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# Blasting levees part of effort to revive Oregon lake

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Upper Klamath Lake in Klamath Falls, Ore., is the state's largest freshwater lake. Explosions this week should boost the lake's volume by almost 5.9 billion gallons.

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By [Patrick O'Driscoll](#), USA TODAY

A national conservation group plans to blow up 2 miles of levees Tuesday on Oregon's Upper Klamath Lake in an unprecedented move to improve wildlife habitat, water storage and water quality downstream.

The Nature Conservancy aims to restore almost 5 square miles of marsh in an area vital to two rare fish species. Crews will set off 100 tons of explosives buried in four half-mile sections of dikes.

Water from the lake then will rush through the gaps to flood wetlands lost 50 years ago when the Williamson River delta was drained for farming. The conservancy has bought the croplands and removed them from production.

The explosions, in four bursts over five minutes, will throw soil 150 feet up and 300 feet out, says Mark Stern, director of the conservancy's Upper Klamath conservation program.

"It's not going to be this big volcanic explosion, but you will feel the earth move a little bit," Stern says. He says loud

booms will go off before the actual explosions to scare away fish and other wildlife.

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The \$9 million project, 12 years in the making, is backed by federal and state agencies and a host of groups because it will both aid wildlife and increase the capacity of the Upper Klamath, Oregon's largest freshwater lake. The lake is home to the shortnose sucker and Lost River sucker, both declared endangered under federal law 19 years ago. It also is the source of the Klamath River, a lifeline for 1,400 irrigation farmers and for threatened Coho salmon downstream.

"By breaching these levees and restoring wetland, we essentially are making Upper Klamath Lake a bigger water body, with more storage available for downstream," Stern says. "It will also create tremendous breeding habitat for water birds — pelicans, black terns, sandhill cranes and waterfowl" that migrate along the Pacific Flyway.

Helping the fish now — the new marshes will act as a nursery for young suckerfish — could ease a long-running battle over water downstream. In a severe drought several years ago, the lake level fell so low that water managers had to cut off the flow to farmers to protect the fish. Angry protests followed. Lawsuits over the lake, river and fish continue today.

Water releases for farming are likely to continue jeopardizing the three fish species, the federal Bureau of Reclamation reported last week in an assessment of irrigation operations through 2017.

Tuesday's blasts should boost the lake's volume by almost 5.9 billion gallons. Explosives are being used instead of bulldozers because the levee soils are too unstable. Earthmovers were still used over the past two years to remove the upper 60% of the berms — about 1.75 million cubic yards of dirt — to make the final job easier.

Once the dust settles, aquatic plants such as hard-stemmed bulrushes will begin to reclaim the marsh naturally. "The recipe for growing wetlands is pretty straightforward," Stern says. "Just add water."

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**Jacq** wrote: 172d ago

Taking land out of agriculture and putting it in federal control is not unprecedented in the Klamath Basin. More than 100,000 acres ag land has been converted to federal land and/or The Nature Conservancy land, creating mostly wetlands, and this project is the beginning of another 20,000 acre land acquisition. Wetlands there evaporate 2x the amount of water as irrigated ag. The National Academy of Science Chairman Dr William Lewis stated that adding more wetlands will not help the sucker fish and will not improve water quality. With the evaporation it will decrease available water, not to mention taking production and jobs out of the private sector. Downsizing ag has already decimated our cattle industry in the Upper Klamath Basin. But this makes a good positive story for another land grab. By the way, it was discovered that there were tens of thousands more sucker fish in Klamath Lake than guessed at the time they were listed as endangered. Our government doesn't know how many suckers they must find before they can come off the endangered species list.

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**newmexicocraig** wrote: 175d ago

amightyfortress - LOL!!

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**amightyfortress** wrote: 175d ago

"Water from the lake then will rush through the gaps to flood wetlands lost 50 years ago when the Williamson River delta was drained for farming"

Nooooooooooooo! What if there are ants and worms crawling on the land, they will drown!

"The explosions, in four bursts over five minutes, will throw soil 150 feet up and 300 feet out, says Mark Stern, director of the conservancy's Upper Klamath conservation program. He says loud booms will go off before the actual explosions to scare away fish and other wildlife."

Nooooooooooooo! What if some of the birds are deaf and don't hear the booms? Or, what if the booms scare the birds and they're frozen in place, unable to fly away? How can we be sure all the fish will hear the booms? Some fish might DIE!

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