

Establishing Action Areas in the Puget Sound Basin
Final Recommendation to the Partnership Leadership Council
August 31, 2007

Statutory Requirements for Action Areas

Chapter 90.71 RCW directs the Leadership Council to define a strategic 2020 Action Agenda to protect and restore Puget Sound with regional and sub-regional actions that are based, in part, on existing watershed programs.

To develop the Action Agenda, the Partnership is directed to work with local watershed groups, tribes, counties, cities, special purpose districts, businesses and others in geographic areas of the basin called “Action Areas.” These Action Areas are to collectively encompass the entire Puget Sound basin, including the marine waters and the watersheds draining to these waters, and are listed as follows in the statute:

- (a) Strait of Juan de Fuca
- (b) The San Juan Islands
- (c) Whidbey Island
- (d) North Central Puget Sound
- (e) South Central Puget Sound
- (f) South Puget Sound
- (g) Hood Canal

The Council is directed to “define the geographic delineations of these Action Areas based upon the common issues and interests of the entities in these Action Areas, and upon the characteristics of the Sound’s physical structure, and the water flows into and within the Sound.”

Once established, the Partnership’s executive director will invite tribes, local governments, watershed groups and others to convene in each Action Area to identify the applicable local plan elements, projects, and programs for adoption into the Action Agenda. The work in the Action Areas will complement the Partnership’s work to compile and assess management, restoration and protection plans and programs at the regional scale for the Puget Sound basin. An Ecosystem Coordination Board will advise the Council in carrying out its responsibilities, including development and implementation of the Action Agenda, and is the primary venue for stakeholder representation in the Partnership. The Ecosystem Coordination Board will include one representative from each Action Area who will be selected by the Council following a nomination process.

Process for Developing Proposal for Delineation of Action Areas

During the legislative debate on the issue of delineating the action areas, the legislature concluded that the Leadership Council should have flexibility in setting the boundaries of the action areas, but also listed the following criteria to assist with this task:

- Common issues and interests.
- Characteristics of the Sound's physical structure.
- How water flows into and within the Sound.

The Leadership Council chair, Bill Ruckelshaus, suggested two other principles related to this task:

- The process is evolutionary—the Partnership can make adjustments after the initial decisions.
- Local areas are encouraged to self organize and develop a common approach.

An initial background document and maps were broadly distributed on July 23, to various interests and to the public for review and comment. The comments received pointed to a number of other principles that should also be considered by the Council in setting the boundaries of the action areas and guiding their functions and use. These include:

Setting the geographic boundaries of the action areas

- Emphasize ecologic and hydrologic characteristics, especially the processes and connections between watersheds and marine basins.
- Consider and respect established boundaries, institutions, working relationships and planning processes.
- Minimize splitting jurisdictions into different areas.

Guiding the functions and uses of the action areas

- Support effective governance structures and proven institutions/mechanisms for watershed-based and ecosystem-based management.
- Limit or reduce demands to attend meetings and reorganize information.
- Foster equitable dialogue and decision-making and wider participation.
- Establish the areas for the purpose of developing the Action Agenda; revisit other uses later.
- Keep the boundaries flexible to encourage collaboration and communication.
- Facilitate a comprehensive, integrated, multi-species approach that fosters greater connection between freshwater and marine systems.
- Provide funding and other support for local capacity to contribute to the work of the action areas and the development of the Action Agenda.

Partnership staff took these criteria into careful consideration in developing a proposal for delineation of Action Areas. The request for input on the staff proposal, along with accompanying maps, was broadly distributed on August 10, with the deadline for comments on August 27.

Based on the comments received on the proposal, and based on the previous principles and the direction from the statute, Partnership staff developed this recommendation for the delineation of Action Areas for the Leadership Council's consideration.

Initial Staff Recommendation Based on the First Set of Comments

After receiving a number of comments on the principles for delineating the Action Areas, Partnership staff prepared a draft proposal for delineation. The draft proposal identified three "focus areas", or specific locations in the region, where the comments did not provide clear guidance on a preferred option for setting the Action Area boundaries. These areas included: the boundary between the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Hood Canal; the Central Puget Sound; and the boundary between San Juan Islands and Whidbey Island.

