



ENVIRONMENTALISTS SAY COLUMBIA RIVER TREATY NEEDS TO EXPAND TO INCLUDE 'ECOSYSTEM-BASED FUNCTIONS'

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Environmentalists are weighing in on the Columbia River Treaty, calling on the United States to prioritize salmon and river health as preparations are made to re-negotiate the treaty with Canada.

“The treaty’s benefits in hydropower and flood control for the United States and Canada came with wrenching costs for tribes and first nations, salmon and the river’s health,” said Rhett Lawrence, conservation director for the Sierra Club’s Oregon chapter. “A modernized treaty must help both nations jointly prepare the Columbia and Snake watersheds with resilience and health for the climate change that is upon us.”

The Sierra Club recently sent a letter to the federal agencies that are preparing negotiating positions for the United States. Those positions must be in place by the end of this year so that the U.S. State Department can negotiate with Canada over the next decade for a new treaty that would take effect in 2024.

The current treaty, ratified in 1964, addressed only two issues: flood control and hydropower generation. The Sierra Club and other environmental groups contend the treaty should be expanded to include a third purpose called “ecosystem-based functions,” or restoring salmon runs and river health.

The Sierra Club’s letter comes on the heels of power utilities across the Pacific Northwest taking the exact opposite position.

An alliance of 70 utilities representing 6.4 million power customers contends that expanding the scope of the treaty to include ecosystem-based functions is unacceptable, particularly because draft negotiating positions do not recognize billions of dollars that have been spent over decades to mitigate damages caused by construction of federal hydropower dams.

The utility alliance also maintains that there are multiple mitigation plans already in place because of laws such as the Endangered Species Act.

“From our view, re-negotiating an existing international treaty is not the place to conciliate specific United States ecosystem issues, especially considering all of the current nontreaty environmental efforts ... and the multiple fish and wildlife recovery plans we have in place today,” wrote Ken Sugden, general manager of Flathead Electric Cooperative, in a letter sent to Montana’s congressional delegation. The co-op estimates that one-third of bills paid by rate payers already go toward fish and wildlife mitigation programs overseen by the Bonneville Power Administration.

(See CBB, August 9, 2013, “Utilities Group Expresses Concern With Columbia River Treaty Draft Recommendations, Process, Scope” <http://www.cbbulletin.com/427854.aspx>)

The Sierra Club, however, is calling for a series of fundamental changes to the treaty.

It wants ecosystem-based functions to become a co-equal purpose with power production and flood control; better fish passage at dams; the promotion of energy efficiency and renewable energy sources; more flexible and improved flood control operations and the addition of another federal agency, such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, to focus on ecosystem matters in preparing for treaty negotiations.

Climate change also is in the mix.

“The United States and Canada should coordinate to make climate change science, planning, management and response an explicit component of treaty implementation,” the Sierra Club states.

“To protect already struggling salmon in the face of climate change, more water should not be diverted from the Columbia River for consumptive uses until the needs of salmon and a healthy river are met.”

While the utilities say the draft recommendations have already gone too far in expanding the scope of the treaty to include environmental matters, the Sierra Club says they have not gone far enough.

“The working draft as currently written will not adequately modernize the Columbia River Treaty for our present and future realities and challenges,” said John Osborn, a Spokane physician who coordinates the Sierra Club’s Columbia River Project. “We are requesting substantial changes in the United States position on the future of the Columbia River.”

For more information go to the U.S. Entity cover letter:

<http://www.crt2014-2024review.gov/Files/US%20Entity%20cover%20letter,%20June%2027%202013.pdf>

The CRTR working draft recommendation:

<http://www.crt2014-2024review.gov/Files/CRTR%20working%20draft%20recommendation,%20June%2027%202013.pdf>

The treaty development schedule can be found at:

<http://www.crt2014-2024review.gov/Files/Treaty%20Review%20process%20timeline,%20Final,%20June%2025%202013.pdf>

