

# New Columbia River treaty on the horizon

## Canada, US one step closer to modernizing 60-year-old treaty

**KATE AYERS**

VICTORIA – Six years and 19 rounds of negotiations resulted in an agreement in principle (AIP) July 11 to modernize the 60-year-old Columbia River Treaty.

The document identifies the major elements of a new treaty between Canada and the US, setting the stage for final negotiations.

“We started negotiations with the US in May 2018. ... Before then, we had a lot of public engagement in the basin, including with the agricultural sector and local producers,” BC’s lead negotiator Kathy Eichenberger told *Country Life in BC*.

Since 2012, the province has consulted First Nations, local governments and residents, to learn about concerns with the current treaty, set to expire this fall, and how it could be improved.

Agricultural producers highlighted the losses sustained when 60,000 hectares of valley-bottom land were flooded following the construction of treaty dams, notably the prime ranch land inundated with the creation of Lake Kootanusa in 1975 by Washington’s Libby Dam. In all, approximately 2,300 people were displaced.

“At the beginning, the province did try to engage with agriculture, but I think it fell off the rails as farmers are so busy,” says Kootenay and Boundary Farm Advisors coordinator Rachael Roussin.

In June 2021, the province released a document of over 40 programs and initiatives that address the agricultural interests in the Columbia Basin and Kootenay region.

A year later, in February 2022, the province released a Columbia River Treaty agriculture discussion paper that noted farmers face challenges accessing those supports.

While further public engagement will take place before release of the new treaty document, the agriculture sector has been largely quiet about potential impacts and supports needed in the final treaty.

“We have launched a couple of initiatives trying to see where there are gaps to support the agricultural sector in the basin; we frankly didn’t get much uptake,” Eichenberger says. “We’ve never been really successful in getting a lot of input or feedback.”

The BC Fruit Growers Association, which has long

advocated for greater consideration of the impacts to BC’s fruit and vegetable sector as a result of the greater irrigation the treaty made possible in eastern Washington, said it no longer has a position.

Eichenberger hopes the BC negotiation team can foreground supports the sector needs, above and beyond what the province and BC Ministry of Agriculture and others are already doing.

### Flood control

In place since 1964 and set to expire in September, the Columbia River Treaty has contributed to flood control and energy production in Canada and the US.

The modernized treaty will provide some level of assured pre-planned flood control

and continued cooperation on hydropower for the Columbia River. BC will have more control over treaty flows and reservoir levels for BC’s purposes to reduce local impacts.

As a result, the treaty requires Canada and the US to annually coordinate 15.5 million acre feet of water storage behind Canadian treaty dams to optimize hydropower generation in both countries (1.23 million litres of water will cover an acre to a depth of one foot).

Domestic flexibility will be used to address impacts resulting from the treaty to ecosystems, Indigenous cultural values and socio-economic interests.

“We don’t see that any potential changes in the reservoir operations will

affect agriculture in any way,” Eichenberger says. “But we are again, outside of the treaty, wanting to hear more from the local producers on what support they need and how, between the different agencies, we can coordinate greater support delivery for the producers here.”

More additions to the AIP include Canadian entitlement for downstream benefits.

Preplanned flood control will see Canada provide the US with 3.6 million acre feet of preplanned flood-risk management, down from 8.95 million acre feet in time for spring 2025.

Canada will receive compensation for flood risk management through 2044 to the tune of US\$37.6 million annually, indexed to inflation. The US will provide another

US\$16.6 million annually for additional benefits it receives from Canadian reservoir operations.

In addition, the US and Canada will form an Indigenous-led advisory body and cross-border working group to provide recommendations on how treaty and hydrosystem operations can better support ecosystem needs and Indigenous cultural values.

The treaty’s effective date is still to be determined, but both countries have committed to getting it in place as soon as possible. In the coming weeks, the governments of Canada and BC will share more detailed information about the AIP and future engagement with basin communities.



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