Current Projects

Chehalis Flooding & Fish
How best to address catastrophic flooding has been studied and debated in the Chehalis River Basin in southwest Washington since at least the 1930s. There have been seven major floods in the past 30 years alone. The Center was asked by the Washington State Governor’s Office to help the Office of Financial Management—in collaboration with the Department of Transportation, Department of Ecology, and affected and interested federal agencies, tribal governments and local governments—produce a report to the Governor and Legislature required by Engrossed Substitute House Bill 2020 that identifies recommended priority flood hazard mitigation projects. The Center convened technical and policy experts, built a common knowledge base, and provided training to local leaders on how to work together and reach consensus. The report was completed in December 2012. This work and the report helped change the tone, galvanized the parties, and inspired Governor Gregoire to convene a work group of Basin leaders to craft a proposal for her to recommend to the Legislature. With the Center’s facilitation, the group developed a consensus proposal for the next two years that would: 1) fund immediate capital projects to protect critical infrastructure and initiate restoration of fish habitat; and 2) fill information gaps and decide on major capital projects needed to dramatically reduce flooding and significantly enhance salmon populations. The 2013-15 state budget includes $28.2 million to implement the work group’s recommendations. The Center remains involved facilitating and coordinating the work group’s efforts.

Joint SR 530 Landslide Commission
Washington Governor Jay Inslee and Snohomish County Executive John Lovick have formed a joint commission in response to the SR 530 landslide of March 2014 that took the lives of 43 people in the Stillaguamish Valley. The Commission will review the incident and the collective response, and will provide recommendations to help plan and respond to similar events. The 12-member Commission will operate independently, and will not determine liability, cause or fault, or act as a substitute for the courts in any way. With the Center’s facilitation, the Commission will produce a report of prioritized recommendations by December 2014.

Capitol Lake Assessment
The Washington State Department of Enterprise Services has asked the Ruckelshaus Center to conduct an interview-based situation assessment to explore issues and opportunities regarding the future management of Capitol Lake in Olympia. This assessment will explore relevant issues and interests of involved parties, along with the dynamics of the situation, culminating in a report articulating the major issues, key parties, and their interests and perspectives. The report will also analyze and explore the prospects for a collaborative process to address those issues. In this context, a collaborative process means a solution-focused dialogue among all the key interests, participating willingly, that is convened and facilitated by a neutral third party.
Eldercare Workforce
The Center is partnering with the University of Washington’s Health Policy Center (UW HPC) on a project examining the eldercare workforce capacity in Washington state, including mapping the issue, convening stakeholders statewide to listen and learn from one another about areas of conflict and consensus, and facilitating those stakeholders as they create and put into operation a Washington State Eldercare Workforce Alliance. In December 2012, the Center and UW HPC received a grant to begin the first phase of this project. The Center is also participating in a University Network for Collaborative Governance (UNCG) initiative to launch similar efforts in states across the country that will engage health care and workforce stakeholders in developing eldercare workforce strategies. The UNCG initiative will focus on: 1) Hosting a national colloquium on Eldercare Workforce Collaboration, resulting in a report to serve as the basis for a multi-state pilot; 2) A pilot to evaluate and report on results and lessons learned of the assessments; and 3) Convening assessments in several states through UNCG centers.

Aviation Biofuels
The Center has been involved in two related projects designed to promote sustainable aviation biofuels in the Pacific Northwest, helping the region meet its clean energy goals. The first project was called Sustainable Aviation Biofuels Northwest (SAFN), a four-state effort to conduct a regional assessment of the challenges and opportunities associated with the production of sustainable aviation biofuels in the Northwest. The Center served on the regional stakeholder group participating in the assessment. SAFN released its recommendations in May 2011. The second is a grant from the US Department of Agriculture Agriculture and Food Research Initiative to support a team of academic and private sector researchers called the Northwest Advanced Renewables Alliance to explore woody biomass as a source of aviation biofuels. The focus is overcoming key obstacles that prevent wood-based jet fuel and petrochemical substitutes from being economically viable. The Center provides internal and external facilitation.

