Washington's Water Future Skagit Regional Roundtable Synthesis of Key Discussion Themes

Monday, July 20, 1:00-5:00 pm | Skagit Station Community Room (105 E. Kincaid Mount Vernon, WA. 98273)

About the roundtable

This meeting convened approx. 20 individuals from across a range of diverse interests, including local governments, utilities, Tribes, environmental and agricultural interests, and others. Meeting objectives were to:

- Discuss what a resilient water future looks like for the region, and what local priorities drive that vision
- Identify barriers that are in the way of achieving that vision and addressing local needs.
- Explore solutions that will move the region towards a resilient water future, and how Washington can help

See Appendix A (pgs 3-8) for comment letters submitted by roundtable participants in response to this synthesis.

Participants' experiences of water trends in the region

- Hotter, drier summers, loss of lower elevation snowpack, drought impacts to farmlands, more invasive species.
- Devastation from December 2025 flood; more regular flooding, more inundated properties during flood events.
- Recent Anacortes flood protection investments for water treatment plant paid off.
- Intensified divisiveness as resource management becomes more difficult.
- Disagreement with climate projections presented (too catastrophic and unlikely).

Regional vision of a resilient water future

- Thriving agriculture and communities maintain the character of Skagit Valley.
- Preserved natural beauty, healthy and biodiverse ecosystems and fish runs; delisting of all ESA species.
- Adequate, reliable water supply for agriculture, housing, rural development, and industry.
- Climate resilient infrastructure (e.g., diking, drainage, community flood protection, storage for agricultural uses).
- A collaborative, integrated program or plan that provides a framework for regional water quantity and water quality decision-making, balances benefits across needs and interests, and is backed by a statewide water plan.

	Barriers to a resilient water future	Solutions for a resilient water future
Physical/ technological	• Dams and their impacts to the river system. • Aging drainage infrastructure. • Lack of adequate water and infrastructure for agricultural irrigation water. • Too much development in the floodplain. • Many water demands, e.g. data centers.	• Increase storage (e.g., off-channel). • Reconnect historic Skagit River floodplains. • Optimize dam management for flood storage, agriculture water supply, and instream flow. • Limit evaporation from storage reservoirs • Look to traditional indigenous technologies and new techniques like cloud seeding, desalinization, air capture, drip irrigation.
Legal/ regulatory	• Archaic water law disincentivizes conservation, doesn't protect the river • Flawed instream/out-of-stream accounting. • No mechanism to redistribute water rights. • Lack of regulatory coordination and project delivery; lack of state leadership. • Agriculture not included in water allocation under existing regulatory constraints. • Endangered Species Act requirements.	• Amend the Skagit River Instream Flow Rule to provide more water for non-municipal purveyors; allow Skagit agricultural users to withdraw below the regulatory gauge. • Regulate development, especially in the floodplain. • Set conservation standards for new growth and existing residents.
Institutional/ Governance	• Lack of cooperative effort or coordinated group with authority to tackle ongoing challenges.	• Integrated plan that meets interests of diverse groups across the basin, aligns decisions across the various interests and

	• No integrated decision-making structure or strategy.	entities, and provides the structure and strategy to holistically adapt together.
Financial	• Inadequate funding for identified solutions. • High cost to maintain drainage infrastructure within small local taxing districts.	• State funding to support integrated planning and local infrastructure investments. • Tax incentives for conservation (e.g., reduced property tax). • Incentives for water trading.
Social/ political	• Difficult to achieve consensus; lack of transparency; lack of will to work together. • Disagreement re anticipated climate changes. • Limited understanding of actual needs. • Outsider interference creates conflict.	• Host field trips to build trust, relationships, and a shared understanding of needs. • Ground solutions locally, with Indigenous knowledge built in and broadly respected.

Moving towards implementation

This table reflects outcomes from small-group discussions that explored what is needed, what Washington can offer, and how to foster collaboration for four water solutions identified for the Skagit region. Themes were drawn from a group discussion around the focus and outcomes of an integrated plan. Many responses apply to regional and state scales.