Staff prepared three different options for each of these focus areas, and identified one of the options as the preferred option.

Specifically, the initial staff recommendation included:

1. Strait of Juan de Fuca/Hood Canal: The boundary between these two areas should follow the Clallam-Jefferson county line.
2. San Juan Islands and Whidbey Island: The boundary between these two areas should follow the boundary between WRIAs 1 and 3.
3. Central Puget Sound: The statutory designations of "North Central Sound" and "South Central Sound" should be combined to create one Action Area in the Central Puget Sound. The proposal also included a recommendation that this combined Central Puget Sound area be subdivided to allow for two representatives to be appointed to the Ecosystem Coordination Board.
4. The staff also recommended that the San Juan Islands area name be changed to "Georgia Straits", and the Whidbey Island area be renamed "Whidbey Basin".

Final Staff Recommendation

Comments on the draft staff recommendation were received until August 27. Partnership staff evaluated the comments and modified the maps to reflect a new staff recommendation. This is the recommendation presented to the Leadership Council at their August 31st meeting.

Fundamentally, the significant change from the initial staff recommendation is the final recommendation follows closely the statutory requirement of seven Action Areas. The final recommendation also reverts to the same names for the Action Areas as identified in statute. This change was made after considering the comments and evaluating the statutory language.

The specific changes in the final staff recommendation include:

1. Strait of Juan de Fuca/Hood Canal: Change from the original recommendation of the county line, to a line further east extending to Pt Wilson.
2. San Juan Islands/Whidbey Island: No change to the staff recommendation.
3. Central Puget Sound: Change back to the statutory designations for “North Central Puget Sound” and “South Central Puget Sound” with an Action Area representative from each on the Ecosystem Coordination Board.
4. The initial name change proposal is abandoned, and the recommendation is now to retain the statutory names for the Action Areas – i.e. San Juan Islands and Whidbey Island.

Discussion of Changes and Review Comments

Strait of Juan de Fuca/Hood Canal

The initial staff proposal (option 1) called for the delineation of the Strait of Juan de Fuca Action Area to encompass all waters and associated watersheds extending from the northwestern tip of the Olympic Peninsula (Cape Flattery) to the Clallam-Jefferson county boundary. Option 2 proposed to establish the boundary at Point Wilson in Jefferson County, further east of the Clallam-Jefferson boundary. And option 3 would follow the boundary for the Hood Canal Aquatic Rehabilitation Zone.

There were a significant number of comments on this issue and the staff proposal in both rounds of comments.

Those supporting the county line boundary include:

- North Olympic Salmon Coalition
- Jefferson Conservation District
- Jefferson Land Trust
- Jefferson County Department of Community Development
- Skokomish Tribe
- WRIA 17 Watershed Planning Unit
- Jefferson Public Utility District #1

Arguments in favor of the county line boundary include:

- The county line is the boundary for the Hood Canal Coordinating Council, the lead entity for summer chum salmon recovery in this geographic area.

- Reflects the way some of the jurisdictions in the area are working together on some issues.

Those supporting the Point Wilson boundary include:

- Clallam County Commissioners
- Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe
- Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe
- North Olympic Peninsula Lead Entity
- PSAMP/PSNERP scientists.

Arguments in favor of the Point Wilson boundary include:

- The Point Wilson line reflects a natural breakpoint in the marine basin at the entrance to Admiralty Inlet, effectively connects the marine basins with the upland watersheds, and is consistent with the PSAMP/PSNERP basin delineations.