Columbia River Gorge Commission
The Columbia River Gorge Commission asked the Center and the Oregon Consensus program at Portland State University to conduct a series of individual and group interviews with a wide range of stakeholders and regional leaders to identify aspiration, concerns and willingness to find common ground for resource protection and community development in the Columbia River Gorge. The assessment summarized the interviews and offered recommendations about the feasibility of collaborative problem solving. The Assessment also recommended the Gorge Commission engage in internal development work, to strengthen collaboration between the Commission, other agencies, communities and the public. To that end, the Commission asked the Center and Oregon Consensus to provide training for Gorge Commissioners that included tools for communication, collaboration and problem solving. The Commission is also asking the Centers to remain involved as it seeks to take on several of the collaborative challenges identified in the assessment.

Spokane River Toxics
The Spokane River Regional Toxics Task Force is a collaborative group of governmental agencies, private industries, and environmental organizations attempting an innovative approach to the reduction of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) within the Spokane River. The goal of the Task Force is to develop a comprehensive plan to bring the Spokane River into compliance with water quality standards for PCBs. 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 Center is now facilitating the Task Force and its Work Groups.

Tri-Cities Governance
Building upon the “4Cs Project” conducted several years ago by the Three Rivers Community Roundtable, the Center is conducting research and a public engagement process on the topic of improving governance and governance structure in the Tri-Cities, WA region. The project will be done in three phases in collaboration with WSU’s Division of Governmental Studies and Services, UW Evans School of Public Affairs, and UW Information School.
Collaboration Training
As part of its efforts to build capacity for collaborative policy within the state and region, the Center provides training in collaborative problem-solving, conflict resolution and building long-term working relationships. For example, the Center has held workshops to assist newly-elected state legislators with the transition from candidate to legislator. The Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) asked the Center to provide trainings to meet the needs of WDFW habitat biologists in successfully managing interactions and relationships with permit applicants, while providing protection for fish and their habitat. The Center teamed with the National Policy Consensus Center at Portland State University to provide collaboration training to staff at the Washington State Department of Natural Resources’ Aquatics Division. And the Center is part of a University Network for Collaborative Governance that has issued a Guide to Collaborative Competencies. The Center uses that guide to help agencies understand what types of collaborative skills university centers can help them develop.

Health Care Policy Assessment
The Ruckelshaus Center is currently assessing opportunities to expand its services in the health care sector. Health care reform has complicated policy debates and challenges that affect a wide variety of stakeholders across Washington state and the Pacific Northwest. Combining WSU and UW expertise and perspective into an effective, university-based neutral third party may help to resolve many policy issues that impact government and industry stakeholders, labor, community partners and advocates.

Civil Public Discourse
Recognizing that civil public discourse is a fundamental element of collaborative public policy, the Center has been exploring the status of civil discourse in the state, region and nation, seeking to understand how the current state of discourse compares to other periods in history, how this affects the policy process, and what the Center and other organizations can do about it. The Center has supported research on the issue and co-sponsored, presented, or otherwise assisted in nine different local, regional and national events to explore and foster civil discourse. Another important element of the Center’s efforts to promote civil discourse and build capacity for collaborative policy within the state and region is providing training in collaborative problem-solving, conflict resolution and building long-term working relationships.

Past Projects
Columbia River Salmon
The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) asked the Ruckelshaus Center— in partnership with Oregon Consensus at Portland State University—to conduct a situation assessment of regional views about salmon and steelhead recovery planning in the Columbia River Basin over the long term. A situation assessment is an interview-based process undertaken to better understand and explore relevant issues and interests of involved parties and situation dynamics. An assessment team featuring practitioner and academic expertise from Washington, Oregon and Idaho interviewed a broad array of regional parties to capture the full range of perspectives. The assessment was released in December 2013.

Washington Coastal Marine Advisory Council
In the fall of 2010, coastal Marine Resource Committees (MRCs) and Washington State natural resource agencies began discussing the need for a group to advise the State and provide local perspectives on ocean policy issues marine resource issues, projects and conflicts on Washington’s Pacific Ocean Coast (from Cape Flattery south), including the estuaries of Grays Harbor, Willapa Bay and the lower Columbia River. The result was recommendation to the State Ocean Caucus (SOC)
to form a Washington Coastal Marine Advisory Council (WCMAC) coordinated by the Washington State Department of Ecology. At request of the stakeholders who helped design the process, Ecology retained the Center to serve as neutral convener, providing facilitation and coordination services to support the WCMAC. The Center assisted the WCMAC in developing a mission statement and working relationships to lay vital groundwork for its new role advising the Governor’s Office.

