

# Introduction

Throughout history, the residents of Skagit County have dealt with the various natural hazards affecting the area. Photographs, journal entries, and newspapers from the mid to late 1800's to the present show that the residents of the area have dealt with high water, severe windstorms, harsh winter storms, wildfires, earthquakes, landslides, and even minor volcanic activity. Although there were fewer people in the area many years ago, the natural hazards did at times, adversely affect the lives of those who depended on the land and climate conditions for food and welfare. As the population of the county increased, the exposure to natural hazards created a greater risk than experienced historically. With an ever-continuing growth in population and the development of natural lands, the impact of these natural hazards will continue to escalate.

Skagit County's rural setting, a one-hour drive north from Seattle on I-5, combined with its mild climate and close proximity to the waters of Puget Sound and the mountains of the North Cascades create an almost ideal locale that draws people to live here. However, the potential impacts of natural hazards typical to the area make the population, business community, and the environment vulnerable to natural disaster situations.

Skagit County is subject to flooding, severe storms, landslides, earthquakes, wildfires, and volcanic activity and to a much lesser extent, avalanche, drought, tsunami, and seiche. It is impossible to predict exactly when these disasters will occur, or the extent to which they will affect the county, but occur they will – it is only a matter of time. However, with careful planning and collaboration among public agencies, private sector organizations, as well as citizens and businesses within the community, it is possible to minimize the losses that can result from these natural disasters.

Skagit County experienced large-scale destruction during the back-to-back flood events that occurred in November of 1990. The Skagit River and its tributaries swelled due to heavy rain and melting snow causing flooding in both rural and urban areas. The damage to Skagit County businesses, residences, and infrastructure from these two events exceeded \$36 million. Skagit County sought and received a Presidential Disaster Declaration to obtain federal assistance for its flood recovery effort. It is estimated that the 1990 flood events directly or indirectly affected at least three-quarters of the county's residents.

The 1990 floods were followed by similar back-to-back floods in November of 1995 (Federal Disaster Number 1079) that resulted in over \$14.5 million in damages. Another flood event in February of 1996 resulted in more than \$1.1 million in damages.

**Skagit County's damages caused by the 1995 floods represented 25% of all Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Public Assistance costs statewide, 29% of Individual Grants, 29% of Small Business Administration (SBA) loans, and 22% of all National Flood Insurance Program claims.** (Source: FEMA)

Following the 1995 floods, the City of Mount Vernon sought and received \$517,500 in disaster mitigation funds through the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. Following the 1996 flood, Skagit County sought and received \$4,245,155 and the City of Mount Vernon sought and received \$2,024,000 in disaster mitigation funds through the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. In addition, Skagit County also received \$1,329,109 in Community Development Block Grant funds, the bulk of which was used to buy-out, elevate, or re-locate repetitive loss properties.

As a result of this funding, 49 repetitive-loss properties were mitigated by Skagit County. Of these properties, 1 home was elevated, 7 homes were re-located outside of the floodplain, and 41 homes were purchased and removed from the floodway or floodplain. In addition 43 repetitive-loss properties were mitigated by the City of Mount Vernon. A total of 2 businesses, 25 homes, and 16 mobile homes were purchased and removed from the floodway in the City of Mount Vernon.

### **What is natural hazard mitigation?**

Natural hazard mitigation is the development and implementation of activities designed to reduce or eliminate losses resulting from natural hazards.

### **Why develop a natural hazards mitigation strategy?**

Developing a mitigation strategy for Skagit County completes the process of planning that began with the Skagit County Emergency Management Plan. This plan serves to establish a foundation for coordination and collaboration among local Indian Tribes, agencies, jurisdictions, and the citizens of Skagit County in addition to identifying mitigation strategies and future mitigation projects as a means to assist in meeting the requirements of various federal assistance programs.

The rising cost of responding to and recovering from natural disasters has led to a renewed interest in identifying effective ways to reduce the vulnerability to natural hazards and the disasters these hazards can create. Natural hazard mitigation plans assist communities in identifying the hazards that could impact them, determining the vulnerability of the community to these hazards, and identifying mitigation strategies to prevent or reduce the impacts these hazards pose to the community through a coordinated, multi-jurisdictional approach.

### **What are the benefits of hazard mitigation?**

- **Save lives and property** – communities can save lives and reduce property damage from natural hazards through mitigation actions, such as moving families and their homes out of harm's way or by limiting development and/or regulating the type of construction or structures allowed in certain areas.
- **Reduce vulnerability to future hazards** – by having a mitigation strategy in place, communities are better prepared to take the proper steps that will permanently reduce the risk of future losses.
- **Facilitate post-disaster funding** – by identifying mitigation strategies and projects before the next disaster, communities will be in a better position to obtain post-disaster funding because much of the background work necessary for funding assistance will already be in place.

- **Speed recovery** – by developing a mitigation strategy, communities can identify post-disaster mitigation opportunities in advance of a disaster.
- **Demonstrate commitment to improving community health and safety** – developing a mitigation strategy demonstrates a community's commitment to safeguarding its citizens and protecting its economic and environmental well-being.

### **Who does the natural hazards mitigation plan benefit?**

The **Skagit County Natural Hazards Mitigation Plan** was developed, written, and adopted as a multi-jurisdictional natural hazards mitigation plan for the benefit of the incorporated municipalities, various special purpose districts, the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, and the Upper Skagit Indian Tribe as well as the unincorporated rural areas of Skagit County. It is anticipated that a large number of county special purpose districts will also adopt this plan in order to benefit from future hazard mitigation funding.

The information contained in this plan is applicable county-wide and serves to provide the framework for natural hazard mitigation within Skagit County. Much has already been gained in simply developing this plan and establishing the basic mitigation strategies that have been incorporated into this document. It is hoped that the spirit of inter-jurisdictional cooperation that has begun with this planning effort will continue in the years to come thereby providing further benefits to all jurisdictions and agencies within the county as well as the citizens these jurisdictions and agency serve.

Furthermore, the **Skagit County Natural Hazards Mitigation Plan** was developed following the process set forth in the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000 as well as the requirements of the National Flood Insurance Program Community Rating System. By doing so, it is anticipated that the citizens living in those jurisdictions within Skagit County that participate in the Community Rating System could possibly further benefit from this plan through an additional decrease in their flood insurance premiums.

### **Natural hazards land use policy in Washington**

Planning for natural hazards in Washington has taken shape over the past 30 years beginning with the State Environmental Policy Act (1971) and the Shorelines Management Act (1971), and followed by the State Building Code Act (1974, 1985) and the Growth Management Act (1991). It is an integral element of Washington's statewide land use planning program which focuses on appropriate land use controls in critical areas that are prone to natural disasters, along with keeping up with the latest technology in construction methods to mitigate potential disasters.

### **Support for natural hazards mitigation**

The primary responsibility for the development and implementation of mitigation strategies and policies lies with local jurisdictions. However, local jurisdictions are not alone; various partners and resources exist at the state and federal levels to assist local government in the development of mitigation strategies and plans. Within Washington State, the Washington Military Department, Emergency Management Division is the lead agency for providing hazard mitigation planning assistance to local jurisdictions.