Wahkiakum County

Exploratory Marine Resources Committee

Summary Report and Recommendations

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Introduction

Wahkiakum County is one of eight counties authorized by the state legislature to establish marine resources committees via RCW 36.125.010. As part of this legislation, Wahkiakum County has the opportunity to explore whether a marine resource committee is a good fit in this community, and if so, how it should be put together and what duties it should have.

This summary report aims to present information to help in this exploration process, and ultimately provide Wahkiakum County citizens and County Commissioners the information needed to make an informed decision on whether Wahkiakum County should form a Marine Resource Committee.

This summary also includes research done by Grays Harbor County in their exploratory marine resources committee. Grays Harbor County contracted with John M. Kliem and Deborah A. Holden, consultants with Creative Community Solutions. Kliem and Holden profiled other Marine Resource Committees, and also summarized the structure, legislation and statewide coordination of marine resource committees.

Wahkiakum County is unique in that its coastline lies solely on the Columbia River Estuary, and that it is the smallest county in both population and land area along the outer coast. The ecology and communities in Wahkiakum County have unique marine resource challenges and needs, and initial needs presented in the exploratory process will be also be outlined here.

Altogether, this document will present:

1. An overview of the MRC organization structure, excerpted from Grays Harbor County Marine Resource Committee Informational Workbook (Kliem and Holden, 2008),

2. Profiles on existing MRCs under the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative, excerpted from Grays Harbor County Marine Resource Committee Informational Workbook (Kliem and Holden, 2008).

3. A discussion about potential start up issues with the new Coastal MRC programs, excerpted from Grays Harbor County Marine Resource Committee Informational Workbook (Kliem and Holden, 2008),

4. A summary of Wahkiakum County challenges and needs learned thus far related to marine resources and establishing a marine resources committee, and

5. A draft work plan for near-term MRC work.

Marine Resource Committee Models in Washington

Marine Resource Committees (MRCs) are grassroots, county appointed committees with the purpose of restoring and protecting marine resources. MRCs do projects and activities that reflect local priorities, use sound science, and bring about measurable results. Based on federally created and funded MRCs within the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative, the State of Washington passed legislation in 2007 to create its own system of MRCs for other counties bordering the Puget Sound and Pacific Ocean coastlines. This section explores the fundamental organizational structure of both systems.

The Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative

Out of concern for declining marine resources within the Northwest Straits, Congress established the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative (referred to as the Initiative) in 1998 to encourage scientifically sound, locally supported marine conservation measures.

Congress authorized the Initiative as an independent program under the general auspices of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). In a nutshell, the Initiative allows seven counties to form independent Marine Resource Committees (MRCs). The Initiative also set up an umbrella organization, the Northwest Straits Commission (NWSC), to channel funding, provide technical assistance, and facilitate regional planning to the individual MRCs. In Fiscal Year 2008, the Northwest Straits Initiative received $1,562,000 from the federal government.

The MRC's

At the core of this federally authorized and funded program are the local county Marine Resource Committees. The seven counties allowed to organize Marine Resource Committees under the Initiative are:

- Clallam County
- Island County
- Jefferson County
- San Juan County
- Skagit County
- Snohomish County
- Whatcom County

"The mission of the MRCs, guided by sound science and the needs of the Northwest Straits marine ecosystem, is to address local marine issues, recommend remedial actions to local authorities, and build local awareness of the issues and support for remedies." (Murray-Metcalf Report 1998[1])

PERFORMANCE BENCHMARKS FOR MRCS IN THE NORTHWEST STRAITS INITIATIVE:

- MARINE HABITATS – Protect and restore marine, coastal and nearshore habitat, prevent loss and achieve a net gain of healthy habitat areas.

[1] The Murray-Metcalf Report was the final report of the Murray-Metcalf Commission – a blue-ribbon committee formed in 1997 by U.S. Senator Patty Murray and U.S. Representative Jack Metcalf to explore models for protecting and restoring marine resources in the Northwest Straits.

- MARINE LIFE – Protect and restore marine populations to healthy, sustainable levels.
- MARINE WATER QUALITY – Protect marine water quality of the NW Straits region, and restore the health of marine waters.
- SOUND SCIENCE – Collect high quality data and promote its use and dissemination.
- OUTREACH AND EDUCATION – Promote stewardship & understanding of NW Straits marine resources through education and outreach.

