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# Columbia power-sharing treaty contains troubling inequity: Guest opinion



In renegotiating a Columbia River power-sharing agreement with Canada, the U.S. must deal with a troubling inequity, says Scott Corwin of the Public Power Council. *(Mike Zacchino/The Oregonian)*



By **Guest Columnist**

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on January 03, 2014 at 6:00 AM, updated January 31, 2014 at 12:32 PM

**By Scott Corwin**

As part of the constant landscape in our lives, the sheer volume and variation of the mighty Columbia River can be difficult to grasp. At its highest levels, you may gaze upon a mind-boggling nine million gallons passing by each second at The Dalles; at its lowest, the volume drops to a paltry 300,000 gallons per second. How this water is stored upstream and the timing of its release downstream are critical in protecting us from flooding, and in bringing us the clean hydropower used in our homes and businesses.

The Northwest region reached a major milestone in the history of the Columbia River Treaty with Canada recently. After three years of study and regional outreach, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Bonneville Power Administration sent to the U.S. State Department a carefully crafted recommendation to update this 50 year-old treaty. It includes a more equitable power-sharing proposal, along with modernized flood control and ecosystem sections that would work in conjunction with the many other laws and agreements in place for fish and wildlife and river operations.

What the State Department does next with this treaty could affect every citizen in the Northwest. There is a risk that the delicate balance achieved in the region could quickly be upset as other federal agencies weigh in.

The Columbia River Treaty has provided benefits to both countries since its inception. It led to new water storage in Canada and Montana and provided for a sharing of the benefits. Under the treaty, flood control arrangements are set to change in the future and need to be renegotiated. The treaty's power-sharing provisions, however, could extend permanently if there is not a serious effort put forth to change them. This is a concern to citizens of the Northwest because it will affect the rates paid for the electricity we rely on now in almost every moment of our modern lives. And, since clean hydropower can be ramped up or down quickly, another concern of treaty negotiations is hydro's availability for maintaining grid reliability and for balancing generation that varies throughout the day, like wind power.

The current electricity sharing arrangement with Canada is based on decades-old forecasts of how power generation would be developed in the region. A lot has changed since the 1960s. Without correction, what was intended to be a 50-50 sharing of the downstream power benefit will remain heavily lopsided; the U.S. will be sending to Canada about 10 times the amount of hydropower that we actually generate downstream. As many Northwest citizens struggle to pay rising power bills, this inequity begs for resolution.

Even back when President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Columbia River Treaty in 1961, and when President Lyndon Johnson visited the Northwest upon ratification in 1964, it was clear that the obligations would need to be renegotiated after 50 years. That time is now upon us. In 2014, citizens and businesses of the Northwest will be looking for our representatives at the table to move expeditiously toward a new agreement with our good ally to the north that truly reinstates the U.S. benefits of this historic treaty for decades to come.

*Scott Corwin is executive director of the Public Power Council, representing consumer-owned utilities in the Northwest that buy power and transmission from the federal Columbia River power system.*

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