



Securing Instream Flows Necessary for Klamath Ecosystem Restoration



Proposal Questions

Mission/History Of Organization

Founded in 2020, Ridges to Riffles Indigenous Conservation Group (R2R) is an Indigenous-led 501(c)3 non-profit organization with a mission to help Indigenous Peoples protect and restore the natural and cultural resources they rely on to maintain their identity and

JEDI Efforts and Impact

As an Indigenous-led organization working to protect and restore cultural and natural resources critical to Indigenous sovereignty, R2R is committed to environmental justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. This commitment is best reflected in our work

sovereignty. The team at R2R brings significant legal expertise, unparalleled connections and working relationships with Tribes in the region, the ability to bridge Indigenous knowledge with western scientific perspectives, and considerable communication and public outreach experience and capacity. We are dedicated to ensuring our work and projects are Indigenous-led, impactful, and sustainable. To date, R2R's work has primarily focused on serving Tribes along the Klamath River with the historic dam removal effort. R2R pursues initiatives that are crucial for restoring the health of our rivers, supporting Indigenous communities, and preserving cultural, spiritual, and ecological heritage for future generations.

to uplift and empower Indigenous voices and perspectives in hydropower reform, water flow management, and ecosystem restoration – all spaces where Indigenous peoples have historically been disenfranchised. Our staff bridge their education and experience in the western system with traditional Indigenous values and knowledge in a way that honors our connection to the land and waters, and promotes equity and environmental justice. Additionally, R2R prides itself on workplace policies that create an inclusive environment for marginalized communities. These policies include a flexible work schedule to accommodate families and practicing traditional ways of life (e.g. up to three weeks of paid time off for cultural/spiritual activities).

Final Success

Instream flows for the entire 257 miles of the Klamath River are secured, sustaining the ecological health and aquatic and terrestrial resources of the watershed and the people that depend on them.

Location Details

Our project will work to secure instream flows to restore the ecological health of the Klamath River. The Klamath River runs approximately 257 miles from southern Oregon through northern California, before emptying into the Pacific Ocean at the traditional Yurok village of Rek-woi. The river holds deep cultural and historical significance to the Indigenous peoples who have lived on and stewarded the river since time immemorial and was historically the third largest salmon-bearing river in lower continental United States. The river supports several species of salmon, as well as steelhead, eulachon, lamprey, and sturgeon – essential traditional resources that historically supported thriving Indigenous traditional subsistence and commercial fisheries. Unfortunately, with habitat destruction, insufficient water flows, and climate change, salmon populations are down to 1-3% of their historical run size. Coho populations are at risk of extinction and conservation actions have been necessary in recent years to protect lower numbers of Chinook salmon runs.

Dam removal is just the beginning. With the historic removal of four dams along the Klamath River in 2024, salmon and other river species now have access to nearly 400 miles of spawning and rearing habitat that have been blocked for nearly 100 years – a beacon of hope for the threatened and endangered salmon populations. Once in a lifetime/generation opportunity to recover. Numerous habitat restoration projects are underway on the Klamath River to improve spawning and rearing areas for salmon returning to the area for the first time in over 100 years. And now the next step in restoration of this ecosystem is to welcome the salmon home by ensuring adequate, clean, cold water to support their lifecycle.

This monumental restoration effort, however, is just the first step, of many, to restoring the Klamath River basin. Unfortunately, the Klamath River has been at the center of major water disputes between farmers, Tribes, conservation organizations, and government agencies. Climate change is exacerbating these conflicts that stem from competition over an ever-growing limited water supply for irrigation, fisheries, and environmental conservation. Yet, the river needs water. We cannot maximize the restoration benefits of the historic dam removal project without ensuring cold, clean water, adequate water for the river and its species.

Biodiversity in Project Area

Quantifying and securing the instream flows necessary to support Klamath River ecosystem recovery and ecological function within a changing climate and post-dam removal will be essential to enhancing ecosystem resilience in the Klamath Basin. Adequate water flows support habitat diversity, temperature regulation, and essential ecological processes – all necessary for aiding in climate change adaptation.

Low water flows can be disastrous for migrating adult salmon causing heat stress to salmon that makes them more susceptible to disease and pathogen, as seen in 2002, when over seventy thousand adult Chinook salmon died within the Yurok Reservation due to disease driven by excessive upstream irrigation water withdrawals and poor river water quality.

Since the 2002 fish kill, the largest fish kill in American history, climate change has continued to exacerbate the risks caused by inadequate river flows. Warming waters and lower flows are climate hazards that are expected to be more prevalent as the climate continues to change. Flows help moderate temperature extremes, preventing heat stress during hot periods. This temperature regulation is vital for the survival of salmon and numerous other Klamath River species. Securing water rights will help mitigate extreme weather events post-dam removal, ensuring climate resilience and conditions optimal for the long-term sustainability of salmon.

