The Power of Water
Renegotiating the Columbia River Treaty

Emma S. Norman, PhD
Dept. of Social Sciences, Environmental and Energy Policy Program

The Columbia River is home to North America’s largest transboundary hydropower project, one that generates millions in revenue each year and holds tremendous social and environmental significance. The mighty river was once home to one of the largest salmon runs in the world and was a symbol of grandeur and wildness. Indigenous People relied on the river for sustenance for thousands of years -- and Celilo Falls was once home to the oldest continually inhabited settlements in North America.

However, post-World War II, hydroelectric power was seen as a way to create new jobs and to meet growing energy needs. Under this premise, the governments of Canada and the United States made a decision to value ‘power’ over ‘fish’ with the signing of the Columbia River Treaty in 1964. Now, forty years later, the terms of the Treaty are up for renegotiation. Supporters argue that the Treaty has done precisely what it was originally set out to do: construct dams, generate power, and control floods. Critics argue that the absence of environmental and social provisions is in need of redress, notably lack of: environmental protection (particularly salmon protection), equitable cost sharing, community decision-making, and Indigenous rights.

This presentation explores how the renegotiation of the Columbia River Treaty speaks to wider trends in environmental and transboundary water governance. In particular 1) inclusion of Indigenous treaty rights, land claims, and self-governance 2) consideration of environmental provisions; 3) aligning governance mechanisms with increased public expectations for public involvement and regional representation. The presentation is timely, as 2013 was the United Nations International Year of Water Cooperation and 2014 is the United Nations Year of Water and Energy.