

Notes from the Government & Resiliency Panel

Museum of Northwest Art, La Conner, WA, November 4, 1:00-2:30pm

The discussion was moderated by Dave Peterson, a professor of forest biology at the University of Washington and emeritus senior scientist with the U.S. Forest Service. His research focuses on fire science and climate change in the western U.S., with a current focus on adapting to climate change in forest ecosystems.

Two articles were published about this panel:

- [Museum of Northwest Art holds panel discussion on climate change resiliency \(Skagit Valley Herald\)](#)
- [MoNA group told collaboration key in climate change actions \(La Conner Weekly News\)](#)

Part One: Introductions

Dave Peterson used the bio information in [About the Panelists](#) to introduce each panelist, who then provided a short introduction in response to these two questions: *What are your major concerns about climate change for society and the Skagit region? What is your organization doing to understand climate change and prepare for its effects?*

Heather Spore, *MSc. Environmental Policy Analyst for Swinomish Indian Tribal Community*, opened by stating her personal connections to both the Alaskan and Hawaiian environments. She shared how she's seen pristine salmon habitat, but has also witnessed the risks in both Alaska and the PNW, such as increased river temperatures that negatively impact salmon in many ways. Heather cited the example of several thousand salmon that died in the Nooksack before they had a chance to spawn. She stated that salmon are crucial for tribal communities in numerous ways and that every fish matters. She also discussed how melting glaciers are limiting the essential cool, clear water needed for salmon habitat and how lower river levels are a widespread problem for salmon, as well as people. Heather spoke about the work that is being done to look seven generations ahead and shared a couple of examples of restoration projects. She talked about the Swinomish clam garden, which is the first of its kind in the region, which will provide essential habitat despite sea level rise. Heather ended by expressing her hope that we can work together to restore habitat that is lost and to protect habitat that is still healthy.

Richard Brocksmith, *Mt. Vernon Councilmember*, opened by sharing that while he has a background as a fish biologist, he is planning to focus on his role as a City Council Member. His overarching message is that while Skagit County has not had a strong focus on prioritizing climate change resiliency in the past, this is changing and it is changing quickly. Richard discussed flood protection and described the flood wall in downtown Mount Vernon. He shared an example of stormwater planning and how this infrastructure is essential when planning to grow the city to be bigger and stronger. He talked about how residents and Council Members are changing their previously negative opinions on increasing density, which is a requirement in the upcoming growth management plan. He shared that while Mount Vernon has an award-winning waste water system, we must still work to increase the capacity of the existing wastewater systems, which will allow for more density. Richard used this example to demonstrate how wastewater is tied to density which is tied to climate change resiliency planning.

Ronda Strauch, *Seattle City Light*, opened with a description of Seattle City Light as a public utility which has provided power to Seattle and surrounding areas since 1905. They are now greenhouse gas neutral with

80-90% hydroelectric power. Ronda's position was developed 10 years ago as part of the utility's climate change response plan, and her work is focused on helping the utility be resilient. SCL feels that electricity is essential to help the community thrive and cope in the face of climate change. One example of that is the increased need for air conditioning to cope with heat waves. Ronda shared that the challenges of the complexity and the pace of climate change mean that we need to focus on collaboration in order to reduce greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere and to strengthen our ways of living. SCL is putting effort into decarbonizing transportation etc. There are four components to their work: 1. Education, both internal and external 2. Research in collaboration with universities and other entities 3. Collaboration, for example when they needed to purchase electricity during the Sourdough fire 4. Actions, for example working to modernize the grid.

Karlee Deatherage, *Sr. Community Affairs Rep (Skagit & Snohomish County) for Puget Sound Energy* opened by sharing that her role is working with communities and learning about the needs of Skagit and other nearby counties. She polled the audience to get a better understanding of where folks in the audience were coming from. Karlee described how PSE's CEO has helped them focus on climate change and necessary adaptations. In 2021, PSE launched a plan to become carbon free by 2045 and they are eliminating coal by next year. A recent report shows that they are on track to achieve 80% clean energy by 2030 and 100% by 2045. PSE is concerned about many aspects of climate change, including extreme weather events, which mean wetter winters (rain or snow), hotter summers, and increased droughts. These events strain the grid, which means there is an increased likelihood of power outages and flooding, making it difficult for first responders to restore power. Additionally, there is more demand on the electric systems, and they need to make sure they can meet those needs without overloading the systems. One way PSE is working to tackle these issues is by encouraging behavior change of customers through programs like Flex smart and considering neighborhood scaled systems. Karlee ended by stating that while there are challenges, there are also solutions.