Water rights informed by science and secured by law will provide water flows to promote the overall health of the Klamath River ecosystem and will enhance the resilience of the river system in the face of climate change and other environmental stressors. Furthermore, by restoring the ecological health throughout the basin, instream water flows will enhance the benefits of

Expected Economic & Recreational Impact

Quantifying instream flows and securing water rights necessary to support and restore the Klamath River would have numerous economic and outdoor recreational impacts. Enough water in the river would move us back towards a natural hydrograph that supports wild salmon and other species – similar to the water flows the species evolved with and the river enjoyed pre-colonization. Adequate water flows would improve salmon habitat and decrease disease prevalence, both of which are essential as river temperatures increase with climate change. As salmon populations recover, there would be a revitalization of the traditional subsistence and commercial instream and offshore salmon fisheries, which is estimated to be worth over \$500 million in revenue if salmon populations are healthy. Sustainable fisheries lead to sustainable economic development through job creation from fish processing, distribution, and sales.

Clean, cool, and adequate water flows would also improve river health in a way that would improve recreational/sport fishing and river rafting and create potential new opportunities for eco-tourism for the Yurok and other Tribes along the river. An increase in direct tourism businesses would also generate additional revenue for local hotels, restaurants, and related industries. The Klamath River already offers recreational opportunities through whitewater rafting, steelhead and trout sport fishing, and camping. A restored Klamath River would only enhance and expand these opportunities.

other protected areas, such as the Klamath Wild and Scenic River designated areas.

**Strategy & Timeline
For Final Success**

The main project goal is securing water rights for the restoration of the Klamath River ecosystem, the species that call it home, and the people who depend on it all. R2R will continue both legal and scientific work to secure instream flows necessary to support the long-term sustainability of the Klamath River ecosystem and aquatic resources. Current water management by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) has provided water to upstream agriculture to the detriment of downstream fishery and river needs. Accordingly, only the bare minimum flows required by the Endangered Species Act to support Coho salmon are provided, the minimum to stave off extinction, but not to recover or restore the species' or other aquatic resources' resilience.

This project would support R2R working in tandem with the Yurok Tribe to secure instream flows for the ecological health of the Klamath River, moving back to a more natural hydrograph with which the river and species evolved. The Tribe had been working with the Biden Administration to forge a path forward with the federal government. With a new federal administration and the reconnection of the river completed in 2024, R2R is revising its strategy to accommodate the new political and ecological situation. A short-term plan to ensure adequate water is flowing in the river this summer 2025 is necessary to capture the restoration potential from the removal of the four dams in 2024. This short-term plan will support the long-term goal of asserting and quantifying the Yurok Tribe's federally reserved water rights down the road.

This grant will support the strategic development of the new strategy which will likely include:

- 1) Comprehensive instream flow studies on the Klamath River post-dam removal
- 2) Legal research and strategy development to explore the dedication of instream flows under California Law Section 1707
- 3) Legal research and strategy development to explore dedicating PacifiCorp's water rights from the former hydroelectric project to instream flows
- 4) Asserting and quantifying the Yurok Tribe's federally reserved water rights

We anticipate completing the instream flow study by December 2025, and legal research and strategy development of instream flows and PacifiCorp's water rights by June 2026. Asserting and quantifying the Yurok Tribe's federally

Key Decision Makers

The court of public opinion is important. It would be helpful for the business community to start a public education campaign that highlights the human right to clean water to drink, recreate, fish and gather on rivers.



reserved water rights is a long-term objective that will be supported by the activities listed above.

Elevate Voices

Since colonization, Tribes have largely been left out of decision-making which has impacted their traditional ways of life and legal rights. While dam removal marks an historic and important step in restoring the damage done through colonialism, the work to restore the Klamath River is just beginning.

Despite the Yurok Tribe having senior federally reserved water rights to support the Klamath River tribal fishery, those rights are unquantified and unprovided. Current water management by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) has favored upstream agriculture to the detriment of downstream fishery and river needs because these rights remain unquantified. This project engages directly with the Yurok Tribe and is, not only elevating their voices, but advocating for their rights. Resolving the Tribe's water rights, which courts have already held includes instream flows to support the Tribe's commercial, subsistence, and ceremonial fisheries, is key to securing instream water flows on the Klamath mainstem to support fish health, ecosystem health, and human communities' health.

Furthermore, throughout our work, R2R is establishing ourselves in critical decision-making spaces to ensure Indigenous-voices are uplifted and at the table. Led by government agencies and a colonized system, these spaces have historically disenfranchised Tribal input and are not respectful of Indigenous perspectives and values. Our staff bridge their education and experience in the Western system with traditional Indigenous values and knowledge to address water challenges exacerbated by climate change and an unsustainable extractive economy in a way that honors our connection to the land and waters, and promotes equity and environmental justice.

TCA Funding Plan

- Instream flows are increased on the Klamath River, supporting the restoration and recovery of salmon populations.
- Water management decisions on the Klamath River prioritize Tribal and ecosystem needs.
- Aquatic habitat diversity increases, providing cool water refugia for migrating salmon populations during extreme heat events.

It is important to note that the restoration of the Klamath River basin is a long-term outcome that goes well-beyond the scope of this project. It is possible some of the outcomes listed here could take

Measurable On-Ground Outcomes

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How long it took to complete application

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Confidential Items

We respectfully request that this proposal be kept confidential as securing water rights may involve litigation down the road.

Other Relevant Application Details

