



## Lake Whatcom Policy Group

### December 6, 2023 Meeting

### Brief Digest of Presentations and Discussion

**Policy Group members in attendance:** Hannah Stone, Skip Williams (Bellingham City Council); Kaylee Galloway, Todd Donovan (Whatcom County Council); Bruce Ford (Lake Whatcom Water and Sewer District Commission); Nancy Alyanak (Sudden Valley Community Association).

#### 1. Aquatic Invasive Species Prevention Program (AIS) Program Review

City staff provided an overview of the Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) prevention program. There are four aquatic invasive species present in Lake Whatcom, including Eurasian watermilfoil, New Zealand mudsnail, Asian clam, and nutria. There are no zebra or quagga mussels in Washington State, but they are a species of concern for the AIS program to prevent. In 2007, zebra and quagga mussels were transferred over land for the first time, leading to their presence in Lake Mead in Nevada.

AIS program inspectors protect our drinking water and provide customer service. In 2023, the program switched to a 4 x 10-hour shift schedule for inspectors.

Watercraft inspections are mandatory. Inspectors ask for vessel history, visually inspect, and complete decontaminations when necessary, based on a risk assessment. Examples of high-risk vessels include used vessels acquired recently, out-of-state registration, and those whose history includes a waterbody that has or is suspected to have zebra or quagga mussels.

Inspectors issue permits, which every boat is required to display. The permit fee is based on vessel type. Whatcom County Sheriff's Office (WCSO) enforces the AIS permit requirement. In 2023, WCSO completed 736 written inspections and only 37 AIS violations were located. The operators of the vessels in violation were sent to the inspection station to obtain a permit.

The total annual watercraft inspections have remained constant since 2017. There are four inspection stations: Bloedel Donovan, Sudden Valley, South Bay, and Lake Samish. The Bloedel Donovan, Samish, and South Bay season opened 4/22/23, with the busiest day in mid-May. Bloedel Donovan experienced the slowest July in program history, while South Bay had the busiest July in program history. Staff expect higher boat traffic at South Bay in the future since it was redeveloped in September to provide improved accessibility. The Sudden Valley season opened 5/6/23 with the busiest day in mid-May. The AIS program also completed 1,422 boats inspections at off-site locations.

Overall, boats come from all across the US and Canada (25 states and provinces) with the most from Washington State and British Columbia. Only 10% of boats required additional attention (plants removed, decontaminate, etc.) and 12 decontaminations were completed. Decontaminations use hot water and high pressure.

Additionally, the AIS program includes a wire seal program to allow an express pass for boaters returning to the same lake. Early detection and monitoring of existing species are also components of the AIS program.

In 2023, juvenile quagga mussels and one adult were found near Twin Falls Idaho in the Snake River, which is part of the Columbia River basin. Idaho implemented a rapid response plan and copper treatment to kill the mussels. They will evaluate the effectiveness of the treatment in spring.

Changes to the AIS program for 2024 include converting two 9-month positions to full-time, increasing monitoring, and developing an AIS Rapid Response Plan specific for Lake Whatcom in close coordination with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

## **2. Lake Whatcom Management Program 2025-2029 Work Plan – Process for Update and Policy-Maker Input**

Whatcom County staff provided an overview of the anticipated timeline for developing the 2025-2029 Lake Whatcom Management Program Work Plan:

- February 2024- Staff give update to and gather input from Policy Group
- April- June 2024- Draft work plan and Interjurisdictional Coordinating Team (ICT) review
- July 2024- Public comment period
- August 2024- Incorporate feedback into work plan
- September 2024- Circulate work plan for final review and present to Policy Group
- October 2024- Present work plan to Councils and Commission for consideration of adoption

Staff also mentioned that they are looking to add climate action as an 11<sup>th</sup> program area. Other program area work is expected to be similar to the current work plan with additional actions. Another related item is that the 2023 progress report is currently being drafted and will be completed in early 2024.

## **3. Updates**

### **Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) Reassessment Schedule**

Whatcom County staff provided an update on the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) reassessment. The consultant completed modeling runs in the summer and finished the draft report in November. Staff and stakeholders have met and are currently reviewing the draft. The Lake Whatcom Data Team is providing comments on it to the consultant. The report and model results will be submitted for review with the Washington Department of Ecology's Environmental Assessment Program. Staff will discuss the report results at the February Policy Group meeting. The final report will be submitted to the Department of Ecology by the end of March for new target reduction.

Staff stated that the TMDL was approved by the Environmental Protection Agency in 2016, so we are eight years in to the 50-year timeline. Models are to be updated every 10 years, there is continued monitoring, and staff review updated model and data, then revisit short and long-term actions. Policy Group member inquired about where the data

shows we are at in terms of progress. Whatcom County Council wishes to discuss this at a future County Water Work Session.

Policy Group members also inquired if the contract with the WWU Institute for Watershed Studies is still comprehensive enough and if it should look at forestry impacts. Staff stated there are many variables, so it is hard to determine how timber harvests affect water quality. The 2016 TMDL does have an allowance for silviculture. New modeling will help figure out a broader scale where phosphorus is coming from.

Policy Group members reiterated that the meetings are focused on what we've done and what we are going to do, but not on how are we doing, nor data driven. Staff mentioned that they can better reiterate the data from the annual Watershed Institute report and also stated that changes to water quality are complex and will take time. The data shows subtle changes. The data is shared annually at the Joint Councils and Commission meeting and reports are available to public. Policy Group members also inquired about the projected phosphorus removal vs. the actual phosphorus removal from implemented stormwater projects. Staff stated that both the City and County conduct effectiveness monitoring and work on incorporating monitoring into the design of projects.

#### **City of Bellingham Building Moratorium**

City Council extended the building moratorium for Silver Beach to July 2024. This allows time to review regulations and determine what it would mean to revise the densities for multi-family housing. In 2021, the City re-zoned all multi-family zones with density ranges of low, medium, and high and require a minimum number of units on each property as it is developed. High density areas do not have a maximum number of units. There are four multi-family areas in Silver Beach, one medium and three high density. Most sites are built out already, but some have additional development potential and now have a minimum number of units required. This will impact the City's buildable lands analysis, but is expected to have a small impact.

The City is looking at the impacts low and medium density zones will have and is also looking at stormwater. The City expects to discuss this at the City Planning Commission in March, then Planning Commission will give a recommendation to City Council, and City Council is expected to make a determination in May. City staff will provide an update at the February Policy Group meeting and the March Joint Councils and Commission meeting.

#### **Whatcom County Forest Management Plan**

Whatcom County staff summarized that a Request For Proposals was issued in November for the forest management plan for Whatcom County-owned forestland. Four proposals were received, which will be scored in December and a selection is expected to be made in early 2024. County Council approved the budget for a new parks position that will implement the forest management plan. County Parks is also working with Washington Department of Natural Resources staff to develop a post-fire assessment of the Blue Canyon Road fire. The emergency proclamation associated with the aftermath of this wildfire has been extended until the end of the year.

	<b>Climate Vulnerability Assessment</b> City staff stated they will have a new position for the climate vulnerability assessment. This position is currently pending City Council budget approval.
<b>4. Celebration of Lake Whatcom Management Program Partnership</b>	
	Councilmember Galloway acknowledged over 31 years of Lake Whatcom Management Program partnership.

The next Policy Group meeting is February 7, 2024 at 3:00PM