



## Perspective

### *"Farewell, my farmer friend"*

***By Dan Keppen***

They say bad things come in threes, and that certainly seems to be the case for me this summer.

I've unexpectedly lost three friends in recent months, each of them from different eras of my five-plus decades on this planet. One was an old college sweetheart. One was a close high school friend. And the third was Donald Rohrbacker, a farmer who died in a tragic truck accident here in the Klamath Basin last month.

The youngest of the three was 55. The oldest was 60. Gone too soon!

I'd like to tell you about my farmer friend, who, from the time he was a child, loved to be in the field with his family. Donald Rohrbacker spent countless hours growing hay, grain, and potatoes. He knew the soil, understood what he was growing, and would gaze at the stars at night, reading weather patterns to best take care of his crops and his garden.

We talked a lot about water. Donald was one of those farmers who had his water supply curtailed in 2001, when the Klamath Irrigation Project was shut down for the first time in 95 years. The water that had proved to be a reliable supply for decades did not make it to his fields that year. Instead, non-elected government biologists decided that it needed to stay in Upper Klamath Lake for suckers or sent downstream for coho salmon in California.

Amazingly, the federal government repeated this same mistake over two decades later, in 2022.

The resulting impacts to the local community in both years were immediate and far-reaching. Thousands of acres of valuable farmland were left without water. In addition to harming those property owners, managers, and workers, the curtailment also imparted an economic "ripple" effect through the broader community. The wildlife benefits provided by those farms – particularly the food provided for area waterfowl – were also lost with the water. Domestic wells went dry and potable water had to be trucked in. Severe business losses echoed the hardship endured by Klamath Project farmers and farm employees.

My family moved with me to the Klamath Basin in late 2001, where I assumed my new job as executive director of the Klamath Water Users Association. We met many people in the community who were reeling from that first tough summer without water, including our new friend Donald and his wife Charlotte, who became one of my wife's closest friends. Our children grew up and went to school together.

Early on in my new job, I was contacted by a reporter from Oregon's largest newspaper who wanted to do a story showing people the "human side" of what was happening in the Klamath Basin following the 2022 water curtailment. I steered him towards Charlotte, since Donald was scrambling all over the region, desperately trying to sell hay to help make ends meet that year.

On the day I heard of Donald's tragic passing one month ago, I contacted that reporter, who is now a friend, and told him the grim news. He said that he remembered Charlotte well and was saddened to hear of her loss. He recalled that at the time he was interviewing her back in 2002, the Xbox had just come out. Charlotte told him that things were so tight, she didn't know if she could spend the money to buy one for her kids.

"I so wanted to buy them one, and probably should have," the reporter emailed to me. "In those days though, I thought I was a noble reporter and couldn't get involved in the story."

He wrapped up the story and his editors were so impressed they put it on the front page.

"Charlotte took a chance by letting me do the story at a tough time," he recalled. "Looking back, I feel like that was one of the most important stories I wrote in those years."

All of this has stirred up some interesting emotions in me in the past few weeks. The same environmental flow-centric "management" philosophy employed by the federal government in its Klamath Project operations (as well as California's Central Valley Project) that hurt Basin farmers in 2001 is still being used today. This, despite the fact that the National Academy of Sciences in two reports concluded that the science behind the decision to curtail farmers in 2001 was not scientifically justified. There is still no correlation between the health of the targeted fish species and the additional water that has been moved away from farms.

It's enough to make a person jaded, and I realized that I was becoming one of those people. In recent years, I've avoided social get-togethers where, inevitably, Donald or some other farmer would want to talk about water. After dealing with the issue all day, it was sometimes the last thing I wanted to talk about when I wasn't working.

And then I went to Donald's memorial service, where each of his children shared in letters what their father meant to them. They all talked about hard work, faith, honesty and caring for others.

Near the end of the service, the late Paul Harvey's "So God Made a Farmer" speech from 1978 was played against a backdrop of images honoring this farmer and his family working the ground. You may recall that this speech was made famous again about ten years ago when it was used in a Ram truck ad during the second half of the Super Bowl.

"And on the 8th day, God looked down on his planned paradise and said, 'I need a caretaker'", Harvey starts the speech off, rumbling in his hypnotic timbre. "So, God made a farmer."

People at the service were openly weeping when Harvey's speech ended with the final verse trailing off as a slide showed Donald and his family smiling at the camera from a grain field.

"God said I need somebody that would laugh and then sigh, and then reply, with smiling eyes, when his son says he wants to spend his life 'doing what dad does.' So, God made a farmer."

The effect of Harvey's speech juxtaposed with the slides of the Rohrbackers working their land was staggering to me and everyone present at the memorial service. I don't think there was a dry eye in the church. It was a wonderful tribute to a wonderful man, who produced good things for the rest of us to eat.

Donald was a great businessman that helped drive agriculture in our community, but he wasn't necessarily unique. There are plenty more like him in our Basin and in rural communities across the West.

It breaks my heart that these good people – the victims of over two-decades of litigation-driven water "management" – continue to have their very important livelihoods jeopardized every year when unelected government officials from faraway places are allowed to divert more water away from homes, communities, and farms.

Water management has become more of a competition among regulatory agencies over who can get the most water for one species or the other. For some regulators and others, “winning” has become the goal instead of actual success for species and communities. Food production suffers, communities and wildlife suffer, and the agricultural community feels targeted and devalued.

Producers struggle to explain to their children why raising food has become a thing to be ashamed of, and why the “downsizing” of the Klamath Project has become a trophy to be won by the opponents of irrigated agriculture in the Basin.

Adding insult to injury, the Klamath Project in recent years continues to be targeted and attacked in traditional and social media. Legions of reporters, documentarians, and bloggers continue to choose and perpetuate narratives that demonize farmers and ranchers who make a living in irrigated agriculture growing food for the Nation.

I wish some of those critics of Western irrigators could have been there at Donald’s memorial service. I wish more people in the media – like my reporter friend who talked his bosses into running a story about hurting farmers on the front page of his paper – would take the time to meet farmers and ranchers, visit their fields, and hear their stories. I wish more reporters and policy makers would spend some time talking to irrigation district managers, who in my mind, best understand the plumbing and the politics that drive irrigation deliveries in the West.

I regret that I’ve become so numb to it all myself. I had no excuse to shirk from hearing hard stories from producers who did not have the option of stepping away from their true-life experiences. These people – through no fault of their own – are having their way of life destroyed, and they have no choice but to deal with that pain. And our own government and litigious activists are the ones destroying them.

For those who live in rural communities that have been impacted by these government decisions, it’s almost unfathomable to understand. Many of the farmers and ranchers I work with feel like our government is about to throw away the best food production system in the world, at a time when our country and the world will need them more than ever.

We need a broader view of how water is used to meet environmental needs, one that considers state water laws, science, population growth, habitat needs and – especially - food production.

I’ve experienced too much personal loss this summer, and frankly, I’m hoping for a reprieve. Still, it’s easy to remember when three bad things happen, and overlook the fact that the good things come in abundance. I was lucky to have all three such amazing people in my life. And, Donald’s sad passing and his powerful memorial service were another reminder that we work for really good people.

We all need somebody “willing to get up before dawn, milk cows, work all day in the fields, milk cows again, eat supper and then go to town and stay past midnight at a meeting of the school board,” like Paul Harvey once said.

That’s why God made farmers.

**We will continue to keep you informed on this and other developments impacting Western irrigated agriculture.**

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