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New Ruckelshaus Center Aims to Resolve Tough Issues

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A new, joint center to address hard-to-resolve social, economic and environmental issues in Washington was launched Oct. 10 by the University of Washington and Washington State University.

It will be named for William D. Ruckelshaus, who is highly respected for his public service, corporate leadership and help on community issues. He was the first and fifth director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as well as deputy attorney general and acting director of the FBI.

Ruckelshaus is a former senior vice president at Weyerhaeuser and chairman/CEO of Browning Ferris Industries, and currently is a strategic director at Madrona Venture Partners. He has been leading efforts on salmon recovery and has been chairman of the new center's board, known during its pilot phase as the Policy Consensus Center. Board members and others in the community are raising funds to endow the center in his honor.

The center has already helped with some contentious water issues. It is bringing farm interests together with environmental advocates, community leaders and tribes to identify approaches to farming that can improve profitability and provide environmental benefits. It has been invited by the state House of Representatives to put on a workshop for newly elected legislators and has assisted with conflicts among business, labor and regulatory agencies.

The center provides immediate assistance to those already in conflict, as well as "anticipatory assistance" to those who see one coming. The center gets involved only if all significantly affected parties agree to its presence, and tries not to duplicate services already available. The center's involvement doesn't signal an imposed solution, but assistance in finding one.

Ruckelshaus says this is one more way that the universities can benefit the state. "By working directly with the people who are affected, the expertise and neutrality of the universities can fly below the political radar to help find a win-win solution," he says. "Particularly on issues that generate political polarization, an honest-broker institution like this center can call on many kinds of expertise to fill gaps in our ability to address issues that affect our future."

Among similar centers, this is the only one that combines two research universities for statewide reach and it offers the most comprehensive array of resources. The center is co-located at the UW Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs and WSU Extension.

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