



OregonLive.com

Everything Oregon

Revising the U.S.-Canada treaty for Columbia River use needs full public input now



By [The Oregonian Editorial Board](#)

[Follow on Twitter](#)

on April 05, 2013 at 4:29 PM, updated April 09, 2013 at 12:59 PM

Correction appended

The ultimate wakeup call to Portland that it was downriver of lethal forces came in 1948. That's when the Columbia River breached under flood conditions and wiped out the 40,000-person colony known as Vanport City, situated between downtown Portland and the river in what today is known as Delta Park. It was a Hurricane Katrina-like debacle, killing at least 15, displacing all residents and reducing homes to splintered matchboxes.

That it hasn't happened again owes to a deal between Canada and the United States.

But who's keeping track? That was a long time ago. Life as it is currently enjoyed in the Pacific Northwest -- with water-skiing and cheap electricity from hydropower firing up homes and commerce -- is in many ways allowed by a restrained, slack-water Columbia River. And the master blueprint of river operations is the [Columbia River Treaty](#), hammered out after Vanport.

That's about to change, however. Nobody knows quite how. And life here could change, too, or at least become more expensive, if the Pacific Northwest fails to negotiate wisely with Canada.

Treaty talk can bore all but the lawyers paid to get the *fine print** right. But make no mistake: Renewal, cancellation or revision of the treaty will affect everyone's wallet in Oregon, not to mention the safety of folks living anywhere near the river and its tributaries and all Western states drawing power from the Columbia basin.

*(*Very Important Fine Print: The treaty expires in 2024, but requests for revisions or renewal must be made 10 years in advance, which is now. By December of this year, Oregon and Northwest managers of the river - the Bonneville Power Administration and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, in consultation with 15 Northwest tribes and others -- must tell the U.S. Department of State what to do.)*

It's not as if there isn't much at stake. Or that life in greater Portland and southwest Washington hasn't changed since Vanport, when mention of a billion-dollar-a-year salmon recovery plan would surely have

induced eye-rolling. Back then, the aims of the treaty were simple: to ensure flood protection throughout the vast basin, an area the size of France, as well as calibrate water flows to ensure electricity generation.

Oregon and the Northwest got the better part of the deal. The U.S. paid a one-time fee of \$64 million to Canada to store water behind new dams at the Columbia's upper reaches, in British Columbia, affording us flood protection. U.S. utilities, meanwhile, were able to snap up for just \$254 million Canada's negotiated entitlement to half the value of downstream power benefits for the first 30 years.

To put into context just the \$64 million, consider that somewhere between \$1 billion and \$3 billion worth of property and infrastructure damage is avoided annually in the Northwest through flood protection warranted by the treaty.

But life has changed since 1961, when President Dwight Eisenhower and Canadian Prime Minister John Diefenbaker signed the treaty. British Columbia has developed, along with it an appetite for electricity from its dams. Residential, commercial, agricultural and maritime development hereabouts has exploded -- all of it bringing more pressure upon the river for electricity and flood protection but also for irrigation, commerce, recreation, fish and wildlife. Unknowns associated with rising global temperatures and increased competition for water complicate things. One treaty term already worth worrying about is the pay-as-we-go model, fair in its respect for market conditions but frightful if the value of stored water were to soar.

Meanwhile the great euphemism kicked around among folks involved in updating the treaty is "ecosystem benefits," which really means fish recovery programs, wildlife habitat restoration and recreation by people. It's expensive and will need to be weighed as new treaty terms are contemplated. Complications include a separate, long-standing U.S. treaty that ensures an adequate supply of Columbia River salmon to Northwest tribes.

Brig. Gen. Anthony Funkhouser oversees the Northwest division of the Army Corps of Engineers and joins new BPA Administrator William Drummond in heading up the effort to make recommendations to the State Department for an updated Columbia River Treaty. While Funkhouser claims he loses sleep over maintaining river flows that adequately serve so many purposes, he also is given to the wry quip that collapses history and its changing circumstances: "Truth has a date stamp on it."

Oregonians are urged to help define river truths at upcoming open houses sponsored by the BPA and the corps. The treaty and its complications will be laid bare April 16 in Portland and April 29 in Boardman. Meanwhile, it's worth taking a minute to reflect on how the river helps make life so rich here.

It wouldn't have been possible without a smart deal between the U.S. and Canada. And it won't be possible to ensure continued protections and economic security without a new deal.

The editorial reflects a correction published April 9, 2013: After the 1948 Vanport Flood, the Multnomah County coroner's office declared 15 people were killed. Others cite at least seven other Vanport residents as

missing. An editorial about flood control in the Columbia Basin, where federal officials estimate more than 50 were killed in the same spring flooding, overstated Vanport's portion of the dead.

© OregonLive.com. All rights reserved.