Amend water law to support current and future uses

1) Reconsider prior appropriation to better meet the instream needs and other priorities.
2) Provide flexibility and regulatory certainty to allow municipal water purveyors to supply new uses.
3) Increase funding for infrastructure to support a county-wide supplier.
4) Invest in better science to support aquifer recharge for streamflow mitigation.
5) Legally define efficiency and conservation standards by water user.
6) Incentivize collaboration by developing a common understanding of the risk of inaction and prioritizing projects supported by multiple partners.

Develop new supplies (e.g., via conservation and infrastructure investments)

1) Use spill from Seattle City Light's dam operations for new withdrawals and instream flow (40 cfs for ag).
2) Secure a long-term water right for Skagit Valley agriculture.
3) Provide state funding for acquisitions and support farmers in transfer and purchase.
4) Secure funding for multi-benefit delta infrastructure.

Protect and restore habitat function (e.g., for ESA-listed species)

1) Promote data transparency and data sharing between agencies.
2) Revisit policies re aquifer storage & recharge, recycled water discharge to seawater, ag use of recycled water.
3) Increase Ecology staff and presence on-the-ground while encouraging local control.
4) Incentivize farmers to maintain wetlands and riparian habitats.
5) Increase efficiency and smart prioritization in distributing salmon recovery funding.
6) Elevate habitat protection on public forest harvest plans.

Integrate floodplain management and infrastructure investments

1) Identify nature-based solutions and best management practices for flood infrastructure in coastal areas that protect fish and agriculture (e.g. tide gates manage fresh and saltwater flow and diking/ditch operations).
2) Build a statewide program for floodplain acquisition in high-risk areas and provide funding for floodplain reconnection projects.
3) Coordinate focused efforts between state agencies, Tribes, and local communities to develop science, solutions, and integrated plans in specific high-risk areas.
4) Foster collaboration in integrated planning with a facilitated, funded, accountable process.

Appendix A. Comment Letters in Response to the Skagit Regional Roundtable Synthesis

August 17, 2026

Casey Sixkiller, Director
Washington Department of Ecology
300 Desmond Drive SE
Lacey, WA 98503

RE: Skagit County and Skagit Dike/Drainage/Irrigation Districts Comment on Ecology's Proposed Draft Synthesis of July 20, 2026 Washington Water Futures Skagit Roundtable Meeting

Director Sixkiller,

Skagit County and the Skagit Valley's dike, drainage and irrigation districts provide comment on Ecology's draft synthesis of the Washington Water Futures July 20 Skagit Roundtable meeting.

Ecology's draft synthesis does not appropriately reflect our positions and interests. Please refer to this joint letter, the Board's July 1, 2026 letter and the Districts' July 14, 2026 letter regarding our positions and interests as to the matters discussed at the July 20 Roundtable meeting. We request this communication be made part of the record.

1. Relevant Factual Background.

The Skagit River is the U.S. West Coast's third largest river by discharge volume, after the Columbia and Sacramento.

In the 1990s, King County commissioned a study by HDR Engineering to explore appropriating the Skagit River to meet King County's rapidly-growing water needs, giving rise to Skagit tribal/local studies, agreements and effort meant to protect the Skagit River Basin from "a King County raid of the local water."[1]

In 2001, Ecology adopted an Instream Flow Rule, WAC 173-503, which recognized significant municipal water rights (City of Anacortes and Skagit Public Utility District No. 1) more than sufficient to support the limited future growth that the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan envisions.

Ecology's Rule required the rest of the Skagit River's immense flow to remain in the river whenever summertime flows fall below 10,000 cfs, some three times higher than the Skagit's historic low flow, providing an unprecedented level of protection for fisheries and the environment, also precluding a "King County raid of the local water."

[1] *See*, Deposition of Bob Wubbena, Senior Vice President, HDR Engineering, dated May 3, 2005, at 25, Snohomish County Superior Court Cause No. 04-2-05842-1. Mr. Wubbena's deposition reflects that he (and HDR) worked on water system plans for entities in Skagit County as well as King County.

