Governance in the United States Columbia River Basin: An Historical Analysis

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Sponsor
Hatfield School of Government, Division of Public Administration

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Date of Award
1-1-2011

Document Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Public Affairs and Policy

Department
Public Administration

Physical Description
1 online resource (viii, 565 p.) : 2 maps (some col.)

Subjects
Columbia River Watershed -- Politics and government -- History, Columbia River -- Power utilization -- Politics and government -- History

DOI
10.15760/etd.48

Abstract
Political and institutional leaders in the Pacific Northwest have struggled over how best to manage Columbia River Basin development and the implications of that development since the early 1900s. Their efforts present a seeming paradox: whereas prominent political and institutional leaders believed some form of regional governance system was necessary, those same leaders refused to establish systems with the decision-making authority necessary to resolve the issues that led them to create the systems in the first place. This study examines the historical record at the institutional level to determine why. This study found twenty-six governance systems proposed since 1933 of which eleven were enacted. Prior to then, a private market oriented system dominated, assisted by supportive federal agencies with jurisdictional authority over individual resource domains. Since 1934, the Basin has experienced an unbroken succession of one governance system or another, at times with multiple systems operating in parallel. This study categorized each system under one of four governance models, distinguished by the locus of decision-making. Transitions from one system to another came about through evolutionary processes or the emergence of circumstances that allowed for dramatic shifts between models. Evolutionary change within models resulted in collapse due to internal structural weaknesses or shifts to improved systems through mutual agreement. Dramatic change between models occurred when a "critical situation" appeared that called existing governance systems into question and allowed new systems to rise in their place. Four such critical situations occurred between 1929 and 1999. These were the onset of the Depression, the end of World War II, the hydrothermal crisis of the mid 1970s, and the first ESA listings of salmon in 1991. This study concluded that the conflicting interests of powerful institutions only partially explain the Basin's governance paradox. Differing worldviews and senses of institutional culture, identity, and values aggravated the conflict over competing interests by shaping the perspectives each party held over the goals and motivations of the others. This study...
recommends further research to determine how institutional values translate into individual level decision-making. It offers a theoretical framework under which such research might proceed.

**Description**
Hatfield School of Government. Division of Public Administration

**Persistent Identifier**
http://archives.pdx.edu/ds/pu/6939

**Recommended Citation**
https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open_access_etds/48
10.15760/etd.48