Peter Browning, *Skagit County Commissioner*, opened by stating that the commissioners keep voting down Fully Contained Communities and will continue to do so. He shared his personal concern for how climate change will impact his adult children, as well as some of his background, including a Masters in Cultural Anthropology from Western Washington University, his previous work in public health, and providing private consultation to tribal communities. Peter stated that he is not a scientist, rather his role as a Commissioner requires him to be a generalist. His goal is to shape a local plan for the best steps we can take while listening to the community's diverse perspectives. He believes we can't have a coherent conversation without including the dike and drainage districts. Peter stressed the importance of listening to the tribal communities, and shared that he appreciated Heather's comments earlier and that he is also listening to the farming communities and the electrical utilities. He had several conclusions to share, including that experts agree that it is going to be harder to feed ourselves in the face of climate change and cited the example of the impact of water shortages in the Southwest. Peter stated that Skagit's farmland is one of our strengths and has the top 2% rated soil in the world, and he expressed that we need to reduce our footprint by trying to localize food systems to minimize transportation. He believes we need to be concerned about sea level rise and that our dikes must be managed as we deal with unprecedented floods. Peter expressed that even if the farmland can handle the floods, our cities and the commercial and residential infrastructure cannot. He believes we need protection, through zoning and creating more acres of fully protected farmland—Skagit County is now 70 acres short of 15,000 protected acres. He expressed the need to pull back some of the marine dikes, make sure we have public control of dikes, come together to create coherent planning, and move forward on estuary restoration projects.

Part Two: Discussion of the Central Question

Dave Peterson asked everyone to dive into the central question: *Are there opportunities to increase the resilience of communities (including tribal communities), natural resources, and infrastructure in anticipation of climate change effects and socioeconomic change?*

Richard Brocksmith spoke about the need to invest in our waste water management systems in order to reduce their nutrient outputs. He spoke about reducing harmful overflows into the river. He mentioned that there are huge amounts of money required to do this work and that it would be very helpful to have more community members come to City Council meetings to share their priorities in order to inform policies.

Ronda Strauch emphasized that resiliency is a team effort and that consumers can help by using less electricity and being thoughtful about what time they are using electricity. She shared an example of what time people charge their electric cars and that they should not all do so at the same time in order to not stress the grid. She encouraged everyone to talk to their networks, share their thoughts with local governments, and learn more about co-benefits, such as weatherization.

Karlee Deatherage mentioned the importance of prioritizing underserved and tribal communities and how important it is that everyone can keep their lights on during extreme weather. PSE is working on a few demonstration projects (e.g., Samish Island) that involve solar panels and batteries to help with neighborhood resiliency, which could help in outages and with peak demand times. She also mentioned the discount for people with low income to get a lower utility rate (a 5–45% reduction on electric bills).

Heather Spore talked about how the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community published a Climate Change Action Adaption plan in 2010 which addressed coastal development and other areas. She shared that federal grants are being utilized to understand what has been done and how to increase salmon restoration for off-reservation areas. Heather mentioned partnerships with the Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group and Skagit River Systems Cooperative. She also talked about working with the county and Washington Department of Transportation in order to renovate and replace culverts. She said that the levees protect infrastructure but are at increased risk of impacts from increased rainfall and flooding. She mentioned the need to consider levee setbacks rather than just raising them, which would help with reconnecting floodplains and providing co-benefits for salmon while allowing the river to have a more natural course and keeping infrastructure out of harm's way. Heather believes we need to work to understand the delta and the floodplain holistically in order to provide co-benefits to increase resilience and provide reconnection for salmon habitat. She shared that over the past 100 years we have lost 85% of the delta to diking, and ended by stating that the tribe is very supportive of the Estuary Restoration Strategic Assessment.

