

# **Local Regional Estuarine Governance: Lessons From The Columbia River Estuary**

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## **Introduction**

In 1974, a local county commissioner and gillnet salmon fisherman visited officials in neighboring counties, cities, and ports on the lower Columbia, promoting an estuary “study”. Their vision was a study that would solve longstanding development-environment conflicts related to ports, wetlands, and shoreline land use. Later that year, with promised CZM funding, the Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce or CREST was established as a voluntary, bi-state council of local governments. CREST set out to identify estuary problems, foster needed research to solve these problems, and implement solutions within three years, after which the organization would dissolve, mission accomplished. However, after four years of information gathering, planning, and becoming schooled in the complexities of estuarine management, CREST’s governing council decided it needed to stick around to see that its plans were implemented. CREST had become too valuable a forum to its local constituencies for them to walk away and “put the plan on the shelf”. Nearly 30 years later, CREST continues to thrive. The authors, one a director of CREST during its early planning years and the other the current director, interviewed other former CREST directors to learn what it was that has made CREST relevant and supported by local governments over the years.

## **Regional Setting**

The Columbia River estuary is the second largest estuary on the US west coast, comprised of nearly 120 square miles of water, flats, marshes, diverse flora and fauna, including millions of migrating salmon, and a shipping channel serving local and upriver ports and cities. The estuary region is sparsely populated (~30,000) and rural, with several small cities on both sides of the river. Astoria, Oregon, the largest settlement along the estuary, has a population of just 10,000. Tourism, forest products, fishing, and fish processing are major economic activities, and many retirees settle in the area.

## **Evolution Of Crest And Its Functions**

CREST’s roles and functions in management of the Columbia estuary have evolved since its creation in 1974, driven as much by events and opportunities external to the region and organization as by conscious choices or perceived local problems. In part, this response to opportunities has been necessitated by the finances of CREST. Local membership dues have never been enough to support a single staff member, let alone the several broadly-trained professionals needed to provide required services. CREST staff has thus of necessity been entrepreneurial, generating a variety of grants and contracts to support a viable professional team. A good deal of that grant support has come from Oregon and Washington CZM programs, particularly in the early years of the organization. Support has diversified since that time and it is fair to say that CREST owes its longevity in part to its grants-writing skills. Another important reason CREST has

persisted is that it has stayed true to its principal mission—providing estuary-related planning and plan implementation services to its membership, including coordination with state and federal agencies on issues of local importance. CREST has performed a variety of other specialized functions over the years for its members—planning for wetlands, dredged material disposal, restoration and mitigation, oil spill response, watershed restoration, and more. Some of these functions have been constant, while others have been a product of the times. Table 1, based on recollections of CREST directors, illustrates this consistency and evolution.

#### Early CZM-Driven Planning and Implementation

In the early 1970s, there were many conflicts about how and where port and other development should proceed along the shores of the Columbia estuary. The Port of Astoria in particular was interested in filling lands adjacent to existing piers and in promoting development on other lands with highway, rail, and deep water access. Federal and state agencies charged with protecting natural resources rejected site-specific development proposals, saying that there needed to be a regional plan that set limits and defined protection and development areas. Around the same time, Oregon and Washington both were actively developing state coastal management programs supported by federal grants under the Coastal Zone Management Act. Both states agreed in 1975 to fund the development of an estuary plan for the Columbia. After several false starts, work began in earnest with a synthesis or inventory of existing information about the estuary, followed by development of local estuary-shoreland plans for five sub-areas, and plans for dredged material disposal, and mitigation and restoration. In 1979, the CREST Council adopted these elements as the *Columbia River Estuary Regional Management Plan* (CREST 1979). One of the most significant decisions in the plan was to make CREST a permanent, bi-state council of local governments.

Before the 1979 plan could be implemented and incorporated into local plans and Oregon's Coastal Management Program, certain remaining disputes not resolved in the initial conflict resolution process needed to be addressed. CREST invited the Seattle-based *Institute for Environmental Mediation* to conduct a formal mediation of the disputes, which in the main pitted local port and other development interests against federal and state agencies. The process and its outcomes, described in detail by Gusman and Huser (1984), ultimately led to plan approval and incorporation of relevant portions into local comprehensive plans (LCPs). In Washington, cities and Counties used the CREST regional plan to update local Shoreline Master Programs.

