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US House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife
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The Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative

Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative. The background and workings of our organization is described in several reports that are provided as attachments (Murray-Metcalf Report, Policy Consensus Center Evaluation Report and 2008 Northwest Straits Initiative Annual Report). This testimony provides a brief summary of who we are, what we do, and how we came to be in existence.

The Northwest Straits Region

The Northwest Straits region includes the U.S. marine waters of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the San Juan Islands and northern Puget Sound reaching from the southern borders of Snohomish and Jefferson counties to the Canadian border. Seven counties, 15 tribes, many cities, and other local governments have jurisdiction in the region.

Iconic species such as Chinook salmon, Puget Sound southern resident orca, western grebe, and many species of rockfish exist in these waters, and all of them depend on a healthy ecosystem for their survival. Many of these species and their habitats are in serious decline as a result of human activities. Several rockfish species populations have declined over 90% and similar declines have occurred with several species of marine birds. The southern resident orcas were listed on the Endangered Species Act, as were Chinook salmon. The Northwest Straits region, a spectacularly ecologically rich area, offers important migratory corridors for most of the Puget Sound salmon species and feeding grounds for the orcas. Oil tankers, pleasure boats, commercial barges and whale watching boats all travel these waters in large numbers.

Puget Sound is the second largest estuary in the United States, after Chesapeake Bay. The Northwest Straits area includes 1,460 of Puget Sound's 2,500 miles of shoreline, and is home to more than 1.16 million people.

The Northwest Straits are the front door to the region's many busy ports and urban areas. Thousands of cargo and tank vessels call each year at large ports in Tacoma, Seattle, and Vancouver, BC, as well as many smaller ports and marinas throughout the Puget Sound and Georgia Basin. Historically, this area has supported a healthy ocean-based industry of

commercial and recreational fishing, shellfish growing and harvesting, whale-watching and tourism.

Early History

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.

The sanctuary proposal was met with mixed regional support and strong resistance in many local areas. During public meetings, citizens voiced concerns that a sanctuary would be administered in a “top-down” fashion, with staff 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 a sanctuary would not effectively engage residents of the local communities or respond to local needs. Residents and leaders did, however, recognize that more needed to be done to restore and protect the marine resources of the region.

Several key leaders recognized the need to create a new and different program that could help restore and protect the marine resources of the Northwest Straits. While there was a federal and state regulatory framework in place, what was missing was a way to harness the energy and expertise of local citizens. Residents of the region live, work and play in or near the marine waters and are committed to being part of the solution for its recovery. The region also is home to twenty federally recognized treaty tribes who are co-managers of the resources and who have a strong commitment to restoring the marine environment.

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. Specifically called out in the “Commission’s Report to the Convenors” were the declining populations of bottomfish, sea birds, invertebrates, salmon and some populations of marine mammals. The Murray-Metcalf Commission developed the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative as a “bottom-up” program that would allow residents to set priorities and goals for restoring ecosystem health, as well as initiate and carry out projects within a regional framework.

The Murray-Metcalf commission recommended, “...establishing a network of local, county-based Marine Resource Committees (MRCs) committed to protecting and conserving the resources of the Northwest Straits. ...MRCs will coordinate their activities through the Northwest Straits Commission. The Commission will provide technical assistance, integrate scientific information, develop ecosystem-level coordination, and coordinate funding.”

In 1998, the Northwest Straits Advisory Commission was authorized by Congress and directed to be organized and operated in accordance with the final report of the Murray-Metcalf Commission.

“As a commercial fisherman, I usually avoid opportunities to grind up lots of time just to see my ideas lost in some bureaucratic shuffle or voted down by people who think I don't get it. But the MRC is different. We are all residents of the same community who share a vision of healthy marine resources, and we volunteer to work together to develop a shared idea of how we can help achieve that vision.” – Buck Meloy, Whatcom Marine Resources Committee

The Structure of the Northwest Straits Initiative

The “Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative” describes the entire organization that includes the Northwest Straits Commission (acting as board of directors), the MRCs, and the Northwest Straits Foundation. It is a unique framework that was intentionally designed to ensure that decision-making occurs in a bottom-up fashion.