Unfortunately, Ecology's 2001 Skagit ISF Rule failed to make any provision for either (1) exempt wells; or (2) the long-standing practice by which Skagit irrigation districts withdrew irrigation water below the regulatory gage to fill Skagit Delta ditches and provide water for Skagit farms. These omissions have been the genesis of water rights conflict in the Skagit Valley for the last quarter century.

2. Discussion and Analysis.

a. Exempt Wells.

We do not seek to revisit the question of exempt wells, and consider the matter generally settled. Unincorporated Skagit County is principally floodplain and natural resource land, areas in which the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan actively discourages residential, commercial and industrial growth.[2]

b. Agricultural Irrigation Withdrawals.

Agricultural irrigation withdrawals on the Skagit Delta present the principal remaining Skagit River water-related issue. This problem arises from Ecology's untenable interpretation of its 2001 Skagit ISF Rule. Ecology must focus its resources on reasonably resolving this problem.

For decades, Skagit irrigators pumped Skagit mainstem water into Skagit Delta drainage ditches in the summer, creating a sub-irrigated landscape conducive to crop growth, with high efficiency and minimal environmental impact. Although these withdrawals are in the tidally-influenced zone below the Mount Vernon regulatory gage, Ecology now takes the position that these withdrawals are interruptible and thus prohibited by the Rule whenever the Skagit at the Mount Vernon gage falls below the minimum flow of 10,000 cfs. Since these withdrawals are below the regulatory gage and by definition have no impact on stream flows at the Mount Vernon gage, it is difficult to comprehend how these withdrawals offend the minimum flow requirements established by the 2001 Rule.

Ecology's position also seems inconsistent with reasoned environmental analysis and policy judgment. The Skagit below the Mount Vernon gage is highly influenced by tidal fluctuation, and the *de minimis* withdrawals necessary to continue supporting Skagit Agriculture on the Delta effectively disappears into this ecological background. Many in our community consider Ecology's position to be arbitrary and capricious.

[2] *See, e.g.,* Skagit County Comprehensive Plan Policy 5A-5.2 (2025-2045) ("Low intensity land use activities such as agricultural, forestry, and recreational land uses should be encouraged in floodplain areas and other land uses in these areas should be discouraged.")

Ecology and its Skagit ISF Rule provide ample water to drive human population growth and attract water-dependent industry such as data centers and plastic water bottling operations, yet there is little to no water available to sustain Skagit Agriculture and its long-standing irrigation practices. This outcome is inconsistent with Skagit County's Comprehensive Plan and sound public policy.

c. Climate Change and Solutions Going Forward.

Ecology's July 20 Roundtable seemed focused on the concept of climate change as a way to shift attention away from the Rule's omissions.[3] To be clear, we appreciate better than most that the climate is warming, North Cascades glaciers are shrinking, and summertime Skagit low flows are likely to become lower.

However, it is also important to recollect that "natural" summertime flows are already substantially enhanced by the Skagit River system's five hydroelectric dams, with recent agreements affording significant new in-river flow enhancement.

Furthermore, the amount of water required to support Skagit Agriculture relative to actual summertime stream flow under any plausible climate scenario is truly minimal when compared to river usage around the American West, noting again that Skagit Agriculture withdrawals occur very low in the basin, shortly before the Skagit reaches its confluence with the saltwater.

In short, solving this issue should not be difficult among reasoned minds operating in good faith.

Our objective is to establish a long-range, durable water regime in the Skagit that responsibly supports both Skagit fisheries and farming in light of climate change projections. This requires balanced leadership, honesty and transparency, and recognition that community buy-in and collaboration are objectives in their own right.

For this reason, we have asked the Skagit County Climate Impact Advisory Committee (CIAC) to advise our community on summertime low flows under various plausible climate scenarios.[4]

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[3] Ecology's presentation, maps and other information presented at the July 20 Roundtable seemingly relied on the RCP 8.5 (SSP5-8.5) climate scenario. Scientific authorities have concluded that the projected emissions associated with RCP8.5 "have become implausible, based on trends in the costs of renewables, the emergence of climate policy and recent emission trends." Scenario Model Intercomparison Project for CMIP7, Geoscientific Model Development, European Geosciences Union, April 7, 2026, at https://gmd.copernicus.org/articles/19/2627/2026/ (last visited August 15, 2026). As discussed during the July 20 Roundtable meeting, Ecology's reliance on an outdated and controversially high climate scenario is making it more difficult to achieve community buy-in.

