
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 1999, the Upper Columbia Salmon Recovery Board has coordinated and facilitated the regional structure and organizational processes to support a community-led, collective approach to salmon recovery. The regional structure and organizational processes include, but are not limited to: partnerships on forest and aquatic habitat restoration projects, the implementation organizational chart documented in Section 8 of the [Upper Columbia Spring Chinook Salmon & Steelhead Recovery Plan](#), and project funders.

After more than two decades of salmon recovery, the time has come to evaluate and reflect on the original, still-extant regional structure and processes. The purpose of this evaluation was to gather perspectives about areas working well and opportunities for improving that structure and those processes. From October 2020 through February 2021, an Evaluation Team with the William D. Ruckelshaus Center (the Center) conducted individual interviews and gathered input at regional meetings. The following report provides a summary of common themes without attribution to the speaker or their perspective, which allowed interviewees to speak openly and candidly.

Interviewees repeatedly affirmed their commitment to the work of salmon recovery and the collective effort to restore aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. Many interviewees described how the regional structure has cultivated trust – especially among tribes and counties – and established social capital among the community, particularly with landowners.

Many interviewees mentioned personal beliefs and values that bring them to the work. Others explained that participating in the regional structure is not only essential to fulfilling their organization/agency mission, but also to make progress most effectively and efficiently on salmon recovery.

While interviewees expressed frustrations with some elements and identified opportunities for tweaks, adjustments, and/or reinvigoration, the Ruckelshaus Center Evaluation Team did not hear interviewees describe the system as broken. After more than a decade, people and organizations and agencies are still committed to the collective effort and regional approach to salmon recovery. That speaks to the soundness and durability of the original regional structure and set of organizational processes—and continued urgency of the work.

Next Steps

The Center operates impartially and supports entities and communities collaboratively tackling complicated issues. As such, the recommendations within the final report are guided by the Evaluation Team's expertise in managing collaborative efforts, but ultimately reflect the calls to action echoed by interviewees: in a nutshell, continue the community led approach and take the work to the next level. It is now incumbent on UCSRB and key entities to reflect on perspectives shared by interviewees and determine how to move forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND KEY ACTIONS

Interviewees repeatedly affirmed their commitment to a community led approach—and to the urgency of salmon recovery efforts. Many interviewees described the core activities that have been – and will be – vital to making continued progress towards recovering salmon. Some identified opportunities to clarify and enhance the regional structure and organizational processes to support the next decade of salmon recovery efforts. The Evaluation Team did not hear individuals describe the structure as broken. Rather, many interviewees variously said that, “the easy projects have been implemented, now we just need the resources, strategy, means to coordinate at the watershed and/or regional scale, etc., to do the more complicated projects, to take the work to the next level.”

The Ruckelshaus Center is not a think tank, nor does it offer policy solutions. The Center operates impartially and supports entities and communities collaboratively tackling complicated issues. As such, the following recommendations are guided by the Evaluation Team’s expertise in managing collaborative efforts, but ultimately reflect the calls to action voiced by interviewees: continue the community led approach and take the work to the next level. Each recommendation also includes key actions, which offer additional details and suggest ways to advance a recommendation.

While the Evaluation Team reviewed numerous background documents, listened to hours of interviews, and observed several regional meetings, the Team also has limited knowledge of the regional structure and exposure to the organizational processes. It is ultimately the work of those in the region to reflect on what individuals shared as part of this evaluation and make decisions regarding how to move forward.

Recommendation: Keep sight of things that have been critical to progress towards salmon recovery thus far, as well as moving forward.

After more than a decade, people and organizations and agencies remain committed to the regional approach to and collective effort of salmon recovery. That speaks to the soundness and durability of the original regional structure and set of organizational processes. Interviewees clearly identified several things crucial to the success and progress thus far—that will remain crucial moving forward.

Key Action: Continue community-based leadership and engagement.

As noted during the section on common themes from interviews, most (if not all) interviewees expressed support for continuing the community-led approach to salmon recovery. Project sponsors have and will continue to play an essential role of building and maintaining

relationships with landowners, facilitating conversations between and among landowners, and developing projects that will contribute to overall salmon recovery.

Funding and dedicated resources have played and will play a critical role in providing the capacity for project sponsors to build and tend relationships, conduct outreach and engagement, and participate in the regional structure (especially the RTT and the IT).

