



# Fostering Collaborative Solutions to Environmental Conflicts on the Ground: The William D. Ruckelshaus Center

As the field of public policy conflict resolution or collaborative governance has developed in the United States over the past four decades, programs and centers have been established at universities across the country that are dedicated to this approach to addressing policy challenges. One such example is the William D. Ruckelshaus Center.

The Center is named for its founder and Advisory Board Chair, William D. (Bill) Ruckelshaus, and is devoted to his approach to collaborative problem solving. Bill Ruckelshaus was the first and fifth head of the US Environmental Protection Agency, earned an international reputation for integrity and courage for his role in the Watergate scandal, and has been a leader of many collaborative policy initiatives over the year, such as the US Oceans Commission, President's Council on Sustainable Development, US/Canada Salmon Treaty, Shared Strategy for Salmon Recovery in Puget Sound, Puget Sound Partnership, and most recently, Washington State Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Ocean Acidification.

The Center is a joint effort of Washington's two research universities — the University of Washington (UW) and Washington State University (WSU) — and was developed in response to requests from community leaders. Building on the unique strengths of the two institutions, the Center is dedicated to assisting public, private, tribal, non-profit and other community leaders in their efforts to build consensus and resolve conflicts around difficult public policy issues.

The Center responds where involvement by the universities adds value and makes the prospects for a successful outcome more likely. This can be because the universities are seen by the involved parties as an acceptable convener where others are not; due to subject matter expertise; in situations where university science is trusted as more neutral and objective than other sources; and, for the ability to include case studies, students and learning. The Center's services are drawn

from the "toolkit" of conflict resolution/collaborative policy making:

- Providing a neutral and safe forum for parties to define and resolve issues.
- Conducting situation assessments to determine the most productive means of addressing the issues.
- Providing facilitation, mediation, dispute resolution, project management, strategic planning and other services that help parties reach consensus and resolve issues.
- Performing applied research and fact-finding.
- Providing structure and ready access to existing information important in helping parties work together to resolve complex policy issues.
- Providing knowledge, training and infrastructure development to improve the collaborative problem-solving capacity of the parties and institutions.
- Hosting or co-hosting policy discussions.

## Project Success

The Center has been involved in a wide range of projects designed to address significant policy challenges in the State of Washington and the Pacific Northwest on issues ranging from natural resource management, economic development, land use, health care, agriculture, municipal governance, and others. Recent examples of environmental collaborations include:

- *Flood reduction program in the Chehalis Basin (southwest Washington)*. The Center has been helping a Governor-appointed work group, and others in the Basin, break through many decades of stalemate. For the first time in over a century of catastrophic floods and decades of study, there is broad agreement for the next steps to reduce flood damage, enhance salmon populations, and support the prosperity of communities in the Basin. This is an issue that has resisted resolution since the 1940s.

- *Columbia River salmon assessment.* The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) has asked the Ruckelshaus Center—in partnership with the Oregon Consensus Program at Portland State University—to conduct a situation assessment of regional views about salmon and steelhead recovery in the Columbia River Basin over the long term. The centers have assembled an assessment team featuring practitioner and academic expertise from Washington, Oregon and Idaho.
- *Columbia River Gorge Commission.* The Columbia River Gorge is a recognized international treasure. The Center and Oregon Consensus have been helping the Columbia River Gorge Commission (a unique interstate compact agency authorized by Congress and Washington and Oregon legislatures) identify common ground and increase their capacity to work collaboratively on resource protection and community development. The centers' assessment, released in 2012, has been used by the Commission and its staff as a blueprint for strengthening collaboration. Now it is prioritizing and tackling the issues identified.
- *Spokane River Toxics Task Force.* This task force, including federal, state, and tribal governments, private industries, and environmental organizations has adopted an innovative approach to reduce polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in the Spokane River. The Task Force expressed a strong preference for a university-based provider of facilitation and coordination services, and asked the Center to play those roles. The Task Force is now initiating a planning process for making measurable progress.
- *Voluntary Stewardship Program.* After almost 20 years of court and legislative battles over applying Washington's growth management regulations on farmland, the Governor and Legislature called for a solution based on voluntary, incentive-driven approaches. The Center was designated to provide fact-finding, facilitation, mediation and coordination. After years of hard work, the parties reached agreement and drafted legislation that passed the Legislature by

large margins. Twenty-eight of 39 counties have elected to participate in the resulting program, which is being piloted on both sides of the state.

### **The Unique Value of Universities in ECCR**

The Center was founded on the belief that collaborative approaches offer the best opportunity for addressing many of the most complex policy challenges we face (what academics call “wicked problems”), and that universities can play a unique role in fostering those collaborative approaches. The Center's experiences in the projects described above—and in many others—have reinforced those core beliefs for its Advisory Board, staff and university hosts. The Center is also involved in the University Network for Collaborative Governance (UNCG), a network of university-based centers and programs fostering collaborative policy making. Through UNCG, the Center is learning that it is becoming more common across the United States for decision-makers, stakeholders and citizens to see universities as a tool for solving complex problems and resolving intractable conflicts.

Read more about the Center at:

**[www.ruckelshauscenter.wsu.edu](http://www.ruckelshauscenter.wsu.edu)**

*Michael Kern is the Director of the William D. Ruckelshaus Center. He has a Master of Public Administration degree from the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Affairs, and over 20 years of experience in helping diverse groups reach common ground on public policy issues in the State of Washington and the Pacific Northwest. Prior to joining the Ruckelshaus Center, he was a Senior Associate at Triangle Associates Inc. in Seattle, providing facilitation, mediation, public involvement, strategic planning, project management and other services. He has also provided these services at non-profit organizations, academic institutions and as a sole practitioner for the North Cascades Initiative, Hatchery Reform Project, Hanford Openness Workshops and other projects.*