MRCs would accomplish their mission by doing projects "that will drive real, substantive resource restoration and protection" in the Northwest Straits. To this end, the five broad performance benchmarks guide projects and measure their progress. The Initiative implements the benchmarks by tying funding to them through grant contracts. All MRC projects using Initiative funding must comply with these benchmarks.

The type of projects a MRC would undertake to implement the benchmarks might include:

- Helping to assess marine resources, problems in concert with governmental agencies, Tribes, and other entities.
- Identifying local implications, needs, and strategies associated with the recovery of Puget Sound salmon under the Federal Endangered Species Act in concert with governmental agencies, Tribes, and other entities.

- Working with the Puget Sound Ambient Monitoring Program (PSAMP) and other entities to enhance the scientific baseline and monitoring program for the marine environment of the Northwest Straits.
- Identifying current actions and the need for additional measures.
- Prioritizing actions.
- Working closely with county leadership to implement local marine conservation and restoration initiatives.
- Coordinating with the Northwest Straits Commission on marine ecosystem objectives.
- Reaching out to the public and other key constituencies on such issues as the link between healthy marine habitat and healthy resources and how MPAs can play an important role in habitat protection.

Under the Initiative, MRCs committee membership required the following representation:

- Relevant scientific expertise
- Constructive and knowledgeable individuals
- Balanced representation from:
    - Local government, especially planning staff
    - Affected economic interests, such as ports and commercial fishers

- Recreational interests, such as sport fishers
- Conservation and environmental interests

Each MRC receives their basic funding through a non-competitive grant from the Initiative through the NWSC; in 2007, that amount was $92,000. Some counties in the Initiative provide additional funding and/or in-kind services, such as staff time. Individual MRCs also apply for grant funding from other public and private resources.

The Northwest Straits Commission

Assisting each MRC in their mandate is the Northwest Straits Commission (NWSC), a separate entity with its own budget, board, and staff. The purpose of the NWSC is to provide an ecosystem focus as a whole for the Straits, mobilize science to focus on key priorities, guide and provide resources for to the MRCs, and serve as a forum for coordination and consensus building. The NWSC also does its own projects that carry regional importance for all of the MRCs, such as the Derelict Fishing Gear Removal Program.

The board of directors for the NWSC consists of MRC representatives, appointees by the governor, and a tribal representative appointed by the Secretary of the Interior. On a staff level, there is an executive director and three other positions.

Funding for the NWSC comes from the same source as the MRCs. It costs the Initiative around $360,000 annually to support the staff and activities of the NWSC.

The Roles of NOAA and WDOE

The lead federal agency responsible for passing funding to the NW Straits Initiative from Congress is the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). On a state level, the Washington Department of Ecology (WDOE) serves as the fiscal agent for the NWSC and the staff actually are WDOE employees. The headquarters for the NWSC is at the Padilla Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve.

Despite these financial connections, the NWSC acts autonomously in its operations from these agencies. Similarly, each MRC falls completely under its own county's jurisdiction. However, as with any grant relationship, each party must meet contractual obligations that significantly influence individual actions.

The Northwest Straits Foundation

The NWSC established the Northwest Straits Foundation as a separate nonprofit organization to access additional funding. Having the separate nonprofit decreases the NWSC funding reliance on the federal government and increases the amount of funding available to do projects. The foundation secured $600,000 in 2007.

Five-Year Evaluation

The initial authorization by Congress required a Five-Year Evaluation Report to determine if the Initiative should still receive federal funding. That evaluation happened

in 2004 and the Initiative passed with positive marks, including the following recommendations:

- Congress should reauthorize the Initiative for an extended period
- Increase funding to roughly $1.6 million annually
- Replicate the Initiative to other areas of Puget Sound (the report did not mention the Pacific Coastline at that time – editor's note)
- The Initiative should plan for achieving ecosystem-wide benchmark goals over the next 5, 10, and 20 years

Washington State Marine Resource Committees

The success of the Initiative inspired the Washington State Legislature to pass a "state version" in 2007. Chapter 36.125 of the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) guides those counties bordering Puget Sound south of the Northwest Straits and along the Pacific Coastline in setting up their own MRC. It also provides the option that Jefferson and Clallam Counties, both members of the Initiative, may establish subcommittees within their existing MRC, or create new MRCs altogether, for their Pacific Coastlines.