Some areas of enhanced focus for outreach programming and relationship building could include:

- General outreach about the value of salmon recovery, the projects currently being implemented, and the overall work and mission of the UCSRB
- Targeted funding for community outreach specific to project development and implementation, K-12 education, and information for boaters and other river users
- Rekindling or building relationships with river users and other recreation interests, irrigation districts, farm bureaus, local elected officials, and city/county planning departments

Key Action: UCSRB continue to provide regional coordination and strategic leadership of the regional structure and organizational processes.

As the coordinating entity for the regional structure and organizational processes, the UCSRB will continue to play an important leadership and coordination role.

Key Action: Continue to provide opportunities for informal interactions (post COVID) to build trust, connections, and relationships.

The regional structure has played a vital role in building trust and relationships—especially between tribes and counties and among communities. The foundation of relationships and trust (built pre-COVID 19) helped to ease the transition to virtual work at the onset of the pandemic. While virtual meetings are more accessible (no travel time!), interviewees expressed concerns about the loss of opportunities for informal interactions and other relationship-building avenues limited by the virtual setting. As conditions allow, in-person gatherings such meetings, field trips to project sites, and legislative tours can again provide valuable opportunities for informal interactions to build trust, connections, and relationships.

Key Action: Celebrate milestones and achievements.

The work of salmon recovery, of watershed and forest restoration, is long-term. Individuals and organizations expressed commitment and motivation to continue the work—and celebrating near-term milestones and achievements will help maintain the energy.

Recommendation: Develop a 5-year strategic plan that identifies opportunities for more integration and coordination among high-level plans, with priorities and strategies for a more systemic approach to salmon recovery in the Upper Columbia to guide project development and sequencing.

Interviewees expressed a desire for the region to take the work to the next level. Some described this as developing larger and more complicated projects involving more partners and funding sources. Others called for more coordination with agencies and entities with land-use or resource management decision-making to pursue opportunities that could benefit salmon (e.g., transportation plans and projects). The Evaluation Team also heard a call for more coordination and integration among all the H's (habitat, hydro, hatchery, and harvest).

Alongside the call for the region to take on bigger, more complicated projects, interviewees also recognized the limits of time and resources. Efficient allocation of time and resources means increasing coordination at the policy level along with a plan that

- identifies opportunities for coordination with other entities,
- supports a more integrated approach to conducting the work, and
- guides the sequencing and the development of larger and more complicated projects.

The Implementation Team could lead the development and oversight of a strategic plan via an iterative process, with guidance and support from UCSRB Directors and staff and insight from other teams, committees, and key entities.

The following key actions provide areas of work to support and guide the development of a strategic plan.

Key Action: Identify the landscape of related local, regional, state, federal, and tribal strategic initiatives, planning efforts, and/or existing plans that relate to or affect Upper Columbia salmon recovery initiatives.

An important first step toward a strategic plan will be to create a common understanding of the myriad plans and priorities within the Upper Columbia Basin that directly or have the potential to contribute to salmon recovery goals, timelines, and geographic scales.

Categories of plans identified by interviewees include work in the following areas:

- climate impacts and resilience,
- transportation,
- statewide conservation and recreation,
- fish and wildlife,
- conservation and natural resources,
- forestry,
- pollution mitigation, and
- invasive species management.

Additionally, there are plans that directly support and coordinate salmon recovery efforts, including the *Upper Columbia Spring Chinook Salmon and Steelhead Recovery Plan*⁵ identifying short- and long-term milestones for salmon recovery and providing programmatic goals on habitat, harvest, and hydro. This *Recovery Plan* guides the annual development of projects and funding decisions. Interviewees called for a plan to guide salmon recovery efforts in the Upper Columbia by increasing integration among all H's and coordinating among the various plans and priorities with ecosystem benefits.

Key Action: UCSRB initiate effort to convene relevant entities to identify opportunities for increased integration and coordination among policies, plans, and initiatives among UCSRB, state and federal agencies, and tribes.

As the coordinating entity for the Upper Columbia, the UCSRB is well-positioned to initiate this convening effort.

Outcomes and discussion items could include:

- Identify areas of alignment among their respective strategies and priorities
- Develop understanding of resources and capacity
- Coordinate areas of work and sequencing of projects/priorities
- Identify opportunities to increase integration and coordination at key points in the regional structure, for example: increase communication/coordination between the North Central Forest Health Collaborative and WATs and/or IT; and/or USFS engagement in the IT

Key Action: UCSCB initiate and catalyze effort to increase communication and coordination among all H's.

