



Water for Agriculture Webinar Series



The Voluntary Stewardship Program: Engaging Diverse Interests to Resolve Conflict Over Preserving Agriculture and Protecting Natural Resources

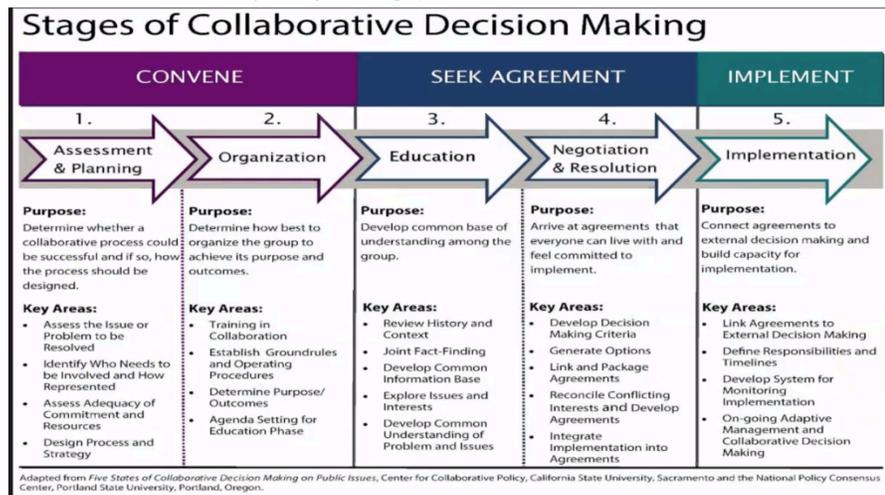
Professor Michael Kern

Associate Professor of Extension, Washington State University
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The Water for Agriculture Webinar Series welcomed Professor Michael Kern as its first guest to share an on-the-ground example of diverse interests engaging in collaborative natural resource governance in Washington State from his work as director of the William D. Ruckelshaus Center. He began by defining “collaborative governance”, describing it as an “umbrella term that refers to a wide range of public policy processes” that all share the goal of “reaching beyond traditional boundaries in public policy.” Professor Kern laid out the following criteria for the type of collaborative governance he practices: “that it’s a facilitated or mediated, multi-party, consensus-seeking process, intended to resolve a specific or particular public policy challenge.”

“We are dedicated to helping public, private, tribal, nonprofit and other community leaders in their efforts to build consensus and resolve conflicts on difficult public policy options.”

Collaborative governance occurs within a system context that includes the political, legal, socioeconomic and environmental conditions surrounding the issue. The process is driven by uncertainty, interdependence, incentives, and leadership and ultimately leads to action, outcomes, and then adaptations that feed back into the system context. This type of collaborative governance project typically has three stages: convening (to assess, plan, and organize), agreement-seeking (to educate, negotiate, and resolve), and implementation (to implement, monitor, evaluate, and adaptively manage).



Professor Kern’s presentation used a Voluntary Stewardship Program, in response to Washington State’s Growth Management Act and associated Critical Area Ordinances on agricultural land as an example to walk us through the collaborative governance process. The Ruckelshaus Center facilitated, mediated, and coordinated the collaborative governance process, as well as provided university-based research and fiscal options for implementation. During the assessment and planning phase, a committee was formed that included county and tribal governments, as well as agriculture and environmental organizations. Public meetings were held to seek additional input. During the organization phase, the committee carefully crafted ground rules that included their purpose, roles and responsibilities, and meeting and communication logistics.

The agreement-seeking phase began with a challenge: to develop a common base of understanding through education. As Professor Kern explained, “you’re not going to reach agreement until everybody is working from the same set of facts.” The Ruckelshaus Center was specifically tasked with leading university-based research and fact-finding to bring all stakeholders to a common understanding from which to negotiate. The Center put together field tours, presentations, case examples, and program summaries to reach this common ground.

Professor Kern explained that within this collaborative governance process, people are often eager to reach negotiations and resolution. However, he explained, successful implementation can only happen when time is taken to lay the groundwork through planning, organization, and education. Sometimes, he explained, you need to “go slow to go fast.” After the committee had laid this groundwork, they were able to reach agreement on a framework for a program which ultimately resulted in legislation passing the Washington State house and senate in 2011 with bipartisan support. But the process didn’t end there.

“There’s really an opportunity here for this program to serve as a national model because the challenges that this is addressing exist all around the country.”

Finally, the committee was tasked with implementing the agreements reached, as well as monitoring and evaluating those solutions to adapt if necessary. The Washington State Conservation Commission was tapped by the committee to lead implementation for the 28 counties who chose to participate in the Voluntary Stewardship Program. The plans have been completed, and currently a search is ongoing to fund the implementation of those plans. Plans include the designation of a coordinating entity, a working group that includes local farmers, tribes, environmental groups, agencies and others to implement the program to protect and restore critical areas. Technical assistance is provided by conservation districts and other agencies including the state’s Department of Fish and Wildlife, Department of Ecology, and Department of Agriculture. Overall, Professor Kern notes, the Voluntary Stewardship Program in Washington state is “a pretty good example of what it can look like on the ground when you try to implement some of the ideas that the Water for Agriculture project is trying to inform, foster, and develop.”

To view the full webinar, [click here](#).

Michael Kern, Assoc. Prof. of Extension at Washington State University, Affiliate Associate Professor, University of Washington’s Evans School of Public Policy and Governance, and Director of the William D. Ruckelshaus Center. Professor Kern is also a member of the Water for Agriculture Advisory Committee.

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