

The Northwest Power Plan

What is the Power Plan?

The Regional Electric Power and Conservation Plan, or simply the Power Plan, is a crucial planning document for the Northwest electric system. First released in 1983, the Power Plan became a primary source of information on energy demand, supply, and resources.

The Northwest region's approach to energy planning changed when Congress passed the Pacific Northwest Electric Power Planning and Conservation Act in 1980. Before that, the region suffered from a disjointed approach to energy system development that produced significant economic and environmental impacts. Thus, the Northwest Power and Conservation Council (the Council) was formed and became responsible for sufficient electricity planning and environmental conservation.

For the past four decades the Council, has developed a 20-year power plan, which it updates every five years, and aims to ensure an adequate, efficient, economical, and reliable power supply for the region while mitigating adverse effects on fish and wildlife.



The Pacific Northwest Electric Power Planning and Conservation Act - or the Northwest Power Act - was established on December 5, 1980, when Congress gave the four states of Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington power to form the Northwest Power and Conservation Council. Before the Act, the region experienced three electricity crises. Two of them were associated with forecasts of electricity needs, which drove a push for new power plants to meet the region's energy needs from population and economic growth. However, the forecasts were tremendously overestimated and led to overinvestment in new nuclear and coal plants, many of which were not completed at a cost of billions of dollars, raising customer bills for decades to come. The third crisis arose around the salmon population decline in the Snake River, as a result of completion of the last major federal hydroelectric dams. The establishment of the Northwest Power Act aimed to troubleshoot the controversy between power demand, accessible power supply, and environmental protection.



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Why Is Power Planning Important?

In the first Power Plan, the Council championed the early development of energy conservation and has played an active role in scaling it up over four decades. As coal plants retire, and the region prioritizes clean energy and decarbonization, the need for long-term planning and regional coordination is just as strong today as it was when the NW Power Act was enacted. The Northwest Power Act gives priority to conservation (energy efficiency) ahead of all other resources so that the economic and environmental risk of existing and new power plants can be reduced. Energy demand and supply resources change over time and need to be effectively balanced so that homes and businesses have the affordable power they need when they need it. It's important to evaluate what kind of resources are used to generate electricity, to balance environmental, cultural and community impacts, particularly in the era of climate change.

- The Power Plan guides the Bonneville Power Administration's decisions over the resources that should be used to meet the electricity needs of customer utilities.
- The region's utilities, regulatory commissions, and policy-makers can use the Power Plan as a stand-alone report with key findings about the electricity system and trends going forward.

The Northwest Power and Conservation Council was established as an interstate agency in 1981. Since then, the agency has produced seven regional Power Plans and complementary Fish and Wildlife programs. The Council develops the Power Plan and then monitors its implementation. There are eight members of the Council, two appointed by the Governors from each Northwest state. While the Power Plan provides supply and demand analysis for the entire region, it also sets specific targets and guidance for the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA).



Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) is a self-funded federal agency formed in 1937 to utilize and distribute power coming from 31 federal hydroelectric dams, several private power plants, and one nuclear power plant. BPA supplies approximately one-third of the Pacific Northwest's electricity and owns the largest transmission grid in the Northwest. BPA's primary customers are public utilities across the Northwest.



The 2021 Power Plan will be critical to point the region in the right direction, and to emphasize the Council's role working with states as they seek to decarbonize, address resource adequacy and transmission needs, and provide a more equitable distribution of benefits from the energy system. Our experience over the decades with energy efficiency and clean energy has shown that we have the greatest impact when we act as a region with shared goals.

The draft of the 2021 Plan is coming in August. Once it is released, there will be 60 days for public comment, which can be submitted in writing or verbally at one of the public hearings. Everybody's voice counts when it comes to regional energy planning. NWECC will be preparing talking points and hosting webinars to help inform our membership and allies on the details of the draft 2021 Power Plan.