The *Recovery Plan* provides a framework for advancing objectives for all H's; however, interviewees conveyed a gap between current activities and the desired level of cross-H integration. Again, the UCSRB is well-positioned to initiate and convene.

Possible topics or outcomes could include:

- Identify areas of alignment among respective strategies and priorities
- Coordinate areas of work and sequencing of projects/priorities
- Identify opportunities to increase communication and coordination among all H's (such as increased dialogue among funding decisions, science conference, etc.).

Ultimately, plans to increase coordination and integration among all H's must dovetail with other regional policies, plans, and initiatives; however, it would help to start with a focused conversation among regional entities involved in habitat, hydro, harvest, and hatcheries.

⁵ Available at: <https://www.ucsr.org/science-resources/reports-plans/recovery-plan/>

Key Action: Clarify who is responsible for developing larger more complex projects including community engagement, project development, prioritization, funding, and implementation.

For the Upper Columbia to take on the next level of work, clarifying who is tasked with developing those projects and providing the necessary supports and incentives will be crucial.

Key Action: Take steps to improve and prioritize a regional approach to evaluation, monitoring, and research.

Evaluation, monitoring, and research efforts are underway in the Upper Columbia; however, interviewees called for emphasizing that work. Opportunities to identify emerging needs along with lessons learned from past efforts are important in any effort, but even more so if the region takes a more integrated approach and begins to develop larger, more complex projects.

Recommendation: Clarify roles and responsibilities and enhance relationships among entities and participants in the regional structure.

Key Action: Clarify and document roles and responsibilities of committees/teams, chair/facilitators, and relationship of UCSRB staff to each committee/team.

Many different partners, committees/teams, and entities with varying responsibilities and authorities comprise the regional structure and participate in organizational processes. The level of engagement varies widely. Ensuring that roles, responsibilities, and relationships (whether resource/technical expertise, voting/non-voting members, facilitator, etc.) among entities are clearly defined may help ease tensions among those intimately involved and enable constructive engagement by people less involved.

Key Action: Prioritize relationship building and strategic involvement of NOAA Fisheries, USFS, and other key entities.

While community leadership will remain critical, taking work to the next level will require more involvement from federal agencies at strategic points in the regional structure.

Specific opportunities could include:

- NOAA Fisheries to reinstate a salmon recovery coordinator,
- increased engagement and involvement of USFS, e.g., via the IT and/or the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative.

Such strategic engagement could support a more systematic approach to salmon recovery, increased coordination of policies, and creative thinking around capacity/allocation of resources.

Key Action: Increase communications and opportunities for building bridges between the biological prioritization process and community needs/interests.

Some interviewees expressed frustrations that CAC project prioritization can diverge from the RTT prioritization, though others acknowledged that the two groups have different objectives and priorities. The goal is that collectively, the RTT and CAC identify projects with the most potential to have benefits for salmon AND support from the community.

There may be opportunities to strengthen or increase alignment between biological and community needs.

Opportunities for consideration include:

- Conversation between RTT and CAC to share respective priorities/needs, explore opportunities to strengthen alignment, and consider potential modifications to proposal review process.
- Identify opportunities for considering community needs and biological priorities earlier in the project development/funding review process.
- Require or incentivize project concept review by the RTT prior to full project development to provide early feedback and identify possible joint benefits among projects.
- After (Joint) CAC ranking, close the communication loop with the RTT (via meeting of respective chairs, appropriate UCSRB staff). This would provide an opportunity for a conversation on priorities/ranking, the potential for biggest biological impact, and other considerations, such as opportunities to build success/relationship with a key landowner or landowners in the interest of increasing overall ecological benefits.

Recommendation: Enhance leadership throughout the regional structure and accountabilities to the organizational processes.

As noted above, the regional structure and organizational processes have contributed to more than a decade of trust and relationship building. Nonetheless, opportunities emerged for enhancing leadership and accountabilities.

Key Action: Establish a Leadership Team chaired by the UCSRB Executive Director.

Membership of Leadership Team would include individuals chairing/facilitating teams/committees in the regional structure and could include representatives from other key entities/agencies that have leadership responsibilities/authorities. The Leadership Team could provide a forum for discussion, relationship building, mutual learning, and communication. Members of the Leadership Team could also participate in trainings on facilitation, conflict resolution, the mechanics of decision-making processes, and collaboration tools and methods.

Key Action: Establish mechanisms for mitigating and resolving conflicts.

