over and over again.

Juan: The water crisis is a very big problem at this point in my life. I have many other problems and this is one that has to be resolved fast. Please make our suffering end this month.

Wes: There isn't much work so there isn't much money coming in. Times are very rough. It is hard for our family to pay the bills each month. My mom and dad are stressed out all the time. What's worse is that there is nothing I can do about it.

Agustin: My parents don't want to move because they like this peaceful community and good schools. My father is going to move away and send us money so we won't have to leave here. He will return when the situation is better.

Amanda: I worry about moving and leaving my small school. Small schools are special because you get to know other students real well and most of us have relationships with our teachers.

Matt: Turning off the water has taken away my dream to go to college and play basketball. I don't know now how I can pay for it.

Rebecca: As human beings we should try everything in our power to sustain wildlife, but at what cost? In Tulelake, by refusing water to the basin's farmers there is the idea that a fish's life is worth more than many farmers and their families' lives. This is a ridiculous idea. There isn't any person who would sacrifice the life of themselves or their children for the life of a fish. So why are farmers in Tulelake being asked to do so? These farmers have made their livelihood out of farming. They have built on the American Dream, the American Dream to produce and flourish. The dream that with every drop of sweat that falls and with every trickle of blood spilled, at the end of the day they can be proud of their toil. This crisis does not only affect farmers and the Tulelake Basin. By supporting the fish's life, you are supporting the basin's business degradation. There once was a strong belief in this community for the American Government; but that has now been destroyed. Please help us to regain some of that belief, and support the Tulelake Farmers.

Cecilia: Immigrants once came to this country to escape this type of tyrannical government and gave their lives for the freedoms we all enjoy. Why now does the government have the right to tell us how we are to make our living and where we are to live?

Our students feel betrayed. We all feel betrayed.

The Tulelake School District provides education for children from preschool through 12th grade. As of March 2001, the student enrollment in the District was 574. Approximately 80% of the said students qualify under federal guidelines as economically disadvantaged and, therefore, receive free or reduced lunches and other benefits. As of said date, approximately 55% of our student population was Hispanic. We are currently involved in preparing the District's operating plan and budget for

the 2001-2002 school year. In order to determine the impact of the cutoff of water on our school population we began polling the students in our schools. Based on our poll, we could lose approximately 200 students, 30 - 40% of our total student population by the beginning of the next

school year. The estimated loss of revenue will be approximately 1 million dollars.

Our schools are recognized by the state of California as High Performing Schools. Our schools are recognized by the state of California as High Performing Schools. Tulelake Basin Elementary School raised their API from 545 to 659, an increase of 114 points. Tulelake High School, already a high performing school, raised our API 53 points, the second largest increase in the north state. This phenomenal growth far exceeded the accountability targets set by the state of California. Our technology is second to none in Northern California. Our student to computer ratio is 1:2. We have a video-conferencing lab for students and community members to take courses from College of the

Siskiyou. Next fall we will begin a yearlong course for Cisco Networking Certification as well as a semester course in A+ Certification as part of our technology path. We are part of the University of California College Prep Initiative, offering 7 online AP courses and 4 honors courses next year. We are also expanding AVID to three grades, 8th, 9th and 10th to increase opportunities for college path education to more students. We have been a part of the KRIS Project (Klamath Resource Information System) collecting water quality data from tributaries to Klamath Lake. We understand the problem. What we do not understand is being excluded from the solution. We also have a working school farm which supports our agricultural program offering hands on experience to future farmers. We cannot farm either this year without water. We cannot water our football fields, soccer fields or our parks. A governmental official in Sacramento told me that instead of destroying our schools you should be up here studying them!

Many of the students' recent writings and actions indicate even more significant adverse impacts to the school community. Based on my years of experience in education I recognize and understand the emotional and behavioral impacts of stress on the school population. Our recent 4th quarter grade reports show a significant increase in D's and F's. This time frame parallels the news of the

water crisis. There are students who emotionally gave up. We expect our SAT 9 scores to drop District wide. It was very hard to motivate many of our students to focus beyond the crisis. The children in our schools are well aware of the financial and emotional health of their families. Many of the families in our schools have participated for years in the successful agricultural business community. Many of the parents of our students are now unemployed or are employers who have not only been forced to lay off long-term employees, but face the prospect of financial ruin themselves. The emotional pain and stress felt by the parents is recognized and transmitted to the students. As hope for a rapid solution fell, referrals and problems increased. I began to deal with behaviors I had not witnessed in three years. We are concerned that facing a summer with no jobs for high school students, the problems could continue to increase. We usually process about 100 student work permits, mostly for field workers. We have processed six.

California Governor Gray Davis signed a bill declaring Modoc and Siskiyou counties within the Klamath Reclamation Project a "special disaster area". Two million dollars will come to our non-profit, Tulelake Community Partnership to set up a Local Assistance Center. We hope it is soon enough and direct enough to help all of our people. Some of our community members are undocumented immigrants, former migrant workers, who will not be eligible. They have put down roots; some are third generation now, but without assistance they must move on. Others who will need our services but will not accept them are senior citizens, too proud to accept "a government handout". Mr. Wendall Wood commented that the government can write a check to our farmers but not to a bald eagle. Mr. Wood needs to remember who signs the check.

The schools will open in late August, but who will still be here? How do we plan? Our summer school

enrollment has dropped from 220 last year to 170 this year K – 8. Our staff is frustrated and deeply hurt by the possibility that our efforts to build an excellent learning community are at risk of destruction because of the loss of irrigation water to the farms that support this school district. We are committed to keeping our certificated and classified staffs intact. We are a very tenacious and

proud community and we will find a way to maintain our way of life for the children we have yet to raise and educate.

I share the words of Ross Macy : "I am an officer in the Future Farmers of America. This organization has taught me the importance of farming, and of leadership. I have ambitions to gain the highest honor that the FFA has to award, the American Farmer Degree and to accomplish this in my hometown, and in my own high school. However, because of this destructive decision I might not be able to reach this goal, and neither will future generations. This is terrible. Above all, the

greatest country in the world needs to have the greatest government in the world. "So that a government of the people, by the people, and FOR the people, shall not perish from the earth." Abraham Lincoln.

Farmers are truly the Keepers of the Earth. If the ESA is not amended there will always be a lawsuit on the horizon. There was a combination of factors that came together during this drought year. Unfortunately, the land itself, which sustains this agricultural community, became a commodity.

How can the problem be prevented in the future? Our government in an emergency is reactive not proactive. As Thomas Jefferson said, "It is more honorable to repair a wrong than to persist in it." You could still open the gates and turn on the water. Some say it is too late to turn water on this year but as long as it can help any person, or any species in the Basin, it is not too late. We teach our children if you make a mistake you admit it, correct it and move on. Congress should also financially reimburse those businesses and workers who have suffered because of the loss of water supplies. The science that led to these decisions must be reviewed. Economic impact studies need to be conducted prior to the impact, as is required by your laws.

It is the people in this Basin who are endangered and worth saving. To close, I choose the words of sophomore, Lupita Aguilar : "We need to find an answer to all this. Please find a way in which both fish, farmers, and ranchers get water. I'm sure there is a solution because there is one to everything. We just have to work together and find the right one that will benefit all sides."

Thank you.

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