Northwest Straits Commission

The Commission consists of five gubernatorial representatives, one tribal representative appointed by the Secretary of the Interior, and one representative from each MRC. Commissioners meet monthly and serve as the governing body for the entire organization. They provide regional vision and guidance, and ensure that progress is being made towards goals and benchmarks. With diverse professional backgrounds and perspectives, Commissioners work through consensus to address marine conservation in the Northwest Straits.

The Commission has four staff members who carry out the day-to-day operations. In addition to supporting MRCs with training conferences, workshops, and collaborative work sessions, the Commission manages marine conservation projects on the regional scale and helps to implement projects in partnership with tribal governments.

Marine Resources Committees

A Marine Resources Committee was established in each of the seven counties bordering the NW Straits: Clallam, Island, Jefferson, San Juan, Skagit, Snohomish and Whatcom. MRCs provide grassroots, bottom-up structure and give a strong voice to citizens on marine issues. Each MRC is created by county ordinance and members are appointed by their county commission or council. MRCs involve scientists, local and tribal governments, and economic, recreational and conservation interests. MRC members set priorities and design marine restoration and protection projects, provide stewardship information to local residents, and work in coordination with their local elected officials. MRC members tap an incredible resource of local talent and knowledge that includes commercial and recreational fishermen, builders, realtors, marina owners, school teachers, retired US Navy Commanders and Coast Guard officers, and a multitude of scientists. The MRCs also experience regular participation by ports, conservation

districts, tribes, and non-profits. These people are passionate, well connected, and understand how to get things done in their community.

Foundation

In 2001, a non-profit Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Foundation was formed in order to leverage additional funds from a diversity of sources. For example, in 2006, the Foundation received funds from NOAA's Marine Debris Program, the Puget Sound Conservation Fund, the Puget Sound Action Team, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and from a number of private charitable organizations. To date, the Foundation has leveraged more than \$5.8 million for projects. The biggest piece of that is a \$4.6 million American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) award through NOAA that occurred in July 2009.

Role of the Northwest Straits Initiative

The Northwest Straits Initiative engages and empowers local citizens to design and carry out restoration and conservation work. By fostering a groundswell of local interest in marine issues and bringing diverse groups of citizens to the table, the NWS Initiative also helps to create better understanding of marine resource threats and issues, and provides the local support necessary for state and federal efforts to succeed.

The MRCs track emerging issues such as tidal energy, ocean acidification and shoreline protection policies and provide a local forum for marine resource issues to be discussed. MRCs find common ground and carry out successful work. MRC members are also effective at collaborating with businesses and other local partners, allowing us to leverage additional funding and in-kind support.

Helping the state achieve conservation and restoration objectives

Although priorities are established at the local level, the conservation and restoration work that is accomplished supports local, state, tribal and federal agency goals.

MRC project examples include native oyster seeding, eelgrass mapping, stormwater education, shoreline restoration, designating marine stewardship areas and establishing voluntary no anchor zones to protect eelgrass beds. The Commission staff manages some larger regional projects that encompass multi-county areas, including the derelict fishing gear removal project, creosote debris removal, and mapping forage fish spawning beaches.

The Commission is carrying out a high priority restoration action by removing derelict fishing gear in all of Puget Sound. Concerns about old fishing nets, lost in Puget Sound by salmon fishing boats, was brought to the attention of the Commission by fishermen concerned that the gear was causing damage to the resources. This project, started in 2002, formed a partnership between state resource agencies, tribes, MRCs and the Commission. In 2009, after removing over 1200 derelict nets and demonstrating the damage to the resource caused by them, the Northwest Straits Foundation received a \$4.6 million grant from NOAA to allow the Northwest Straits Foundation to fully accomplish net removals. The project will remove all the remaining

nets (approximately 3,000) from the Sound by the end of 2010. (see Appendix 1 for additional details about this work)

This derelict gear removal work has been financially supported by NOAA, USFWS, EPA, Washington state salmon recovery funding, state general funds, numerous private foundations, and other sources. It is a high priority near-term action in the Puget Sound Partnership's Action Agenda (the Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan for the Sound).