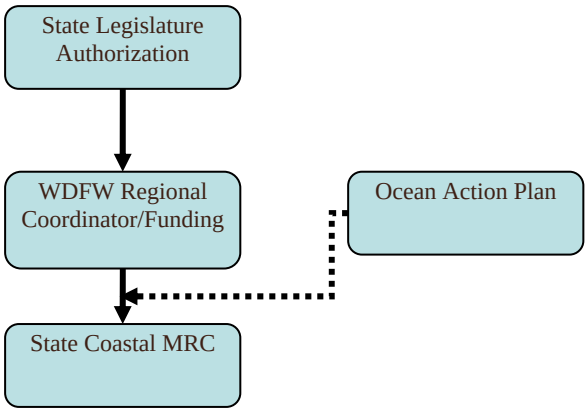

Figure 1: State Coastal MRC Organizational Model

The Intent and Role of State MRCs under Chapter 36.125 RCW

The legislature did not stray far from the basic intent of the Initiative – it essentially mirrored the basic concept of a citizen-based, nonregulatory approach for marine ecosystem restoration and protection (RCW 36.125.005). The mission of these MRCs are to "…address, utilizing sound science, the needs of the marine ecosystem local to the county initiating the marine resources committee (RCW 36.125.010)."

The MRC is to accomplish the mission by reviewing "current data and resource conservation and management programs and make prioritized recommendations for additional measures that might be necessary to enhance protection of marine resources." The role each MRC plays in making these recommendations involves:

1. Utilizing existing data and, to the extent necessary, helping to gather new data on the health of local marine resources;

2. Making scientifically based recommendations on local candidate sites for Marine Protected Areas;

3. Working closely with local and state officials to help implement recommendations of the marine resources committee;

4. Promoting public outreach and education around marine resource conservation and management issues; and

5. Engaging in any other activities that the initiating county deems appropriate.

State MRC Organizational Structure

The state legislation allows any of the authorized counties to form a MRC in cooperation with all cities and special districts bordering marine waters. Adjacent counties can coordinate their efforts if they choose to do so. On the Pacific Coastline, that includes Clallam, Jefferson, Grays Harbor, Pacific, and Wahkiakum Counties (RCW 36.125.020).

A county can choose to delegate management and oversight of a MRC to one or more municipalities within its jurisdiction if they are willing to take on the responsibility. Membership on a state MRC is very similar to that of an Initiative MRC, which includes balanced representation from:

- Local government
- Scientific experts
- Affected economic interests

- Affected recreational interests
- Environmental and conservation interests
- Additionally, counties must invite tribal representatives to participate on the MRC.

If a county does not initiate action in forming a MRC under Chapter 36.125 RCW, county residents may petition the county to do so. The county has sixty days to respond to the petition and must do so in writing, including stating their reasoning behind their decision.

Regional Coordination

Unlike the Initiative, regional coordination will not be under an autonomous umbrella organization like the NWSC. Instead, the coastal MRCs will rely on the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) for this role (RCW 36.125.030). The state MRCs in Puget Sound will rely on the Puget Sound Partnership, another state agency organized under the Governor's Office. The regional coordination role of WDFW under Chapter 36.125 RCW minimally requires them to:

- Coordinate and pool grant applications and other funding requests for marine resources committees;
- Coordinate communications and information among marine resources committees;

- Assist marine resources committees to measure themselves against regional performance benchmarks;
- Assist marine resources committees with coordinating local projects to complement regional priorities;
- Assist marine resources committees to interact with and complement other marine resources committees, and other similar groups, constituted under a different authority; and
- Coordinate with the Northwest Straits commission on issues common to marine resources committees statewide.

Washington's Ocean Action Plan

State Coastal MRCs and WDFW have the additional requirement of collaborating with federal, state, local, and tribal governments and private interest groups in addressing ocean policy issues (RCW 36.125.050). The legislature identified "Washington's Ocean Action Plan: Enhancing Management of Washington State's Ocean and Outer Coasts" (2006) as the guide for developing local and state ocean policy. The Ocean Policy Work Group developed the plan, which consisted of representatives from state agencies and commissions, county commissioners, state legislators, stakeholder groups, and ports.

The six goals identified in the plan for Washington's ocean and coastal resources are:

1. Manage the state's ocean and coastal areas to protect valuable marine resources and maintain ecosystem health while ensuring the vitality of coastal communities, through effective, sustainable fisheries management; development of a state marine aquaculture policy; use of ecosystem-based management; and investigation of developing renewable ocean energy technologies.

