

COLUMBIA: All eyes are on negotiators from U.S., Canada

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than 15 years of water left in the five wells that he uses to irrigate his wheat, alfalfa, timothy hay, potatoes, sunflowers and canola.

He hopes to receive Columbia River water to replace his wells within the next 10 years.

If not, his choices are limited. He could switch to dryland farming, but that would mean a wheat yield of 30 to 32 bushels per acre compared to the 100 bushels per acre he averages under irrigation.

The stakes are enormous. The Columbia Basin includes 15.4 million acres of farmland in Oregon and Washington that produce crops worth \$7.8 billion a year. The highest-producing farmland, nearly 1.7 million acres, is irrigated, according to the USDA Census of Agriculture.

Kagele and other farmers want to replace the declining groundwater with Columbia River water under the federal Columbia Basin Project. Congress in 1933 authorized 1.03 million acres of farmland in the basin to receive Columbia River water under the project. Currently only about 671,000 acres receive the river water, while the remainder depend on wells that are now declining.

“If we ever want to get a little more water out to the farmers and shut the rest of these wells off ... the treaty has to make room for that,” Kagele said.

U.S. priorities

Work on updating the treaty has been underway for years. The Bonneville Power Administration and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers made regional recommendations in 2013 that were developed through consultations with federal agencies, states, Native American tribes and other stakeholders.

“We are not in a position to go into great detail on the agenda or discuss U.S. negotiating positions at this time, but we continue to use the 2013 Regional Recommendation as a guide,” said a U.S. Department of State representative for Western Hemisphere Affairs, who spoke on background.

She said key U.S. objectives include:

- Continued, careful management of flood risk.
- Ensuring a reliable and economical power supply.
- Better addressing the ecosystem.

Maintaining navigation, recreation, irrigation, and municipal and industrial use of the river is vital to the economy of the region, she said.

Three dams in British Columbia and one dam in Montana were built as a result of the treaty, and 24 others fall under the treaty’s purview. Other dams along the Columbia and Snake rivers are operated by the U.S. Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Reclamation and individual utilities and utility districts.

“There are no current discussions regarding the number of dams as part of the modernization of the treaty regime,” the spokeswoman said.

Canada priorities

The treaty has provided “extensive” benefits to both Canada and the U.S., and is an example of the strong bilateral cooperation between the two countries, said John Babcock, spokesman for Global Affairs Canada, which manages Canada’s diplomatic relations and promotes international trade.

“Canada is committed to working with the U.S. to modernize the agreement and to ensuring that it continues to provide shared, equitable benefits to both countries,” Babcock said. “Canada has been working closely with First Nations and basin communities to identify opportunities to further improve environmental conditions in the Canadian portion of the basin.”

Irrigation

Tom Tebb, director of the Office of the Columbia River for the Washington State Department of Ecology, estimates tens of thousands of farmers and others use the Columbia River.

More than 1 million acres of farms and scores of communities take water directly from the river, Tebb said.

Cities that get their drinking water from the river include Revelstoke, B.C.; Wenatchee, Wash.; the Tri-Cities; The Dalles; Vancouver, Wash., and Portland.

Water for the entire Columbia

Columbia River Treaty dams*

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|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Mica | 15. Brownlee |
| 2. Duncan | 16. Bonneville |
| 3. Corra Linn | 17. The Dalles |
| 4. Arrow | 18. John Day |
| 5. Box Canyon | 19. McNary |
| 6. Libby | 20. Ice Harbor |
| 7. Hungry Horse | 21. Priest Rapids |
| 8. Kerr | 22. Wanapum |
| 9. Thompson Falls | 23. Rock Island |
| 10. Noxon Rapids | 24. Rocky Reach |
| 11. Cabinet Gorge | 25. Chelan |
| 12. Albeni Falls | 26. Wells |
| 13. Post Falls | 27. Chief Joseph |
| 14. Oxbow | 28. Grand Coulee |



Derek Sandison



Mike Schwisow



Tom Tebb



Kristin Meira

Flood control

The treaty was originally negotiated after a spring flood in 1948 caused major damage along the river from Trail, B.C., to Vancouver. Vanport, one of the largest cities in Oregon at the time, was destroyed. The flood displaced 30,000 people from their homes and caused more than 50 deaths, according to the Army Corps and Bonneville Power Administration. The magnitude of the flood added a sense of urgency to the international discussions of flood control between the U.S. and Canada.

