

“Government Stole Our Water”: US Farmers Ready for Standoff with Feds in Drought Irrigation Crisis, Expect Right-wing Militia Help

By [RT News](#)

Global Research, June 18, 2021
[RT News](#) 15 June 2021

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Environment](#), [Law and Justice](#)

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Outraged farmers threatened to disrupt a federal order to stop the flow of irrigation water from a lake amid a severe drought in the US state of Oregon. They warned that right-wing militias will back them in case of confrontation.

Farmers are protesting because they own the water in the Upper Klamath Lake, farmer Dan Nielsen told RT’s Ruptly video agency. He stood outside an American flag-colored tent that was set up next to the canal headgates, which control the flow of irrigation water from the lake.

“It’s ours and the federal government actually just stole it. No due process of law, no compensation,” Nielsen said, adding that federal officials had violated the locals’ property rights guaranteed by the US Constitution.

Protesters brought signs saying *“Water for Farms”* and *“Open the Gates. No Water. No Food. No Life.”*

They spoke about releasing the water themselves if the government does not back down. *“If they don’t budge... I think we’re just going to end up taking it,”* Nielsen said. *“It’s the only way the government gets it.”* In order to avoid confrontation, officials must let farmers use the water for their crops or purchase the land from the farmers, he said.

The US Bureau of Reclamation closed the canal last month, saying that due to the extreme drought there was not enough water left for it to operate properly. The bureau also said that releasing the water will threaten the endangered species of salmon that inhabit the lake. The fish have agricultural and spiritual significance to the Native American tribes who live upstream.

According to local media, thousands of farmers on the Oregon-California border were left without a steady water supply after the closure of the canal. Klamath Irrigation District president Ty Kliever said that *“the impacts to our family farms and these rural communities*

will be off the scale.”

An outraged Nielsen and another farmer, Grant Knoll, purchased a vacant lot near the federal waterway, where they set up a tent dubbed ‘Water Crisis Info Center’. Protesters told Jefferson Public Radio (JPR) that they had teamed up with People’s Rights, a group founded by well-known conservative militia leader Ammon Bundy.

They showed JPR a text conversation with Bundy and said the militiamen will get a heads-up when the farmers make their move. *“I’m planning on getting DC’s attention,”* Knoll told JPR this month. *“We’re going to turn on the water and have a standoff.”*

The Bundy family first became famous for their 2014 armed standoff with the US government in a dispute over grazing fees. Two years later Ammon Bundy led a group of militiamen that seized the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge office in Harney County, Oregon.

The occupation ended with FBI agents giving chase during which one militiaman was killed and Ammon Bundy’s brother, Ryan Bundy, was wounded. The brothers were later acquitted in the case that stemmed from the refuge office takeover.

Ben DuVal, a farm owner and president of the Klamath Water Users Association (KWUA), told Ruptly that the situation on the ground has been getting tense because the lack of water hurts not only farmers, but also businesses in the city of Klamath Falls. *“Farmers like myself are looking at basically zero irrigation water this year.”*

DuVal said the protesters were *“doing a good job of bringing some enthusiasm and some awareness to this issue.”* At the same time, he stressed that the protest must remain peaceful. *“I don’t want anything to happen at the headgates that is going to reflect poorly on our community.”*

KWUA previously released a statement condemning the decision to stop releasing the water from Upper Klamath Lake, with DuVal calling it a *“failed experiment that has produced no benefit for the [fish].”*

Klamath Tribes Chairman Don Gentry acknowledged that the severe drought has *“really put us at odds”* with the farming community. *“The agriculture folks... often too referred to [the lake] as ‘reservoir for our folks’, which is kind of strange because it has been here forever; they are using it like a reservoir,”* he said.

Oregon Governor Kate Brown, who declared the Klamath Basin a drought emergency area in April, urged everyone to remain peaceful while the state government was *“doing everything we can”* to help those affected by the extreme weather.

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