#### Estuary Research—the Columbia River Estuary Data Development Program (CREDDP)

In 1979, the estuary “study” that CREST had sought since its inception was funded by Congress through the Pacific Northwest River Basin Commission. Two years later, the Commission was abolished and the four-year, \$4 million research program was homeless. CREST presented itself as the logical heir and, working with NOAA, effectively managed the study to its conclusion. Working with scientists in the region, CREDDP

Table 1. Principal functions, roles, and activities of CREST during different CREST director tenures (1974-2003)

<b>FUNCTIONS/ROLES</b>	<b>Perry 1975-76</b>	<b>Good 1976-80</b>	<b>DeLapa 1980-83</b>	<b>Benoit 1983-86</b>	<b>Fox 1986-89</b>	<b>Barnes 1989-91</b>	<b>Rushmore 1991-93</b>	<b>Graves 1994-96</b>	<b>Taylor 1996-00</b>	<b>Van Ess 2000-03</b>
Mission Definition & Redefinition	●●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
CZM Estuary Planning	●	●●●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Conflict Resolution		●	●●●							
Plan Implementation & Updates		●	●●●	●●	●●●	●	●	●	●	●
Research & Data Development		●●●	●●●	●●●	●	●	●●	●●	●	●
Dredged Material Management		●●●	●		●●●		●●			●●●
Oil Spill Response Planning				●●●						
Restoration & Mitigation Planning		●●	●●●			●●	●●	●●		●●
Restoration & Mitigation (on ground)					●	●●	●	●●●		●●●
National Estuary Program					●●●		●●	●	●	●
Watershed & Salmon Restoration									●●●	●●●
Intergovernmental Coordination	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●
Local Planning, Grant, & Technical Services	●	●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●

● Minor Function/Role

●● Moderate Function/Role

●●● Major Function/Role

produced more than a dozen scientific reports about the estuary's natural resources and its physical, chemical, sedimentary, and biological processes. The primary synthesis product for direct management use was the *Columbia River Estuary Atlas of Physical and Biological Characteristics* (Fox and others 1984).

#### Mitigation, Restoration, and Watershed Assessment

CREST has long been involved in mitigation and restoration work, beginning with the development of the mitigation banking concept in 1978 to address an Oregon CZM requirement, and the first estuarine mitigation bank at the Astoria Airport in 1982. As part of the 1979 plan, CREST also identified potential estuarine mitigation sites, and later matched these sites to estuary areas zoned for future development. Recently, plans responding to ESA designations and the proposed deepening of the Columbia River navigation channel have focused effects on habitat restoration. CREST has been the principal in several major on-the-ground estuary restoration projects, such as a recent one at Blind Slough involving hundreds of acres of habitat. CREST also has managed local watershed programs, supporting citizen councils with technical assessments and identification of stream and wetland restoration projects.

#### Dredged Material Management

More than 5 million cubic yards of dredged material is removed from the Columbia River bar each year and an equal amount from the navigation channel extending to Portland. Disposal of dredged material has been an ongoing problem and a major activity for CREST, beginning with the 1979 plan and continuing to recent controversy over Corps' proposed deepening of the Columbia River channel. This project, if approved, will generate huge new amounts of sand, requiring new and expanded disposal sites. Findings of inconsistency with Oregon's CZM program, supported by CREST, and other problems have held up the project for several years.

#### Serving Local Membership

Probably the most important, continuous function of the CREST staff from the "local value" perspective is the direct service provided to local members. Examples include assistance with state and federal permit applications, Endangered Species Act consultations, reviewing projects that others propose, conducting wetland delineations, analyzing sediment for dredging projects, developing special purpose plans, writing and administering grants for local jurisdictions, and serving as a knowledgeable consultant on all issues aquatic. In our survey, every CREST director said this was a key to maintaining local support over the years.

#### **Lessons Learned From The Crest Experiment**

In retrospect, CREST can be considered an early and continuing experiment in *integrated coastal management*. CREST as an organization, the estuary basin as a geographic planning area, and its multidisciplinary staff and research support structure have over the years provided for integration across several dimensions of coastal management—governmental, spatial, disciplinary, and sectoral (see Cicin-Sain and Knecht 1998). A number of lessons for coastal governance can be drawn from the CREST experiment.

1. Local, multi-jurisdiction coastal management organizations can improve decision making, providing a unique forum to address common and shared problems in a coordinated manner.
2. To be context-relevant, coastal planning requires a strong local, bottom-up element, but as the CREST mediation process illustrated, state and federal governmental interests also need a meaningful voice in planning decisions.
3. Coastal plans are more likely to be supported and implemented when locally developed, but effective local implementation requires post-planning technical assistance.
4. CREST and similar organizations can serve as a single contact point for state, federal, and private sector coordination and consistency, leading to more efficient CZM.
5. CREST gives a voice in decision making to local people who are well-connected to a place, and who understand the unique local context of issues.
6. Local leaders who might not otherwise appreciate the diverse values of an estuary to the local community and economy become more informed and educated in their choices and decisions that effect the estuary.
7. Professional leadership with scientific expertise, and skills in planning, politics, and management is essential to maintain credibility with state and federal grant providers, survive in the local political environment, raise funds with consistency, and provide the range of services and assistance required to maintain local support.
8. The support of local officials and champions in times of crisis is crucial to survival of voluntary organizations like CREST; it is important to have a sufficiently broad base of local government members to weather political storms with one or a few members.
9. National and state financial support necessary to sustain an organization like CREST, which would be ineffective without appropriately trained professional staff who can fulfill the technical, coordination, and other substantive functions.
10. CREST has been a resilient organization in large part because it has stayed true to its principal purpose and mission—working for its local members.

### **Literature Cited**

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