

Natural Environment

Snohomish County’s natural features combine to create a unique environmental setting in the Puget Sound Basin. The Cascade Mountains, parts of five major river watersheds, lowland forests, estuaries, marine shorelines, numerous lakes, wetlands, and streams all combine to create the special character that is Snohomish County. These features also contribute to the county’s economy and quality of life to its citizens.

The Vision Statement for the 2024-2044 Comprehensive Plan (“the Plan”), reflects the importance of the natural environment and the need for its protection. One of the Vision Statement’s guiding principles reads:

Natural Environment: *The County values its beautiful landscapes and fiercely protects the natural environment for its ecosystem services, recreational opportunities, and habitat. There are many connected greenways, open spaces, and wildlife corridors throughout the county providing habitat, flood mitigation, and tree canopy. Regional and neighborhood parks, trails, and open space offer recreational opportunities that are accessible and affordable to all.*

In addition to the obvious aesthetic and habitat functions and values provided by the natural environment, the natural environment performs several ecosystem services benefitting Snohomish County communities and mitigating the impacts of climate change, including but not limited to stormwater management, carbon sequestration, flood attenuation, slope stabilization, microclimate and temperature moderation, and improvements to air and water quality. When the natural environment is not intact, many of these ecosystem services must typically be replaced by constructed structures and facilities at significant cost. There has also been substantial research supporting the role the natural environment plays in human physical and mental health. Equitable access to a healthy natural environment should be available to all county residents.

Protection of the natural environment is fundamental to achieving and preserving the quality of life for Snohomish County residents. People and businesses choose to locate in Snohomish County due in large part to the quality of the natural environment. The ((natural environment element)) Natural Environment Element of the ((comprehensive plan)) Plan provides the framework to realize the vision of thriving communities while protecting and preserving natural resources and the environment. It also provides for protection from various forms of pollution and natural hazards such as flooding, landslides, and other natural disasters. To be effective, in our efforts to protect and enhance the natural environment, the various policies, plans, and programs must be coordinated and focused through a consistent policy framework that has a multi-faceted approach. Our guiding principle is that the cumulative effect of all of the county's programs and efforts should result in no net loss of ecological functions and values consistent with the requirements of state law.

This multi-faceted approach includes planning; intergovernmental coordination; development of regulation; enforcement; and improved protection of ecological functions and values through

non-regulatory incentive-based means, such as voluntary enhancement and restoration, public education and other voluntary activity; and monitoring and adaptive management. The ~~((plan))~~ Natural Environment Element provides policies in each of these areas to direct the county's efforts to protect the natural environment of Snohomish County and to achieve the outcome of no net loss of functions and values to the extent mandated by state law.

The need for a rigorous protection program is balanced by providing a fair and equitable distribution of the impacts of regulation, flexibility and clarity in approach, and fast service delivery. The public must be educated to understand the county's regulatory approach and the reasons for the regulation. Vital to the success of the county's program is careful consideration of how the ~~((burdens))~~ goals of environmental protection may impact property owners and business. Severe financial impacts, unclear government purposes, or circumstances where a less intrusive means for accomplishing the identified purpose are factors that must be avoided in developing policy and regulation that may adversely affect property rights. In developing policy and regulation affecting property rights, as well as issuing permits, county decision makers must evaluate constitutional principles relating to the taking of property and the application of substantive due process. Tools available to aid this evaluation process include the Washington State Attorney General's Advisory Memorandum on Avoiding Unconstitutional Takings of Private Property.

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Climate Change and Sustainability

Greenhouse gases, global warming and projected impacts on the climate create new challenges to implementing the Growth Management Act. A number of climate change impacts have been recorded over the 20th century, and the trends are projected to continue. Research indicates that the burning of fossil fuels and the conversion of land from its natural state are the primary human causes of climate change. Planning for transportation, open space, and resource lands under GMA can influence local fossil fuel dependence and land conversion to reduce the county's greenhouse gas emissions. Likewise, GMA planning for infrastructure and future growth are appropriate means of preparing for and adapting to predicted climate change impacts. While scientific understanding of climate change continues to grow, the county recognizes the prudence of planning for projected impacts. The county will move forward cautiously and responsibly to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and ensure its citizens are prepared to respond and adapt to climate change impacts.

These policies are one element of the county's response to climate change. Other elements include a study of climate change impacts to the county and its infrastructure and a stakeholder involvement process to help the county chart a course of action. This response is in step with state actions on a climate response strategy. The state's Climate Advisory Team, which includes Snohomish County, is tasked with reducing emissions, identifying measures to adapt to climate change, developing clean energy jobs, and moving toward energy independence.