This dissertation argues that Columbia River management and politics have been shaped ever since the New Deal by a conception of the Columbia River as the defining feature of the Pacific Northwest region. The study examines how that conception was developed, how it became institutionalized within and by a government agency, the Bonneville Power Administration, and what its impacts have been. Drawing on a mix of archival materials, published and unpublished secondary accounts, interviews, and the author's experience working on Columbia River policy, the dissertation shows that the definition of a Columbia River-centered Pacific Northwest was laid out in 1935 by the four-state Pacific Northwest Regional Planning Commission, influenced in part by a "regionalist" ideal of shared social and environmental well-being. It was institutionalized but narrowed into the federal BPA in 1937. Soon, a three-and-a-half-state Pacific Northwest consisting of Washington, Oregon, Idaho and western Montana was being knit together by shared transmission lines and uniformly inexpensive power rates, and by a federal power agency that positioned itself as a regional Chamber of Commerce. Since the Second World War, the Columbia River-centered Pacific Northwest has shaped its collective economic fortunes around exclusive regional access to BPA-provided Columbia River hydropower. But geographically distributed wealth did not end political conflict; private power companies, state governors, Native American tribes, and fish and wildlife agencies have had to be accommodated with distributions of BPA power and money. BPA-centered Columbia River management has through political conflict gradually expanded to serve wider interests, moving closer to the New Deal regionalist ideal. Yet in controversial decisions since 2000, Columbia River managers have chosen to risk wild salmon rather than breach federal Columbia River hydropower dams or allow Pacific Northwest power costs to escalate. They have done this because they have prioritized the most fundamental, and the most regional, Columbia River benefit of all: broadly shared inexpensive power. Understanding the opportunities and constraints of BPA-centered regional Columbia River management is essential in order to meet upcoming Columbia River policy challenges.