

ReFRESH: Canada-US Transboundary Water Governance and the Columbia River Treaty Renegotiations

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Challenge

The Columbia Basin is at a crossroads due to the potential termination of the 1964 Canada-US Columbia River Treaty. Once widely recognized as a world-leading, innovative approach to transboundary water governance, concerns are mounting about whether the renegotiation process can address the numerous issues that have emerged since 1964 and regain the Columbia River's status as a recognized global leader in transboundary governance.

In preparation for this milestone, Canadian and US agencies have begun to address what Kenney (2009) calls the "omissions of the past": ecosystem integrity, cultural flows, indigenous values, and climate change (see Province of BC, 2013; U.S. Entity, 2013).

The small body of scholarship that has characterized Canada-US transboundary water governance has primarily highlighted challenges, such as the limited power of local actors (Norman and Bakker, 2009) and the lack of resilience planning (Cosens and Williams, 2012). Questions remain about how to apply the emerging research on innovative governance approaches and water security, in light of these challenges. That is, how can governance innovation be supported in Canada's transboundary basins, specifically in the Columbia given the critical juncture poised by the Treaty renegotiation process?

Project

This project will examine the existing Columbia River governance arrangements in detail and determine how best to apply the leading research on water governance innovation and water security for climate change. This project will engage with leading practitioners to generate insights about opportunities, barriers and strategies for innovation in transboundary governance.

The research team will examine the constellation of actors and institutions that comprise the governance of Canada-US transboundary waters and to assess the potential for governance innovation in the face of global and local water security. Although the case will focus on the Columbia, the engagement process, training opportunities and research lessons will be developed in a framework to enable policy transfer and exchange lessons across the country and internationally, and particularly in basins where new institutional arrangements are actively being debated (e.g. BC-Alaska Stikine negotiations), or longstanding ones that are adapting to changing conditions and threats (e.g. Great Lakes).

Outputs

Anticipated Outputs include:

- Formation of advisory committee to ensure the project goals are aligned with on-the-ground realities for local interests and decision makers.
- Realist reviews (a modified systematic review), with one focusing on governance innovation in transboundary watersheds and the other on implications of water security risks and climate change for transboundary governance.
- Workshop of scholars and policy practitioners will be designed to test and refine study conclusions. The purpose will be to build a shared understanding of opportunities and barriers to re-establish Canada's global leadership in transboundary water governance innovation in the Columbia.
- Knowledge mobilization activities will be central throughout the project and will be shaped by the advisory committee.
- Research findings to be disseminated through peer reviewed publications, webinars, thesis and conference participation.

Outcomes

The project aims to achieve the following outcomes:

- Improved understanding of how to apply new and leading knowledge to the governance of the Columbia River Basin and will aim to inform the current negotiation process.
- Strengthened relationships with partners by developing new relationships between scholars and Canada's transboundary water institutions.
- Increased ability to adapt to changes through building knowledge about water governance innovation and climate change adaptation options.
- Increased knowledge and opportunity to build on existing knowledge to understand the applicability of current research for one of Canada's transboundary water governance approaches.

Research Team and Partners:

Research Team:

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Partners:

Oliver Brandes, POLIS Project on Ecological Governance, University of Victoria

Highly Qualified Personnel (HQP):

TBD