Northwest Environment and Natural Resources Forum
The Center collaborated with the US Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution, the Policy Consensus Initiative at Portland State University, and the Oregon Natural Resources Institute on this project intended to promote collaborative decision making on public policy in the Pacific Northwest. The goal of the Forum was to provide a neutral place for regional environmental leaders from federal, state, local and tribal governments to identify emerging issues of mutual interest and map a strategy for addressing them.

William D. Ruckelshaus Oral History
Douglas Brinkley has published extensively on American environmental history, including the widely-acclaimed “The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America” and the recently-published “The Quiet World: Saving Alaska’s Wilderness Kingdom, 1879-1960.” He has written about American leaders such as Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter and Henry Ford, and conducted oral histories of Neil Armstrong, Stuart Udall and others. As part of his upcoming book on 1960-70’s environmental policy, Dr. Brinkley interviewed Bill Ruckelshaus (the first and fifth director of the EPA), to create an oral history of Bill’s life and remarkable contributions to public service, corporate leadership and collaborative policy. The oral history has been archived at the university libraries and on the website of TVW (Washington state’s version of C-SPAN). It has also be distilled down to a broadcast-quality program that aired in early 2013 and is available on the TVW website.

Voluntary Stewardship Program
In 2007, Washington’s Governor and Legislature—along with agricultural, tribal, environmental and local government representatives—asked the Center to assist in resolving long-standing conflict over the protection and enhancement on agricultural lands of environmentally “critical areas” under Washington’s Growth Management Act. This conflict, more than a decade old, has spawned lawsuits, appeals, legislative battles and a voter initiative. In Substitute Senate Bills S248 and 6520, the parties involved reached a compromise for a moratorium on counties adopting amendments to critical areas ordinances with respect to agricultural activities while participating stakeholders developed recommendations to resolve the long-standing disagreements. The Center was designated to coordinate fact-finding research and facilitate the discussions. The aim was to develop solutions, policies and practices that ensure protection of environmentally sensitive areas in ways that support the preservation of farm lands and a strong farm economy. In 2010, the Agriculture and Critical Areas (Ag CA) Committee reached agreement on a framework for a Voluntary Stewardship Program and turned the framework into proposed legislation which was signed into law in May 2011.

The Washington State Conservation Commission (which the legislation designates as the lead state agency) and the parties to the agreement asked the Center to continue its involvement, believing the Center’s neutrality, experience with these issues/parties and expertise in collaborative processes would continue to be helpful as the agencies and parties begin early implementation. With support from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), the Center remained involved during the first two years of implementation.

“Unfortunately, we have historically lacked an institutional theater in which science and policy-making can come together efficiently and produce more light than heat.”

— WILLIAM D. RUCKELSHAUS
Nurse Staffing
Between 2007 and 2012, the Center assisted in resolving long-standing disagreements concerning hospital staffing decisions. Concerns by the parties included the effects of nurse staffing levels in hospitals, patient safety, costs and working conditions for nurses. Numerous studies have been conducted for this national issue, yet no accepted resolution has been developed. In 2007, the Center held an initial forum between the Northwest Organization of Nurse Executives; SEIU Healthcare 1199NW, United Staff Nurses, UFCW 141, the Washington State Hospital Association, and the Washington State Nurses Association, in which they reached an agreement to work together. In 2008, these parties signed an agreement at a ceremony with Governor Gregoire to begin discussions facilitated by the Center. The goal of all parties in the discussion was to develop a model solution for this pressing problem in health policy.

Association of Washington Cities Mayor’s Exchange
The Association of Washington Cities (AWC) asked the Center to facilitate the April 2011 Mayors Exchange in Yakima, which featured a discussion about successful partnership models from different communities; tips for overcoming interjurisdictional conflict; and ways jurisdictions have maximized resources through collaboration. The Center helped mayors and administrators from over 30 municipalities consider current and future opportunities in the context of a continuum of partnerships, from communication to consolidation.