One approach to bolster leadership and accountabilities throughout the regional structure involves establishing mechanisms and processes for mitigating and resolving conflicts. This could involve a subcommittee of the IT or a small group of staff and others, e.g., the Leadership Team (if established), the UCSRB Executive Director, and/or the Directors.

Key Action: Address conflicts of interest based on individuals/entities playing multiple roles in the structure, e.g., establish a neutral facilitator for each WAT.

As noted, many participants or organizations engage in the regional structure in a variety of ways, e.g., as both convener AND project sponsor. Sometimes this wearing of multiple hats seems to cause confusion, erode trust, or present a conflict of interest. Establishing neutral leadership for WATs provides a path for clarifying leadership roles and addressing conflicts of interest.

Recommendation: Re-envision the mission, role, and responsibilities of the Implementation Team.

Key Action: UCSRB could initiate an effort which includes chairs/facilitators of teams & committees, current IT members, and other entities with leadership authorities to re-envision the mission, role(s), and responsibilities of the IT to establish accountabilities and take advantage of members' knowledge, expertise, and leadership potential.

Potential roles and responsibilities could include:

- Leadership of the regional effort to take the work to the next level, specifically efforts to:
 - Develop and steward a 5-year strategic plan
 - Discuss, communicate, and identify opportunities for policy-level integration, alignment, and coordination of projects (including all "Hs")
- Continue to serve as a regional forum for exchanging information
- Provide final review and guidance for projects prior to presenting to the Board. This step could review biological rankings and community priorities and explore which projects best align with regional priorities and needs.

Based on a re-envisioned role for the IT:

- Determine membership and clearly define individual representatives and alternate roles
- Clearly define the roles of chair/facilitator, staff, and Board
- Establish expectations for participation and attendance
- Determine whether it ought best function as a decision-making body; if so, identify what types of decisions it will make and establish specific processes for decision-making

Recommendation: Establish a more holistic and coordinated strategy to funding and making decisions that supports integration of local projects for regional benefit to salmon recovery.

As noted, project development and proposals currently functions as a competitive process; however, a strategic plan to guide development of larger and more complex projects will also need to establish funding processes that support and incentivize those types of projects from inception to fruition.

The following key actions identify opportunities to incentivize projects that bring forth a more integrated, holistic approach to salmon recovery.

Key Action: Identify the funding landscape and incentives and resources for the region to bring forward projects that feature multiple benefits, collaboration among multiple entities, cross-sector coordination, and link to other projects for a regional benefit.

A critical first step will be to develop a full map of the funding landscape (both regional decision-making and beyond).

With that information in hand, questions to consider include:

- What are the areas of overlap or alignment among funding priorities?
- What resources, supports, and incentives do project sponsors need to cultivate such projects?
- Who else could/should be involved in identifying/developing those projects?

Key Action: Convene conversations to increase coordination and alignment among regional funding priorities and decision-making and, where appropriate, consider modifying regional funding processes.

The UCSRB, with support from the Directors, could convene a conversation among representatives of all the regional funders (e.g. RTT, CACs, Tributary Committees, Bonneville Power Administration), consider inviting other key funders and individuals. Possible outcomes and objectives of that conversation could include:

- discuss opportunities to align or pool funding,
- possible approaches to best achieve shared priorities/objectives,
- opportunities to increase complementary projects and/or link projects for greater regional benefit
- Consider modifying the ranking system and allocation of projects between counties to support these objectives.

Recommendation: Consider improvements to organizational processes.

Key action: Clarify what entities have advisory and/or decision-making responsibilities and review and/or clarify processes and protocols for decision-making (whether consensus, majority or unanimous voting, definitions of support, and methods for addressing/reconciling concerns).

Clear processes for making decisions and communicating those decisions play an essential role in any collaborative effort. Since some interviewees expressed diverging perspectives on who makes decisions and who has decision-making or advisory responsibilities, consider reviewing those processes and protocols.

Some questions to consider during that review:

- Who makes decisions or advises?
- Do existing protocols match that responsibility?
- Are the protocols explicitly articulated and communicated to all participants?

Key Action: Address capacity limitations.

While community leadership and coordination across agencies is a strength of the regional structure, it also presents challenges. Many, if not nearly all, participants in the regional structure and organizational processes have small portions, if any, of their salary/position dedicated to engaging in the committees/teams.

Some opportunities to address capacity limitations:

- Provide resources/stipends for small or under-resourced organizations to participate in committees/teams
- Modify expectations regarding the amount of work committees/teams get asked to perform, take steps to reduce workload
- Impose limitations to number of projects reviewed by RTT/CAC