

Regional Open Space Strategy for Central Puget Sound

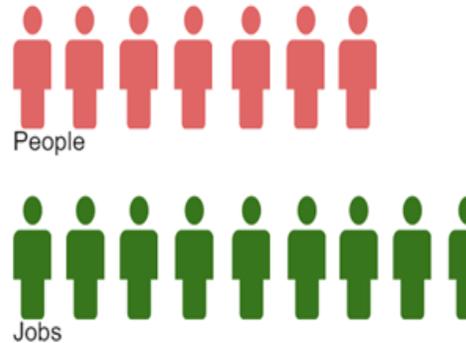
Executive Summary

The Challenge

Residents of the Puget Sound region treasure the area’s environmental health, beauty, and recreational opportunities. Likewise employers and employees alike are drawn to the unparalleled quality of life enjoyed in our region. **These assets are not luxuries, they are essential life-sustaining assets.** Current and predicted future growth translates to approximately seven individuals per hour moving to the King, Pierce, Snohomish or Kitsap County areas, and almost nine newly created jobs per hour. Over the next 25 years, 1 million more residents are expected in the region – the current populations of Everett, Seattle, Bremerton and Tacoma combined. This expansion is a testament to the economic and environmental vitality of the region and its thriving communities. Yet, rapid growth can put tremendous strain on the same natural infrastructure that supports our way of life and makes the Puget Sound region so attractive.

Current growth in population and jobs per hour in the central Puget Sound region. *Source: PSRC, 2016*

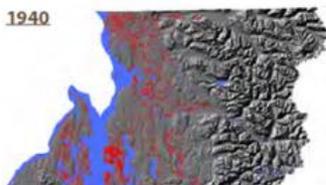
Growth per Hour



As development pressure stretches our natural infrastructure to its limits, the importance of safeguarding Puget Sound’s open space resources and its benefits becomes more clear. Our rapidly growing population has resulted in segments of our communities without easy access to fresh food, parks, and trails and more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Limited access to open space deprives us all of the health benefits gained from opportunities to interact with nature. **The need to address the loss of open space resources is urgent.**

Since 1950, 60 percent of all farmland in the Puget Sound has been lost. Statewide we annually continue to lose 23,700 acres of agricultural lands which have caused some to estimate that “the last acre of farmland in the region could be bulldozed or paved

Growth of the Region’s Footprint

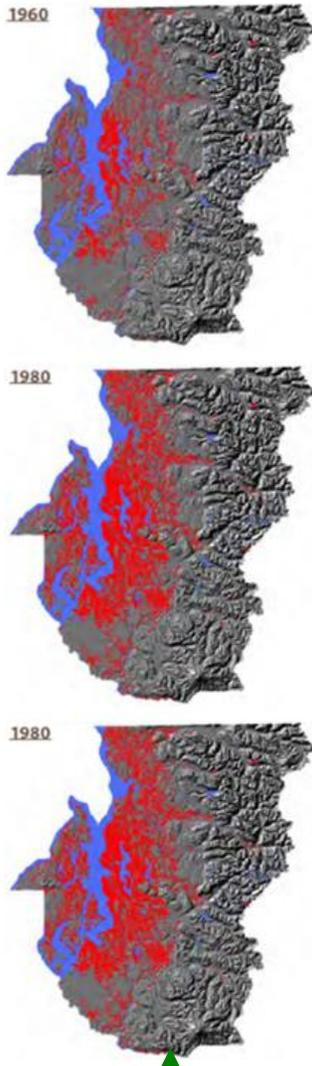


over by 2053” (Canty et al., 2012). The increasing land area lost to development degrades fisheries and aquatic habitat, increases risk of floods and landslides, and reduces our capacity to adapt to or mitigate against these natural disasters. These impacts are compounded by climate change, which aggravates drought conditions and wildfires in the summer, flooding and landslides in the winter. **While existing efforts to address these losses are meritorious, they are not sufficient.**

These challenges demand inclusive and comprehensive solutions. Yet our collective efforts to protect open space are disjointed, uncoordinated and – most importantly – inadequately funded.

