



Senator: KBRA a hard sell

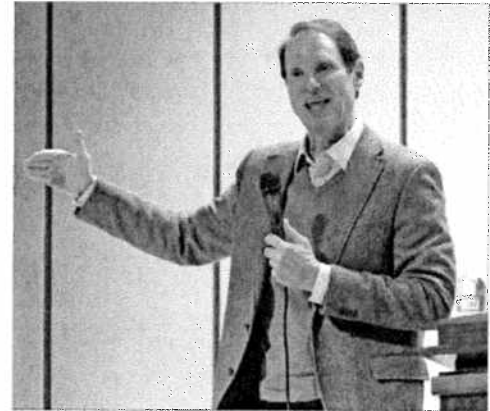
Sen. Ron Wyden talks to town hall audience

By JOEL ASCHBRENNER
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Legislation to implement the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement won't be an easy sell in Congress, especially considering the water settlement's half-a-billion-dollar cost to the federal government, U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said Sunday during a town hall meeting at the Oregon Institute of Technology.

Wyden stopped in Klamath Falls and Lakeview Sunday as part of an annual series of town halls across the state.

About 75 people listened to the senator answer questions about timber issues, post office closures and the Endangered Species Act. Water issues took center stage, and several audience members questioned Wyden about the likelihood Congress would pass legislation to implement the KBRA and a related agreement that would facilitate removal of four dams on the Klamath River.



H&N photo by Joel Aschbrenner Sen. Ron Wyden answered community members' questions about a variety of local topics during a Sunday town hall meeting at the Oregon Institute of Technology. Wyden stopped in Klamath Falls and Lakeview as part of his annual series of town hall meetings across Oregon.

"We've come a long way, senator," said Jeff Mitchell, chairman of the Klamath Tribes. "Now we need your leadership to take us to the finish line."

Restoration agreement

Wyden said he will spend this year trying to build bipartisan support for KBRA legislation so he can schedule a hearing for the bill next year, when he takes over for retiring Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., as the senior Democrat on the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources.

The biggest challenge will be the agreement's more-than-\$500 million price tag, Wyden said. By comparison, a bill to reauthorize timber payments to hundreds of counties nationwide cost \$300 million, he said.

Wyden said he wants to hold hearings on KBRA legislation in the affected communities, including Klamath Falls, so stakeholders can weigh in.

The agreements aim to remove four dams on the Klamath River, establish affordable power and reliable water for irrigators, restore fish habitat and help the Klamath Tribes acquire a 92,000-acre tree farm. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced last month that he could not meet the March 31 deadline to determine if dam removal is feasible because he first needs Congressional approval.

Wyden also said he would look into allegations that a Department of Interior

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whistleblower was fired for questioning "positive spin" the department put on studies to support dam removal.

Timber payments

Wyden said he is working within the Senate Finance Committee on a one- or two-year reauthorization of federal timber payments, which have provided Klamath County with millions of dollars in the past decade.

The payments expire this year, leaving some rural Oregon counties unable to fund services such as law enforcement.

Wyden said he is interested in a bill from three Oregon lawmakers that would set aside some federal timberland for conservation and some for timber production to fund counties.

"I certainly like the concept of having more active management," he said.

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