We have shared our derelict gear project methodologies with other coastal states, helping several to jump-start similar programs (including California, Oregon, South Carolina, New Hampshire and Chesapeake Bay). We also hosted a workshop with neighboring Canadians to share information, and we're looking forward to a pilot project with them in coming months.

MRCs often partner with state agencies to accomplish projects. We worked closely with WA Dept, of Fish and Wildlife to improve the mapping of forage fish spawning beaches in all seven counties. The Initiative designed an approved methodology for volunteers to identify forage fish eggs and mapped over 55 miles of beaches. This work allowed these newly discovered spawning beaches to be protected under existing Washington state law.

The Whatcom MRC partnered with the City of Bellingham and Washington Dept of Ecology to demonstrate the need and ability to remove creosote debris from miles of beaches. Creosote contains hundreds of chemicals, some of them toxic which have been found to leach onto beaches. Several MRCs used their funding to find and remove creosote debris. The Commission successfully obtained a NOAA Community Restoration Program grant to increase the effort and partnered with WA DNR to get the job done. In total over 700 tons of creosote debris was removed from Northwest Straits beaches, including state and federal parks and national wildlife refuges which provide critical habitats for many species.

Commission staff presented the creosote debris project methodologies and results at the Puget Sound/Georgia Basin Research conference in Vancouver, British Columbia in 2006. As a result of that presentation and follow up conversations, the project is being replicated in British Columbia through the BC Ministry of the Environment.

These are a few examples of projects carried out through MRCs and the Commission, a more complete list of projects and accomplishments is available in our annual reports.

“What has impressed me about the Skagit MRC is that the members are tenacious in their mission to improve and restore the saltwater environment around us. Members will frequently use all their contacts and know-how to leverage what little money and effort is available from the MRC proper. Whether the subject is salmon, oysters, public education, derelict gear or low impact development, we have a core group of members who have been working tirelessly on allied projects for a number of years. It is a great group that gets a lot accomplished!” - Erica Pickett, Skagit Marine Resources Committee

Model of success/awards

The Northwest Straits Initiative won the Coastal America Partnership award in 2003.

The Northwest Straits Initiative was featured at the White House Cooperative Conservation conference in June 2005.

The Northwest Straits was awarded the NOAA Restoration Center Excellence Award in 2006.

The Washington State Legislature recognized the Northwest Straits Initiative as an innovative, important and successful program in House Joint Memorial 4029 passed in 2008.

Recognizing the success of the Northwest Straits Initiative model, several new Marine Resources Committees were established along the Washington state outer coast.

The Northwest Straits Initiative won the Warren G. Magnuson Award 2009 for the Derelict Fishing Gear project, presented by People For Puget Sound.

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The Initiative was originally authorized by Congress in 1998. That authorization expired in 2004. The program was formally evaluated in 2004 and was recommended for continuation, increased funding and reauthorization.

2004 Program Evaluation

The Murray-Metcalf report mandated that the Initiative undergo a thorough, independent program review after five years to determine if program benchmarks were being met. In 2004, former EPA Administrator Bill Ruckelshaus chaired the eight-person Northwest Straits Evaluation Panel. After four days of hearings, the panel found that “The Northwest Straits Commission has a track record of responsible and cost-effective approaches to marine conservation, and its structure ensures that both local concerns and scientific discipline guide deliberations and funding decisions.” The panel unanimously recommended “continued federal authorization and expanded support for the Northwest Straits Initiative.”

The evaluation panel also recommended Congressional reauthorization, increased federal funding, and replication of this model elsewhere. The full findings are available in the 2004 Report by the Policy Consensus Center (attached).

“...the Initiative has accomplished valuable research and restoration projects and has established a strong foundation of mechanisms, relationships, and capacity.” – Bill Ruckelshaus, Chair of the Northwest Straits Evaluation Panel, 2004

Funding and Accountability

The NWS Initiative operates on an annual Congressional appropriation. Funds run through NOAA to the Washington State Department of Ecology where they are administered for the Northwest Straits Initiative. The Commission reviews and approves the annual budget, which is submitted to NOAA as part of the annual grant application.