2. Protect the coastal environment and its communities from the threats of marine hazards, such as storm surge and tsunamis, the effects of global climate change, and increased erosion, through improved research and management and increased planning efforts. Through state work, ensure continued coordination to prevent and manage pollution and marine debris.

3. Enhance the sustainability and resiliency of outer coast communities through appropriate economic development practices that honor the historical practices of the past, maintain present successes, and plan for future uses to maximize benefits to the state's residents.

4. Increase state attention on ocean-related scientific research and observation practices that satisfy coastal management needs while furthering integrated and coordinated scientific knowledge of the state's marine environment.

5. Inform all state citizens of the vital importance of the state's ocean resources by collaborating on ocean literacy programs in state K-12 education and expanding public outreach on ocean issues.

6. Create a state interagency team on ocean policy to coordinate state policy and consult and collaborate with tribes, local government, ports, and interested citizens.

Effort on the Ocean Action Plan has now shifted to developing a detailed work plan. This responsibility falls on the State Ocean Caucus, a group consisting of state agencies and the Washington Sea Grant program.

Marine Resource Committees

The diversity of how the seven existing MRCs function under the Initiative demonstrates the great flexibility of that system. Many of the county MRCs are quite different from one another, with each one reflecting the unique needs and orientation of their communities.

Through a series of personal and telephone interviews, the Grays Harbor County MRC project had the opportunity to gather information and perceptions about each one as well as the system as a whole. The structure of the interviews was to answer many of the questions that citizens asked at an introductory meeting/workshop back in February 2008 about how MRCs work and what they do.

In summary, the interviews revealed the following general points about MRCs in the Northwest Straits:

- Most MRC boards approach their work as a "hands on" group. These boards generally oversee or even do the work themselves, often with the aid of subcommittees, citizen volunteers, and other nonprofits. A smaller number of boards take on an "advisory role" they act more like a planning commission; identifying directions and projects and then hiring out their completion.

- Most MRCs depend on the funding channeled to them through the NWSC or the Northwest Straits Foundation. A few MRCs receive some financial or in-kind support from the counties. Only the Snohomish MRC received a substantial funding contribution from its county government.

- The success of MRC projects depend on attracting and sustaining a strong group of core volunteers.
- Strategic planning is important for targeting its limited resources (money, time, and volunteers) in the most effective manner possible. The danger is taking on too much and accomplishing nothing.
- Paid staffing is relatively small; in most cases, even highly successful MRCs run with just part-time professional staffing. However, dealing with operational duties, like reports, invoicing, and contracting, requires substantial time commitments that staff and board members often share.
- Having strong partners that share interests is a necessity for most MRCs.
- Many MRCs feel that their citizens are unaware about their work.
- Good relationships among MRC board members are very important and a quality chair often makes or breaks how well the board functions.
- Most of the MRCs do not work closely with one another, nor do all of them work closely with entities within their counties, such as watershed planning groups and lead entities.
- Tribal participation is very active in some MRCs to non-existent in others. All of the MRCs would like to see more tribal involvement.

The profiles for the NWSC and each county MRC provides specific information from these interviews. This information is available in the Grays Harbor County Marine Resources Committee Marine Resources Committee Informational Workbook[2].

[2] Grays Harbor County Marine Resources Committee Informational Workbook, prepared for the Grays Harbor County MRC Exploratory Committee by John M. Kliem and Deborah A. Holden, Creative Community Solutions in July 2008.

Start Up Issues for State Coastal Marine Resource Committees

There is a lot of work involved in initiating any new program and the Coastal MRC system will prove no different. After comparing the Initiative with Chapter 36.125 RCW as well as listening to the viewpoints of those engaged in the interview process, it is evident that there are a number of practical and policy issues that WDFW and counties will need to work out together to resolve over time. Because both the state and counties are just beginning their program development efforts, this section encourages both parties to start addressing these issues below early on.

Long-Term Funding

The fact that one program is federal and the other is a state one is very important to note, particularly in relationship to funding. It is unclear at this time which legislative body will have the long-term resources or commitment to carry either program fiscally. The state's legislation opens the door to creating ten MRCs and two regional coordinators under the state system, a financial commitment that exceeds the funding levels appropriated by Congress under the Initiative. It is unknown at this time as to whether the state will be capable of financially matching the same funding levels to its system that the federal government currently provides to the NWSC and each MRC.

