



Northwest Straits and Marine Resources Committees

The Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative has several key components. The Initiative includes both the NWS Commission and the NWS Foundation. The 13-member Northwest Straits Commission is composed of five gubernatorial appointees, one Secretary of the Interior appointee, and a representative from each of the seven counties in the Northwest Straits region. The Commission integrates and facilitates action throughout the Northwest Straits region and provides resources and technical support for county-based Marine Resources Committees (MRCs) in Clallam, Island, Jefferson, San Juan, Snohomish, Skagit, and Whatcom counties -- an area that makes up over 60% of Puget Sound's total shoreline.

Each MRC is created by county ordinance and MRC members are appointed by local County Commissioners. All of the MRCs are represented by members of the scientific community, local and tribal governments, and economic, recreational and conservation interests. MRC members design and carry out marine restoration and protection projects, provide stewardship information to local residents and work in coordination with their local elected officials.

The Northwest Straits Foundation is a non-profit organization established to support the scientific, restoration, and education projects and programs of the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative. The Foundation supports research, monitoring, restoration, stewardship, conservation and education programs and projects both at the local and regional level.

Background and History

Despite its rich ecological heritage, the marine resources of the Northwest Straits were showing indications of serious decline by the early 1980s. Recognizing the national and international environmental significance of the area and the environmental degradation that was occurring, Congress authorized a study of the Northwest Straits region in the mid-1980s for potential inclusion in the

National Marine Sanctuary system.

From the beginning, the sanctuary proposal was met with mixed regional support and strong resistance in many local areas. During public meetings, citizens voiced their concerns that a sanctuary would be administered in a top-down fashion, with staff in Washington D.C. making decisions without local input. In 1994, all seven of the county legislative authorities voiced formal, strong opposition to the sanctuary proposal, and the process was officially terminated in 1996. Resistance to the proposal was clearly linked to fears that as a federally administered program, a sanctuary program would not meaningfully engage the community or respond to local needs.

In the aftermath of the proposal's demise, there remained a commitment among many diverse leaders to create a new and different program that could help restore and protect the marine resources of the Northwest Straits. While protection of Northwest Straits resources clearly had a strong existing federal and state regulatory framework, what was missing was a way to harness the energy and expertise of local citizens and provide them with opportunities to actively protect and restore the marine resources.

In 1997, U.S. Senator Patty Murray and U.S. Representative Jack Metcalf established a blue-ribbon committee (known as the Murray-Metcalf Commission) to explore alternative models for protecting and restoring marine resources in the Northwest Straits. The Murray-Metcalf Commission unanimously agreed that the Northwest Straits marine ecosystem and its marine resources were in serious trouble, citing declining populations of bottomfish, sea birds, invertebrates, salmon and some populations of marine mammals as prime examples. After a year of research and discussion, The Murray-Metcalf Commission published a report, known as the *Report to the Convenors* (see **file 2.e.**), which laid the groundwork for what was to become the Northwest Straits Initiative. The report concluded that a coordinated effort, blending well-founded science with grassroots consensus building, would be the best approach. The result is the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative, authorized by Congress in 1998. (See **file 2.g.** for authorizing legislation.)

The Murray-Metcalf report mandated that the Initiative undergo a thorough, independent program review at the end of its initial six-year term. In 2004, Bill Ruckelshaus chaired the 8-person Northwest Straits Evaluation Panel. After four days of hearings, the panel found that the Initiative has achieved success in key areas, including:

- Mobilizing broad citizen support for marine conservation.
- Bringing people together to work cooperatively on issues
- Increasing voluntary compliance with conservation goals
- Tapping local energy to generate on-the-ground projects
- Contributing to scientific understanding of the marine ecosystem
- Spreading innovative ideas between counties

- Creating a model of marine governance that can be adapted to other locations

The evaluation panel's recommendations included:

- Congressional reauthorization for 8-10 years
- Increased federal funding to \$1.6 million
- Replication of this model elsewhere
- Establish strategic priorities for the future

The evaluation panel encouraged the Commission to review and modify the current benchmarks and take on focused strategic planning. (See **file 2.f.** in this folder for the Evaluation report.) In 2005, the Commission and the MRCs finalized a set of revised goals and benchmarks.

In 2014, the Initiative and MRCs again updated their goals and benchmarks in a new 2014-2018 Strategic Plan. In 2018-19 they developed a new Strategic Plan (as of December 2019, not yet finalized). See **file 6.c** for the latest NWS Strategic Plan. The NWS Commission's offices are at Padilla Bay National Estuarine Reserve near Bellingham, WA. Commission staff are WA Department of Ecology employees. The Northwest Straits Foundation is a private 501-c-3 organization.