



Lake Whatcom Policy Group

September 1, 2021 Meeting

Brief Digest of Presentations and Discussion

Policy Group members in attendance: Michael Lilliquist, Gene Knutson (Bellingham City Council); Leslie McRoberts (Lake Whatcom Water and Sewer District Board); Nancy Alyanak, Sudden Valley Community Association.

1. Water quality data reports – updates

Tributary monitoring in the Lake Whatcom watershed for both fecal coliform and phosphorus has been ongoing since 2007. The Lake Whatcom Management Program (LWMP) received a final report from the monitoring consultants in July 2021. The results illustrate the water conditions in tributaries feeding into the lake, and the data will also be used to inform the phosphorus loading model that is part of the Department of Ecology's Total Maximum Daily load (TMDL) limits for phosphorus and fecal coliform in the watershed. The LWMP Data Team will meet to discuss and analyze the results, and plan for future data needs.

The report revealed that most of the phosphorus loading is particulate matter, not dissolved phosphorus. This is also known as suspended solids or turbidity. The filter vaults used to treat stormwater need to be cleaned to retain effectiveness. Stormwater management practices are employed to reduce sediments before the water goes into the vaults. If there is heavy sediment loading, vaults need more maintenance. The summary report on tributary monitoring can be found at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/10P1aaH44dkSzhzRhHTufUBZjENJVDFrQ/view>

2. Lake Whatcom Overlay District regulation revisions

The County Council asked staff to update and revise the County overlay district that contains land use, stormwater, and tree retention regulations for the watershed. This process has just begun, and staff will work with the County Council to clarify their intent for the scope of the work. One goal may be to harmonize County and City regulations whenever possible. For example, the review may include revisions to the definition of what are considered significant trees, and more trees may be protected. Also, current County regulations allow development to result in removal of the greater of 35%, or 5000 square feet, of forest cover on a property during development. These allowances may be reduced.

For comparison, in Bellingham if a property is being redeveloped, it must retain at least 30% of vegetation in a natural forested condition if an engineered method is used for stormwater compliance, or 75% if forest retention is to be used to manage stormwater. Trees that are 6 inches or greater at breast height must be replaced elsewhere on the property if removed, with the exception of hazardous trees. Staff will bring back updates to the Policy Group after the scope of the County review is determined.

3. Wildfire risk management update

The issue of fire risk management was raised by County Executive Sidhu at the March annual Lake Whatcom Joint Councils and Commissioners meeting. Increased fire risk is being driven by increasing air temperatures, reduced summer rain, and earlier snow melts, all of which add up to drier fuels and forests. Staff summarized city and county planning efforts that impact fire management. Whatcom County Parks is working on a forest management plan that will update management of County watershed lands. Bellingham also has an urban forestry management plan in the works. The Lake Whatcom Water and Sewer District is working to reduce fire hazards to its infrastructure. Whatcom County has a Natural Hazards mitigation plan that is currently being updated for submission to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and this plan contains a section on mitigating risks from woodland fires. The Whatcom Conservation District (WCD) has a program that focuses on educating landowners on ways to reduce fire risk.

WCD provides in-person and remote workshops to residents as well as one-on-one consultation with property owners. Creating a 100-foot defensible space around a house is a key component of reducing fire risk. Techniques include keeping the roof clean, moving flammable materials away from the house, planting in clusters rather than continuously, dividing plantings with narrow strips of grass, and adding rock features. Trees are less fire prone if the lower branches are limbed. Keeping shrubs away from trees also reduces fuel that can act as a ladder to the canopy. Flammable mulch should be kept away from the side of a house, and rocks are preferred over organic mulch or vegetation. Healthy plants are less fire prone, and native plants are particularly well-adapted to the area and easier to keep healthy. For more information see www.whatcomcd.org/wildfire.

4. Land managers coordination to address increasing unauthorized bike trails on public lands

Local, state, and federal land managers have been meeting to develop a response to recreation management issues, especially the building of unauthorized mountain bike trails, which is a problem countywide. Staff from the jurisdictions have been meeting with the Whatcom Mountain Bike Coalition (WMBC) to discuss the issue. Clear cuts that wreck existing trails are one thing that drives unauthorized trail building, since bikers often want to restore the trails immediately, which may be outside of the summer season when land disturbance is allowed. Some progress is being made but there are still disagreements. Land managers would prefer that the WMBC develop an annual plan for trail maintenance and construction that could be reviewed beforehand for compliance with requirements.

Many bikers are not affiliated with the coalition so there is a need to find other ways to engage them. Significant construction activities could technically be in violation of land disturbance limits and penalties could be levied, but this has not happened yet.

5. Topics for next meeting

Tentative topics for next meeting are:

- Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) 2021 program review
- TMDL model process review
- Land Use Program review and acquisition funding discussion
- Forestry issues update

Next meeting: December 1, 2021, 3:00 PM