The final staff proposal recommends establishing the boundary line at Point Wilson. This line is most consistent with the characteristics of the Sound's physical structure and with how water flows into and within the Sound. There were differing perspectives on how local entities currently work on common issues and interests. It is the conclusion of Partnership staff that establishing the line at Point Wilson would create an Action Area wherein various entities would identify actions that could more directly address the Strait of Juan de Fuca marine environment and associated drainages. It's acknowledged that this area will have issues in common with the Hood Canal area, particularly with the issue of summer chum salmon recovery. These two Action Areas should be encouraged to work together collaboratively on strategies to address this issue. Finally, the city of Port Townsend is proposed to be included in the Strait of Juan de Fuca Action Area. The city should be allowed to select the Action Area in which they want to participate.

San Juan Islands/Whidbey Island

No changes to the first staff recommended boundary line.

Central Puget Sound

Comments received in the first comment period gave conflicting advice as to how the Action Area should be established in Central Puget Sound. Furthermore, dividing the central basin into "north" and "south" areas did not fit with the guiding principle to delineate the areas based on ecologic and hydrologic characteristics of the Sound. Finally, staff determined that creating a single Action Area in the central basin would allow for improved coordination among the entities in the area or at least collective action related to the shared interests and issues of the Central Puget Sound.

The original staff recommendation would have created a single Central Puget Sound Action Area, eliminating the statutory “north” and “south” distinction. Since this proposal would create only one Action Area, it would have reduced the total number of Areas from seven to six. Staff also recommended establishing two districts within the one Action Area for the purpose of nominating two representatives to the Ecosystem Coordination Board.

This proposal generated significant comment, including:

- Support from WRIA 8 and the King County Executive for the staff recommendation.
- Concern by some that the staff proposal did not follow the statutory requirement calling for seven Action Areas.
- Concerns from Kitsap County and the City of Bainbridge Island saying that East Kitsap has different issues and organizational structures and calling for separate Action Areas for the west and east sides of Central Puget Sound.
- Citizens for a Healthy Bay, the City of Tacoma, and the Port of Tacoma opposed the staff recommendation because of the statutory requirement for seven areas, and recommended an east-west line consistent with the Fisheries Management Areas.

There were also a number of comments regarding the original staff recommendation that since Central Puget Sound Area would receive two Action Area representatives to the Ecosystem Coordination Board, consideration should be given to additional Board members from other areas. Commenters, particularly from the Whidbey Basin Area, suggested that due to the large size of the proposed Whidbey Island Action Area, they too should be allocated two Action Area representatives.

Based on comments received to this proposal, Partnership staff is revising their recommendation and is now proposing that two Action Areas be created in the Central Sound:

- North Central Puget Sound: Encompassing the eastern part of Kitsap County portion of WRIA 15.
- South Central Puget Sound: Including WRIs 8, 9, 10, and a portion of 12. It also includes Vashon and Maury Islands.

These two Action Areas would divide the central Sound basin down the middle, following the King-Kitsap county line. Because this approach would make a political division of the central basin, staff also recommends that the Leadership Council ask these two Action Areas to work together to identify and characterize the priority risks in the central basin and to coordinate their work and communicate with each other as they identify strategies to address the risks. The Leadership Council should ask the Partnership Executive Director to facilitate this communication.

The rationale for the staff recommendation with respect to the central Sound is that it is consistent with the statutory requirement of the seven, specifically named Action Areas. It also reflects how the jurisdictions in these areas are currently organized to address watershed issues.

The downside to this recommendation is that it does not reflect the scientifically identified basin delineation. However, the recommendation to the Leadership Council that these two areas should be asked to coordinate their work may minimize this concern.

Changing the Names of Certain Action Areas

In the original proposal, Partnership staff had proposed changing the names of two areas:

- Changing “San Juan Islands” to “Georgia Straits”
- Changing “Whidbey Island” to “Whidbey Basin”

The staff recommendation was based on the reasoning that although the statute specifically named these areas, the names did not fit with the Action Areas proposed. For example, the proposed Action Area for the north Sound encompasses all of San Juan County and parts of Whatcom County. The “San Juan Islands” doesn’t reflect the actual scope of this area.

The current staff proposal recommends that the names not be changed and to keep all Action Area designations consistent with the statute.