

Creating Strategies to Preserve the Environment and the Agricultural Community

Changing the Paradigm in the Skagit Delta

Objectives

- Protect and promote recovery of ESA listed species
- Protect water quality
- Protect stream flows and instream resources
- Maintain agricultural drainage infrastructure
- Ensure adequate water for agricultural irrigation
- Achieve regulatory certainty for the agricultural community



Charting the Course to Preserve Resources and Agriculture in the Skagit Delta

The Skagit Delta agricultural community has been working hard to develop innovative approaches to protecting our working farmlands while helping to restore streams and salmon habitat. As the *Shared Strategies for Puget Sound* process recognized, both fish and farming must flourish in order to preserve the natural resources and rural character of the Skagit Delta.

The goal of our efforts is to maintain, as a community, the economic vitality of agriculture within the Skagit Delta, while protecting its environmental quality and natural resources.

The drainage/irrigation districts and agricultural landowners in the Skagit Delta are participating in many voluntary and collaborative initiatives to insure that farming activities do not harm or impair the health of the watershed and existing salmon habitat. These agricultural interests assist where and when possible in developing, promoting and participating in project opportunities to better protect water quality and restore critical habitat necessary to recover and sustain a healthy Chinook salmon population, while preserving the agricultural land base.

State / Federal
Environmental Laws
and Regulations

ESA
Endangered
Species Act

CWA
Clean Water Act

Washington
Water Law

Natural Resources

Agriculture

of the Skagit River and Delta

The Skagit River is the only river system in Puget Sound that supports all six species of Pacific Salmon, including steelhead and the largest population of Chinook salmon. The Skagit Delta is home to some of the most diverse shorebird, waterfowl and raptor populations in the state, including:

- ◆ 4,000+ Trumpeter and Tundra swans
- ◆ 80,000+ Snow Geese
- ◆ Thousands of mallard & other dabbling ducks
- ◆ Bald Eagles



The rich soils, flat topography, and moderate climate of the Skagit Delta provide some of the best farming conditions in the world. Agriculture in the Skagit delta is still dominated by small family farms, many of which are third or fourth generation landowners. The Skagit delta, often referred to as "The Agricultural Heartland of Western Washington," is legendary for its agricultural productivity.

- ◆ Approximately 60,000 acres of farmland
- ◆ Over 80 different crops
- ◆ \$600 Million annual contribution to local economy
- ◆ Approximately 15,000 irrigated acres
- ◆ Agricultural activities preserve open space and rural character



A complex system of levees, tide gates and drainage ditches was developed in the 1860s to protect nearly 60,000 acres of prime farmland from flooding and tidal inundation. This critical infrastructure is operated and maintained by dike/drainage/irrigation districts.

- ◆ Special purpose districts provide critical agricultural infrastructure
- ◆ 147 miles of dikes and levees
- ◆ 378 miles of ditches
- ◆ 130 flood and tide gates

Prepared in 2004 by the Washington Conservation Commission, the House Bill 1418 Report was jointly developed with Skagit County, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Tribes and the agricultural community. This process provided a detailed assessment of potential habitat project sites, and outlined a strategy and priority for pursuing these habitat projects. Prioritization is based upon benefit to Chinook salmon, land ownership, and level of infrastructure. Highest rankings were assigned to public land sites and areas containing lower levels of infrastructure. The House Bill 1418 Report opened the door to a new opportunity for collaboration between Landowners and other entities to protect and improve habitat and water quality, while preserving agriculture in the Skagit Delta. Several of these collaborative strategies are described below...

Drainage and Fish Initiative (DFI)

The DFI brought together the agricultural community with state and tribal entities in a collaborative process to design and implement necessary planning, environmental documentation and permitting for the drainage districts' maintenance activities. Today, the drainage districts are working under Drainage Maintenance Plans approved at the state level by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. These plans describe Best Management Practices for maintenance activities and identify proposed habitat improvement projects in the Skagit Delta. The Drainage Maintenance Plans are also being reviewed through the United States Army Corps of Engineers' permitting process. Once this review process is completed, the Drainage Maintenance Plans and associated maintenance activities will have complete federal permitting and compliance coverage including ESA and CWA authorizations.

Tidegates and Fish Initiative (TFI)

The TFI was initiated in March 2006 to support habitat restoration projects within the greater Skagit Delta that are consistent with the goals and objectives of the Skagit Chinook Recovery Plan, and completed in such a manner that will result in the least possible impact on established and functioning delta agricultural lands and drainage infrastructure. The TFI Implementation Agreement provides for up to 2,700 acres of delta agricultural lands to be converted to estuarine habitat consistent with the objectives of the Skagit Chinook Recovery Plan. In addition, the Implementation Agreement will facilitate the regulatory review process required to conduct maintenance activities on tidegates and floodgates for the drainage districts. The Implementation Agreement represents a formal long-term commitment by the agricultural community and state and federal agencies to partner in the implementation of this delta-wide landscape approach to address tidegate and floodgate maintenance needs within the Skagit Delta area, in conjunction with achieving the estuarine habitat restoration goals for recovery of ESA listed Chinook salmon.

In October 2006, the agricultural community completed a planning process addressing the complex issues related to fish and water resources that face agricultural landowners in the lower Skagit and Samish delta areas. This planning process is known as the CIDMP. The CIDMP process included the 11 drainage and irrigation districts serving the Skagit Delta, and provided the agricultural community an opportunity to lead a collaborative farmland and resource stewardship planning process with state and federal agencies and other interested parties. The CIDMP document describes creative solutions to address these difficult issues and meet environmental requirements while protecting the viability of agriculture in the Delta. Today, the CIDMP is guiding the agricultural community's efforts to address habitat, water quality and agricultural irrigation issues in the Skagit Delta.