[4] See, Letter from Board of Commissioners to CIAC dated July 20, 2026.

The CIAC includes highly qualified scientists and policy experts as well as representatives of all four federally-recognized Skagit tribes; Skagit dike, drainage and irrigation districts; Skagit agriculture; Skagit County; and Skagit environmental organizations. This is the appropriate pathway to build community consensus around climate-informed plans and action.

d. Skagit Integrated Plan

For the past two decades, we have been led to believe that progress on Skagit agricultural irrigation water and other natural resource issues centrally requires progress on major estuary restoration consistent with the federally-adopted 2005 Skagit Chinook Recovery Plan. These are projects that inherently implicate our infrastructure and regulatory authority. We are currently supporting various ongoing Chinook Recovery Plan project efforts, but the siloed approach to a range of interconnected issues, including this one, is unlikely to produce long-term, durable solutions.

It is vital that the State support a rational approach to the Skagit Delta and estuary, one that strategically addresses infrastructure resilience, estuary restoration/salmon recovery, farmland preservation, and the impacts that climate change is likely to involve. As discussed during the July 20 meeting, we seek a state-supported integrated planning approach that centers Skagit tribal and local government in direct, collaborative dialogue, and facilitates integrated state and federal funding requests.

3. Conclusion.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the issue of Skagit River water rights and availability. As noted, please refer to this correspondence as the position of Skagit County and the unified Skagit districts as to the issues discussed at the July 20 Roundtable meeting.

Sincerely,

SKAGIT DRAINAGE & IRRIGATION DISTRICTS CONSORTIUM

By: NORM HOFFMAN
Its: Chair

By: BRIAN WALTNER
Its: Vice Chair

SKAGIT COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

RON WESEN, Chair

PETER BROWNING, Commissioner

JOE BURNS, Commissioner

SKAGITONIANS
TO PRESERVE FARMLAND

August 18, 2026

Casey Sixkiller, Director
Washington Department of Ecology
300 Desmond Drive SE
Lacey, WA 98503

Delivered via email

re: Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland Comment on Draft Skagit Regional Roundtable Synthesis, Washington's Water Future Initiative

Director Sixkiller:

Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland (SPF) appreciates the opportunity to comment on Ecology's draft synthesis of the July 20 Skagit Regional Roundtable. We are grateful that ours and other agricultural voices were included in the conversation, and the meeting itself created space for candid exchange, thoughtful discussion across perspectives, and a genuine sense that progress is possible through collaboration. We are concerned, however, that the draft synthesis does not precisely capture what was said or the perspectives expressed by participants. These summaries matter. They become part of the record and can shape how the State understands local priorities and determines what happens next.

SPF supports the comments submitted by Skagit County and the Skagit Drainage & Irrigation Districts Consortium. The Skagit's challenges cannot be addressed effectively through separate, siloed efforts. Water supply, agriculture, salmon recovery, flood protection, drainage and infrastructure, farmland preservation, and climate resilience are interconnected and must be addressed together.

What the Skagit needs is a locally led, state-supported integrated plan that addresses these interconnected issues as a whole.

Going forward, we ask Ecology to record all Washington Water Future meetings, be they regional, public, or interest-specific, so there is a complete and precise record of what participants actually say. In the interest of transparency, survey data and input gathered through meetings funded by taxpayer dollars should be made publicly available.

414A Snoqualmie St. | P.O. Box 2405 | Mount Vernon, WA 98273 360.336.3974 www.skagitonians.org

SKAGITONIANS
TO PRESERVE FARMLAND

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and we look forward to collaborative action that will move us towards collaborative solutions.

Sincerely,

Lora Claus
Executive Director

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