Coastal MRCs will need to work closely with the legislature on an ongoing basis to maintain appropriate financial resources. This will happen if MRCs to communicate clearly and frequently to legislators the value of their contribution to the state's coastal resources.

Regional Coordinator

The NWSC serves as the regional coordinator for the MRCs under the Northwest Straits Initiative. Under the state's Coastal MRC program, WDFW will play that role.

The MRCs play a major leadership role in running the NWSC under the Initiative; representatives from the individual MRCs make up over half of the voting members of its board. This group plays a significant role in making policy and funding decisions that greatly influence each MRC under the Initiative.

Except for the authorization and appropriation by Congress, the NWSC essentially stands alone in running the Initiative – no other federal or state agency plays a policy oversight role. The NWSC in turn only assists the counties in implementing the MRCs under their jurisdiction. Advocates of the Initiative system say that this is intrinsic to preserving its grassroots approach.

Chapter 36.125 RCW sets up WDFW as the "NWSC" for the state Coastal MRC system. Looking at the legislation alone, the use of WDFW in this capacity could change the entire complexion of the regional coordinator role from that of the Initiative. The legislation is clear about what the coordinator role is to accomplish; however, it is not explicit as to how WDFW is to go about it. The department could choose to take on a strongly directive role or hand over decision making to a group similar in membership with the NWSC. Alternatively, it could be something in between.

Developing a model at WDFW will take time and will likely change shape as the program grows. *(Grays Harbor County was the only Coastal MRC at the time Kliem and*

Holden's original report; they recommended the county play an active part in defining the regional coordinator role despite undertaking its own developmental process.)

Benchmarks

The broad benchmarks under the Initiative define the boundaries of MRC activities. They also serve as "measuring sticks" to determine their progress towards addressing serious environmental issues in the Northwest Straits. The Initiative developed these benchmarks before six of the seven MRCs formed (San Juan County MRC formed before congressional authorization of the Initiative).

It is unknown at this time as to what the performance benchmarks will be for the state's Coastal MRC program. There is only one reference to them in Chapter 36.125 RCW, under Section 030, which requires WDFW to "Assist marine resources committees to measure themselves against regional performance benchmarks." The legislation includes no instructions as to how WDFW is to do this. Just as with defining the regional coordinator role, counties will again need to play a very active role in determining the benchmarks.

One point to keep in the mind's forefront is RCW 36.125.050, which references the Ocean Action Plan as a focal point for Coastal MRC collaboration with other public and private interests. The goals in the plan create a broad framework that could give any Coastal MRC sufficient breathing room to take on a wide variety of projects. These goals could serve as beginning point for benchmark discussions.

Marine Protected Areas

The experiences of Initiative MRCs with setting up Marine Protected Areas within their counties provide a cautionary note.

RCW 36.125.010(4)(b) calls out that state MRCs are to make "scientifically based recommendations on local candidate sites for Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)." WDFW manages the MPA program, which up to this time, has been exclusively in Puget Sound.

Establishing MPAs had been a benchmark of the Initiative since its inception: "Achieve a scientifically-based, regional system of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)." However, this benchmark proved highly controversial for many of the Initiative MRCs. Sport and nontribal commercial fishers have reacted negatively to the MRCs playing a role in this process. However, the strongest opposition to the MPA program has been with the treaty tribes. The treaty tribes view the MPA concept as an infringement of treaty rights, especially when discussed at a venue other than at the co-manager's level. In the early years of the Initiative process, this issue kept the tribes from actively participating on the MRCs. Most MRCs eventually had to drop working on the MPA to avoid the controversy and move forward with making progress on other benchmarks. Tribal participation in most of the MRCs is just now starting up.

The 2004 Five-Year Evaluation Report recognized the controversy with the MPAs and recommended giving the benchmark more flexibility in how Initiative MRCs approach the issue (see pages 27-28 of the report). The outcome of this controversy was that the most recent benchmarks for the Initiative soften the emphasis on the MRC role in making recommendations about establishing MPAs. The benchmark now reads:

"…making policy and scientifically-based recommendations about appropriate management tools to protect marine habitats, including designation of marine protected areas." This language shifted MPAs from being the only habitat protection and restoration outcome to what could be one of many options available in the MRC toolbox.