Under the treaty, the U.S. depends on 8.95 million acre-feet of assured water storage behind Canadian dams to reduce spring runoff, said Derek Sandison, director of the Washington State Department of Agriculture and former director of Ecology’s Columbia River office.

That guarantee goes away in 2024.

A new “called upon and effective use” provision is scheduled to kick in, meaning that before asking Canadian dam managers to store runoff, the U.S. would need to make use of all its dams and reservoirs for flood control. That means reducing the water level in U.S. reservoirs in anticipation of storing the spring runoff, Sandison said.

“It’s that whole notion of really drawing down our reservoirs and hoping we get the March (runoff) forecast right,” he said. If they’re wrong, the river flow could be too low to meet all water users’ needs.

“Predictability in river operations is very important,” he said. “The more we can get back to a predictable arrangement, the better for water supply.”

If and when the U.S. asks for Canadian dams to store spring runoff, the U.S. would also have to pay, Sandison said. At this point in the negotiations it’s not clear how such payments would be structured.

There must also at least be a pathway to use additional water supplies in non-treaty reservoirs that have been built by Canada beyond the current terms of the treaty, Sandison said.

Oregon and Washington officials think such access is possi-

ble, but know it won’t be free, he said.

“Certainly we hold out hope that could be possible,” he said.

Electricity

The Columbia is the largest hydropower-producing river in North America.

According to the Corps and Bonneville Power Administration, treaty negotiators in the early 1960s agreed that the U.S. and Canada would equally share downstream power benefits, the increased power generation in the U.S. allowed by the additional storage capacity of the three dams built in Canada. The benefits are calculated annually according to a complex formula that uses the theoretical value placed on the additional generation of electricity made possible by the Canadian dams. Canada’s half is called the Canadian Entitlement.

The Corps and BPA also believe the Canadian Entitlement has more than repaid Canada’s cost of building the three dams, they said in their 2013 review of the treaty.

Ecosystem

Native American tribes and public comments have demanded more attention to the environment, said Tebb, of Ecology’s Office of the Columbia River.

“We value aquatic resources and the salmon as much as we value the farmer and the agricultural economy and value our farmers bring to market,” Tebb said.

Tebb pointed to a U.S. district court order in 2016 to study new alternatives to protect endangered fish and address ongoing flow issues in various tributaries.

“Everyone wants a piece of this river, and we’re just going to have to manage it wisely and be thoughtful to all of those interests,” he said.

It’s not yet clear how a focus on the ecosystem would affect irrigation, navigation or recreation, Sandison said.

Environmental advocates want water flows increased during salmon migration periods. They’re also worried about water quality during the summer when the flow is lowest.

Columbia River Facts

- Average annual flow at Astoria: 198 million acre-feet (the fourth largest river in North America by volume).
- Length: 1,243 miles long (12th longest in U.S.)
- Source: Columbia Lake, British Columbia.
- Number of tributaries: More than 60.
- Total water taken out for municipal use: 433,418 acre-feet per year in Washington state.
- Total water taken out for agriculture: 10.1 million acre-feet per year.
- Amount of power produced: Combined, all of the dams on the river and its tributaries generated 29 gigawatts, about 44 percent of the total hydroelectric generation in U.S. in 2012.
- Total number of known fish and wildlife species: 609.
- Number of endangered fish species: 13.

Impacts on agriculture depend on how much water is pushed out and when, Sandison said.

“If you push out water in the spring, it’s not there in the summer or early fall,” when it’s needed for irrigation, he said.

The future

Kagele, the Odessa farmer, took his first look June 20 at construction work on the first of at least eight pump stations designed to help farmers draw Columbia River water from the East Low Canal. The EL 47.5 pump station is slated to start operations in the spring of 2020 and will serve five farms.

Kagele has high hopes for the completion of the Columbia Basin Project and, as the Columbia River Treaty is renegotiated, the continued availability of the river’s water for hundreds and hundreds of other irrigators like him across Washington state, Oregon and Idaho.

But for him, the Columbia River isn’t just about water. It’s also about his family.

“I expect to be long gone and six feet under by the time this is all worked out, truthfully,” said Kagele, who plans to transfer the farm to his son in the next few years. “As long as we’re working towards that goal, I’m a happy person. Doing some good for my grandchildren and their children — my goal has been met.”