Hazard Description

Severe weather refers to any dangerous meteorological phenomena with the potential to cause damage, social disruption, or loss of human life. Severe weather differs from extreme weather, which refers to unusual weather events at the extremes of the historical distribution.

General severe weather covers wide geographic areas; localized severe weather affects more limited areas. The severe weather event that most typically impacts the planning area is a damaging windstorm, which causes storm surges exacerbating coastal erosion. However, the entire County is susceptible to severe weather events.

Types of Severe Weather Occurring in Skagit County

Freezing Rain—The result of rain occurring when the temperature is below the freezing point. The rain freezes on impact, resulting in a layer of glaze ice up to an inch thick. In a severe ice storm, an evergreen tree 60 feet high and 30 feet wide can be burdened with up to six tons of ice, creating a threat to power and telephone lines and transportation routes.

Hail Storm—Any thunderstorm which produces hail that reaches the ground is known as a hailstorm. Hail has a diameter of 0.20 inches or more. Hail is composed of transparent ice or alternating layers of translucent and translucent ice at least 0.04 inches thick. Although the diameter of hail is varied, in the United States, the average observation of damaging hail is between 1 inch and golf ball-sized 1.75 inches. Stones larger than 0.75 inches are usually large enough to cause damage.

Severe Local Storm—"Microscale" atmospheric systems, including tornadoes, thunderstorms, windstorms, ice storms and snowstorms. These storms may cause a great deal of destruction and even death, but their impact is generally confined to a small area. Typical impacts are on transportation infrastructure and utilities.

Thunderstorm—A storm featuring heavy rains, strong winds, thunder and lightning, typically about 15 miles in diameter and lasting about 30 minutes. Hail and tornadoes are also dangers associated with thunderstorms. Lightning is a serious threat to human life. Heavy rains over a small area in a short time can lead to flash flooding.

Tornado—Most tornadoes have wind speeds less than 110 miles per hour are about 250 feet across and travel a few miles before dissipating. The most extreme tornadoes can attain wind speeds of more than 300 miles per hour, stretch more than two miles across, and stay on the ground for dozens of miles. They are measured using the Enhanced Fujita Scale, ranging from EF0 to EF5.

Windstorm—A storm featuring violent winds. Southwesterly winds are associated with strong storms moving onto the coast from the Pacific Ocean. Southern winds parallel to the coastal mountains are the strongest and most destructive winds. Windstorms tend to damage ridgelines that face into the winds. See illustrations below of previous wind events to impact the area.

Winter Storm—A storm having significant snowfall, ice, and/or freezing rain; the quantity of precipitation varies by elevation.