Pumps and Fish Initiative (PFI)

The PFI evolved from the DFI process to address the need for replacement of drainage system pumps that are impacting fish. A Conceptual Design Proposal was completed in July 2007 that evaluated and proposed remedies for fish protection improvements for Skagit Delta drainage system pump stations. The Proposal focused on proposed physical upgrades for three selected pump stations systems that are not currently screened to protect fish from injury. These three drainage systems are utilized as habitat by fish, and the pump stations need to be upgraded to reduce impacts to salmon. The Proposal evaluated both fish screen and pump replacement options, and recommended replacement of the existing pumps with high-tech systems have been shown to reduce mortality of fish that pass through the pump. Next steps in the PFI include development of a feasibility study, engineering and design, permitting and construction.

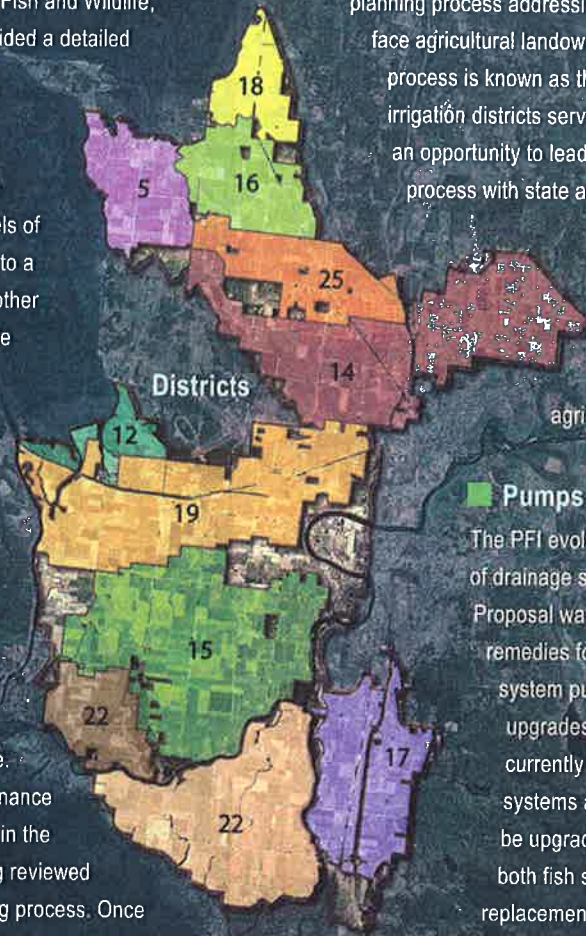
Water Management Initiative (WMI)

In the Skagit Delta, the majority of the water rights were issued many years ago, and farming practices and irrigation water requirements have changed over the years. Today, crops are typically rotated between fields on an annual basis; some crops are not irrigated, and each of the irrigated crops have different water requirements, so water use can vary from one year to the next for the same parcel of land. The CIDMP process documented the existing water rights in the Skagit Delta available for agricultural irrigation, estimated existing irrigation water use, and identified gaps in water availability.

The principal recommendation of the CIDMP was for the drainage/irrigation districts to form a Board of Joint Control (BJC) to manage water rights for an agricultural irrigation service area in the Skagit Delta. A BJC has the authority to hold water rights and move water within the BJC service area for the agricultural

community for their cooperative use. A BJC is also authorized to construct, operate and maintain, the infrastructure used to transport irrigation water supply to where it is needed seasonally. In addition, the BJC may conduct activities and programs that promote more effective and efficient water management.

Efforts are underway to design a "prospectus" which will describe the organizational structure, technical information and legal framework necessary to manage water more effectively to serve the Skagit Delta and protect stream flows. This prospectus will be used to initiate discussions with local, state and federal agencies and other interested parties to develop and secure the necessary agreements and approvals for implementation of the Skagit Delta "Agricultural Water Management Pilot."



Protecting Improving

Habitat and Water Quality

Water Quality Initiative (WQI)

In an effort to address potential water quality concerns associated with Skagit Delta drainage infrastructure, a Storm Water Management Plan Template was completed in July 2007 for the drainage districts to utilize, individually or in cooperation with other districts, to acquire "Secondary Permittee" status under the CWA National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Western Washington Phase II Municipal Storm Water Permit. The Phase II Permit requires drainage districts that meet certain eligibility criteria to develop and implement a Storm Water Management Plan (SWMP) that describes what the districts will do to meet permit requirements. The purpose of a SWMP is to reduce the discharge of pollutants and protect water quality in the district's service area. The SWMP Template is intended to provide a foundation for a drainage district's SWMP, and may be adapted to suit the specific needs, activities, and conditions of an individual district or group of districts. Additionally, a model interlocal agreement is provided to assist districts in coordinating development and implementation of their SWMP with local municipalities and Skagit County. In August 2007, the first district in the Skagit Delta began the process of developing its SWMP using these new program tools.





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"The protection and preservation of agricultural lands is critical to the long-term sustainability of the farming community in the Skagit delta area. Maintaining effective and efficient agricultural drainage infrastructure function is essential to this goal. As important, the protection of environmental quality, and the restoration of primary estuarine habitat on the lower Skagit delta are necessary for a healthy Skagit watershed and the recovery of Chinook salmon. Through collaboration and cooperative partnerships we are finding the pathways towards meeting these intertwined and mutual goals."

*Curtis Johnson
President, WWAA*

*This brochure was designed by HDR Engineering, Inc.
and supported with funding provided by
the Washington State Department of Agriculture
for the Skagit CIDMP Project*