Whatcom Jobs Summit
In September 2012, the Ruckelshaus Center facilitated the Whatcom Jobs Summit, a one-day event that brought together stakeholders representing business, labor, environment and government in Whatcom County. The purpose of the Summit was to promote the removal of barriers to local job growth through productive dialogue, fostering new relationships and the development of action steps for the community. Staff from the Center partnered with practitioners from the WSU Whatcom County Extension Office and Western Washington University’s College of Business and Economics to provide neutral facilitation for an event that included a panel of elected officials, “speed dating” matrix dialogues, a keynote address, breakout group discussion, report-backs from the elected officials and a lively discussion of next steps and action items. The Steering Committee hopes to make this an annual event.

Surplus Salmon
The Washington State Legislature included in its 2010 budget a proviso directing the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to “work with appropriate stakeholders to facilitate the disposition of salmon (at hatcheries) to best utilize the resource, increase revenues to regional fisheries enhancement groups, and enhance the provision of nutrients to food banks.” WDFW asked the Center to provide services to support stakeholder engagement and the development of recommendations. These services included: 1) economic analysis; 2) an interview-based situation assessment; 3) recommendations for a stakeholder involvement process; and 4) facilitation of meetings between WDFW and appropriate stakeholders. After the stakeholder meetings, WFDW Director Phil Anderson thanked the Center for its assistance saying, “The expertise, project oversight, and process insight that you and your colleagues brought to the process was instrumental in bringing the collaborative process to a successful outcome.”

Northwest Marine Trade Association/Puget Soundkeeper Alliance
In 2007, NMTA, PSA and the Washington State Department of Ecology developed and signed an agreement describing how they would work together to address concerns over water pollution from bottom paint and other sources at boatyards. In December 2009, PSA—frustrated with what they saw as an unacceptably slow pace of implementation—filed a notice of intent to sue five NMTA member boatyards for alleged violations of the Clean Water Act relating to these issues. NMTA suggested—and PSA agreed—that the Center become involved to help the parties resolve their dispute. The Center facilitated several meetings at which the parties agreed to a series of steps aimed at repairing their working alliance. NMTA and PSA are again working cooperatively, and have thanked the Center for its assistance. This collaboration led to an important outcome in 2011—legislation (SB 5436) that makes Washington the first state in the nation to phase out copper in antifouling paints used on recreational water vessels.
Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative Evaluation
The Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative is a unique local governance mechanism that employs a collaborative approach to preserve ecosystems, while respecting existing economic and community uses of marine resources. In 2004, the Center managed a federally-mandated independent evaluation of the Initiative. Convening a committee of scientific and other experts, the Center staffed the performance review. What the panel found was one of the most innovative applications of volunteer action anywhere in the country. The credibility and thoroughness of the evaluation led to a stronger mandate and increased federal support for the Initiative.

Walla Walla Water Management Initiative
Members of the Walla Walla Basin Community are working to improve water management to support municipal, agricultural and other water uses, while also providing for the needs of federally protected fish species. In conjunction with the Washington Department of Ecology, they asked the Center to generate a report identifying existing capacities to support an effective integrated water management system for the Basin. The project also involved collecting local input and identifying areas where consensus may exist, and where concerns may need to be addressed, in order to implement watershed and salmon recovery.

Agricultural Pilots Project
At the request of the Washington Governor’s office, the Center provided leadership in developing the Agricultural Pilots Project. The goal of the project was to underwrite pilots that held the potential of demonstrating increased profitability to agriculture, while providing environmental benefits. Guided by an advisory group drawn from involved stakeholders, the Center conducted nearly 200 consultations with environmental, agricultural, tribal and community representatives. In the 2007 legislative session, the Governor and Legislature provided funding for a “proof of concept” phase in which four pilot projects were conducted. The Center was responsible for monitoring the pilots and evaluating the feasibility of an ongoing Agricultural Pilots program that would be managed by an appropriate state agency. A final report was submitted in 2009.

Water Resource Administration & Funding Task Force
The Water Resources Administration and Funding Task Force was created by the Washington State Legislature in 2004. As directed by the Legislature, the Department of Ecology requested that specified interest groups identify representatives to participate on the Task Force to develop proposals and recommend options for funding the state’s water resource programs. It also invited the Center to facilitate the meetings and provide staff support for the effort. During the nine meetings of the Task Force, the group collected and reviewed water resources program information, budget data and funding source data. Based on this information, the Task Force developed a set of findings and conclusions designed to guide policy makers in developing a funding package for both operating and capital support.