From these funds, the Commission allocates each MRC a yearly grant to carry out its activities (54% of budget), pays for the operation and administration of the Commission (28%), funds regional projects (9%), and grants funds for tribal projects (3%).

All funds are administered through the Washington Department of Ecology and are subject to state agency purchasing policies. Grants to MRCs are accomplished through agreements between each county government and the Department of Ecology and are written and reviewed by Northwest Straits Commission staff. The Commission prepares semi-annual reports for NOAA on all projects and provides outcomes.

Commission Federal Funding History	
FY 1999	\$350,000
FY 2000	\$652,000
FY 2001	\$750,000
FY 2002	\$950,000
FY 2003	\$795,000
FY 2004	\$750,000
FY 2005	\$1,250,000
FY 2006	\$1,400,000
FY 2007	\$1,005,000
FY 2008	\$1,600,000

Conclusion

The Northwest Straits Initiative has proven itself to be a worthy investment and an innovative model for engaging citizens in difficult conservation and restoration work. It has leveraged funding and in-kind support from a diverse base of supporters. When the evaluation panel reviewed the Initiative in 2004, there was general recognition of the successful workings of this unique organization, but in addition there was recognition that something special was going on. The panel called it the “magic” of the organization. For those of us who work and volunteer with the Initiative, the “magic” may be the result of bringing people together who care passionately about the place they live, who find joy and meaning in exercising their talents for a good cause, and who value working with diverse interests to solve critical issues. Whatever the magic is, it’s clear that the organization is more than the sum of its parts. We continue -- in partnership with many, many others -- on a tremendously rewarding path toward the restoration and protection of the marine waters of the Northwest Straits region.

Appendix 1. Northwest Straits Initiative's Derelict Fishing Net Removal Project, funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act

In July of 2009, the NW Straits Foundation received \$4.6 million of federal funding through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and NOAA. The funding will pay for the removal of 3,000 derelict fishing nets (208 total metric tons of debris) from Puget Sound and will restore 645 acres of vital marine habitat.

To complete the project, the Initiative will conduct 750 days of removal operations throughout the entire Puget Sound. The Initiative will also conduct 75 days of pre-removal surveys, covering approximately 29 square nautical miles in historic fishing areas in Puget Sound. The project will be completed in eighteen months, concluding by December 31, 2010.

This project will effectively eliminate the problem of legacy derelict nets from Puget Sound.

Project Results

As of October 4, 2009, the Foundation removed 414 derelict nets, and restored over 50 acres of marine habitat. In these removed nets were found more than 27,000 animals, including many drowned marine birds. The project is on schedule.

Four vessels are now working full time as weather permits: the F/V BetSea, the F/V Surveyor II, the F/V Twila Dawn, and the F/V Tenacious. The boats are employing a full complement of biologists, dive teams, boat pilots, and deckhands. The project has created 21 new, full-time, living wage jobs.

Media interest has been high, with segments aired on CNN, NBC Nightly News, and articles in the New York Times and other local venues.

Background

The NW Straits Initiative identified derelict fishing gear as a priority problem in Puget Sound in 2001. Since then, the Initiative has worked cooperatively with fishermen, tribes, and agencies to document the impacts of derelict gear, remove damaging gear, and raise awareness about the harm caused by derelict gear in Puget Sound. The Initiative has removed more than 1,500 derelict fishing nets from Puget Sound. Over 50,000 animals, representing more than 115 species, were found entangled in this gear.

Derelict gillnets are a source of mortality for marine life in Puget Sound and also pose a danger for human safety and navigation. Nets also degrade and destroy hundreds of acres of marine habitat. Nets can remain in the marine environment for decades, yet still effectively capture and kill animals. The Initiative estimate that the 3,000 gill nets to be removed during this project are currently killing approximately 30,000 marine birds, 110,000 fish and nearly 2,000,000 invertebrates every year.