WDFW and the Coastal MRC program need to recognize the potential conflict that this provision in Chapter 36.125 RCW could create in this formation stage.

Summary of Wahkiakum County Marine Resource Needs

Carrie Kennedy, the county MRC coordinator, presented the concept of the Marine Resources Committee to meetings of the Wahkiakum Conservation District, Skamokawa Grange, Grays River Grange, Wahkiakum Food and Farm Network, Wahkiakum Stakeholders Group (a meeting of water- and natural resource-related agencies and non-profits), and Wahkiakum Master Gardeners. Two county-wide gatherings were held over spring 2010 to initiate formation of an exploratory marine resource committee.

Over the group meetings and county-wide gatherings, several common themes arose as needs that could be addressed by a marine resources committee in Wahkiakum County:

- Monitoring. Conservation District members as well as participants in the county-wide gatherings explained how grants for conservation provided funds for the projects themselves, but rarely provided for subsequent monitoring to determine long-term results and impacts.

- River History. Grange members and participants in county-wide exploratory MRC gatherings spoke to the need of gathering and recording stories related to fisheries on the Columbia River. Participants also explained a need for understanding of the natural history of the river, such as native vegetation and fish populations. Comments from group meetings and participants in the exploratory MRC meetings showed a need for a comprehensive list of marine projects in Wahkiakum County

over the past several years. A comprehensive list would help to understand what kind of projects had already been completed and where those projects were located.

- Agency and Public Communication and Collaboration. Members of the Wahkiakum Stakeholders Group and participants in the exploratory MRC gatherings voiced concern over lack of trust and collaboration with resource management agencies. More work needs to be done to change perceptions, and encourage local citizens to work with their local agencies and vice versa.

- Outreach and Education. Members of the Conservation District and participants in the exploratory MRC meetings said they would like to encourage more participation by schools in marine resource education and monitoring, as well as outreach to landowners, particularly in maintaining banks. Participants also suggested outreach to the diking districts.

- Showcasing and Preserving Wahkiakum County's Marine Resources and Associated Culture and Rural Atmosphere. Participants in the exploratory MRC gatherings explained the need to understand the cultural and economic impacts of the estuary and marine resources in Wahkiakum County, and to showcase the beauty and rural atmosphere surrounding the estuary in Wahkiakum County.

Draft Work-Plan for Near-Term MRC Projects

Initial conversations with community members and regional resource-related contacts show that the following activities would be likely successful near-term MRC activities:

- **Marine Resource Storytelling**. Stories have a unique power to build community, gather local knowledge and insight, and build momentum for community-wide movements (gatheringourvoice.org)[3]. The county coordinator will work with the program Gathering Our Voice and the county 4-H media club to gather stories from local citizens on their history, connections and feelings around life on the Columbia River estuary.
- **Marine Resource Education**. The county coordinator will work with volunteers, the school districts, and community groups to build local education opportunities around the Columbia River estuary. The MRC coordinator and MRC volunteers will put together a booth for the Wahkiakum County Fair; highlighting MRC opportunities and showing an interactive timeline showing fisheries and estuary history that would allow fairgoers to contribute their own knowledge to the timeline. Other education opportunities might include a community movie night showing films from the 4-H media club of local stories, as well as a feature film highlighting estuary life. MRC volunteers are also interested in engaging

[3] Gathering Our Voice is a program of the Institute of Rural Innovation and Science; to celebrate and strengthen our shared sense of place. The program aims to build a network of story gatherers and storytellers to collect and preserve positive stories of economic, community and environmental stewardship in Washington, originating in North Central Washington.

local students in marine resource monitoring in partnership with local agencies.

- **Marine Resource Service.** Similar to storytelling, community-wide service opportunities around shared issues of concern can help build momentum while gauging interest on specific marine resource issues. Potential service opportunities include working with local 4-H youth and volunteers to plan willow whips to stabilize banks near the estuary at the County Fairgrounds.

A detailed program planning chart is in Appendix A illustrating Wahkiakum MRC projects and timelines.

Conclusion

The coordinator will summarize the results of this work plan for review by the statewide MRC coordinators, the Wahkiakum County MRC members, and Wahkiakum County Commissioners. In summer of 2010, the county commissioners in partnership with the state can determine how/if the MRC should be established in Wahkiakum County.