Dave Peterson then added a few audience questions about updating the County Plan and HB1181 (Improving the state's response to climate change by updating the state's planning framework).

Peter Browning talked about the importance of increasing urban density in order to keep people in the cities, especially younger people. He shared the example of Burlington's recent development and stated that we need to have conversations about how to create good urban environments with a mix of housing and businesses. He seconded Richard's point about the importance of water management.

Heather Spore added that the tribe is involved in commenting on the Shoreline Master Plan. They are disappointed about the current version because it does not address sea level rise and climate change. The tribe hopes that revised documents will take into account the science that the UW Climate Impacts Group has

done and that the tribe's edits will be included to ensure that development is done with attention to climate change.

Ronda Strauch added that they have crafted a similar plan in Seattle that might be a useful resource in this work.

Richard Brocksmith shared some examples of policies that the City Council is currently working on, such as LED replacements. He also talked about the importance of building codes and gave the example of the new Library Commons (in partnership with PSE), which is well beyond LEED-certified. He mentioned the need for both relatively easy fixes, such as a tree cover policy, and more difficult ones, such as interpreting housing density bills at the state level in order to densify our urban cores and create affordable housing that is respectful of the existing community.

Peter Browning said that in addition to focusing on urban growth issues, there is work to be done to increase density in the county's growth boundaries, and that the five-acre minimum might be a thing of the past.

Part Three: Audience Questions

The first question was about increased options for transportation, such as bike lanes and public transport. **Peter Browning** responded that when he worked in public health he focused on connected bike trails and walking. He mentioned that there is work currently being done to connect Burlington to Anacortes to Marblemount, but we will need to work to connect to Mount Vernon as well. It is a slow process, but a great goal.

Another audience member commented about increased flooding and stated that we need a watershed comprehensive plan about where the extra water is going to go and expressed that the past is no longer a guide for the future. He also had a question about how PSE defines neighborhood relative to utility issues and asked about pushback on battery placement. **Karlee Deatherage** responded that it is a case-by-case basis, which could be on a block-by-block scale. She shared that PSE has a GIS mapping tool that shows circuit capacity and said that the battery placement could vary based on industrial vs. residential locations. It was discussed that all tribal communities must have access to battery storage facilities. **Heather Spore** shared that local tribes are concerned about batteries being placed in locations alongside Hanson Creek etc., to not increase impervious surface for salmon habitation.

The third comment suggested that dike districts need to work together and expressed concern that there was no coordinated effort between the dike districts in the past. **Richard Brocksmith** responded that the dike districts are working to collaborate now, even though they haven't in the past. He added that the Skagit Watershed Council has been purchasing land to create an ecological corridor where the river can be free, which helps with salmon habitat and overlaps strongly with flood hazard areas. **Ronda Strauch** added that making bike trails on dikes would be a great opportunity for co-benefits. **Peter Browning** shared that he believes the communication challenges of the past are gradually being resolved, although there is more work to be done. He mentioned that the privately owned dikes are a vulnerability as they are held to different standards. He shared that the county's relationship with both PSE and SCL is excellent and that they are negotiating to have more water storage than in the past.

The final comment was about how there was a lot of terrific information in this panel and that he would like to know the entry points for the public to participate in future opportunities. Contact information is as follows:

1. **Peter Browning recommended** calling or emailing Jenn Rogers, Skagit County's Communications Manager. Her email is jrogers@co.skagit.wa.us; her phone number is 360-416-1300.
2. **Heather Spore** can answer questions and connect you to the Skagit River System Cooperative and the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community; her email is hspore@swinomish.nsn.us.
3. **Richard Brocksmith** can answer questions regarding the Mount Vernon City Council; his email is richardb@mountvernonwa.gov.
4. **Karlee Deatherage** can answer questions about Puget Sound Energy; her email is Karlee.Deatherage@pse.com.
5. **Ronda Strauch** can answer questions about Seattle City Light; her email is Ronda.Strauch@seattle.gov.

Dave Peterson ended by thanking everyone and sharing that the U.S. National Climate Assessment will be released within the next 2–3 weeks.