

Water Resources of the Columbia River Basin

THE debate on the International Rivers Improvement Act, which was passed by the Canadian House of Commons on June 14, 1955, has served to emphasize the importance of water resources in Canada, particularly the tremendous hydro-electric potential of the Columbia River Basin in British Columbia. The Columbia River is one of the great rivers of the North American continent. It is exceeded only by the Mississippi and St. Lawrence Rivers in the amount of water it discharges annually into the ocean. It has been estimated provisionally that the water resources of this basin when fully developed will warrant an installed capacity of as much as 35 million kilowatts or approximately 30 per cent of the total water power potential of Canada and the United States combined.

Shared by Canada and the U.S.

The resources of the Columbia River Basin are shared by Canada and the United States. Of the total area of 259,000 square miles drained by the Columbia River, 39,700 square miles, roughly 15 per cent, are in Canada and more than 25 per cent of the total annual run-off originates in Canada. Because of the international character of the Columbia River and its principal tributary, the Kootenay, a number of problems have arisen and will continue to arise between Canada and the United States in the exploitation of these waters for industrial, agricultural and other uses. The Canadian Government policy concerning the development of these water resources was set forth in an address by the Minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources, Mr. Jean Lesage, before the Pacific Northwest Association in Vancouver, B.C., on May 9, 1955. He said, in part:

The Pacific Northwest has an important common feature: its economic development largely depends upon water resources and the Columbia River System is its main source of water. However, this vast region is far from being homogeneous. It is composed of several political units separated by an international boundary whose political and economic significance cannot be ignored. The region is constituted of several distinct areas which differ both in geography and in natural resources. The distinction between upstream and downstream areas, for instance, corresponds to a basic economic reality.

Up to now, these differences have not generated any substantial diversity of interests within the region. The various areas of the Pacific Northwest have grown along parallel lines, more or less independently of each other. They were in a position to exploit their respective resources and to attract new industries through their own initiative because their energy requirements could be met by developing available heads in the Columbia River System to provide on-site power. This first phase of development did not call for joint enterprise nor create a conflict of interests, with the result that the different parts of the Pacific Northwest appeared unified through complementary relationships.

As the region approaches the end of its first stage of development, it becomes evident that the unity of interest is more apparent than real. As it moves