Over the last five years, the University of Washington’s Green Futures Lab has led the Regional Open Space Strategy (ROSS) – a collaborative research and planning initiative for the central Puget Sound region conducted with a broad network of open space experts. The ROSS undertook a cross-disciplinary, multi-pronged approach aimed at:

1. Creating a preliminary vision for a multi-jurisdictional and multi-objective regional open space system;
2. Improving regional coordination and decision-making on open space issues;
3. Building a regional open space advocacy community; and
4. Developing frameworks and tools to help advance the most important projects and actions.



Growth of the Region’s Footprint

Source: Urban Ecology Lab, University of Washington

Key Findings

In order to address the four objectives identified above, the ROSS team aimed to discover the issues related to the lack of an integrated open space system in this region renowned for innovative planning and sound environmental principles. Key findings are summarized below and are described in more detail along with others in Chapter 2.

Confronting Regional Challenges Requires Regional Planning and Action.

The defining issues of our time: climate change, human health, social equity, economic development, and biodiversity are challenges that need to be addressed in part through a healthy, connected open space system. This system needs to be regional in scale, connecting land use with environmental planning. A series of ROSS task forces, comprised of regional experts, identified how a robust regional open space system would directly help to address these challenges. This work takes the form of five Open Space Overview Reports which are located within **Appendix D.**

The Region Lacks a Coordinated Vision for Protecting Open





Regional Growth Strategy,
Vision 2040. Source: PSRC, 2009

heds of

Space. Despite significant efforts made to protect open space resources, the region lacks a unifying vision of how to connect and leverage that energy at the regional level. Work tends to focus on a particular jurisdiction, project area or on a specific issue, and is often driven by opportunistic considerations rather than a carefully constructed set of regional priorities. This “silos” or compartmentalizes efforts and funding, hampering the ability to maximize scarce dollars, achieve multiple benefits for people and the environment, and attract additional funding. An initial effort to sketch a regional vision is represented in [Chapter 4](#), and in a video that can be accessed at: [XX\(awaiting upload\)XX](#)

Conservation Funding Is Inadequate and Fragmented. Funding for conservation and restoration efforts are vastly under-sourced and regrettably unsystematic, originating from over 50 federal and dozens of state agencies and programs. Grants are made available on varying schedules, typically with a single purpose and seldom coordinated to produce multiple benefits. The nearly 500 municipalities and taxing authorities, and the hundreds of non-profit and volunteer organizations often compete to obtain these limited funds. Organizations attempting to initiate or continue projects spend time, money, and resources applying for these numerous grant opportunities when they could be focused on executing projects and engaging a larger public. This results in diminishing returns on investments that are already inadequate.

Open Space Protections Are Imbalanced and Not Suitably Scaled. The regional growth strategy, documented in VISION 2040 by the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC)¹, has done a remarkable job of maintaining density in the urban areas and stemming growth outside of urban growth boundaries at a regional scale.

However, undeveloped lands both inside and outside the urban growth boundaries are not systematically protected or conserved as connected open spaces to serve both rural and urban populations at local or regional scales. The time has come to refine the details of that vision to ensure open spaces are connected, protected and enhanced to maximize their benefits and are not neglected in either our local planning or in our regional planning efforts. Often local governments do not have the resources to prioritize open space for conservation because of other demands. They may need assistance, and where there is regional benefit, regional support could make those connections.

¹ The PSRC is a governmental entity composed of representatives from Pierce, Kitsap, King and Snohomish Counties, its cities, and other governments that develops policies and plans and makes decisions on regional issues. Under the U.S. Department of Transportation, PSRC is also the Metropolitan Planning Organization responsible for regional transportation planning and implementation.

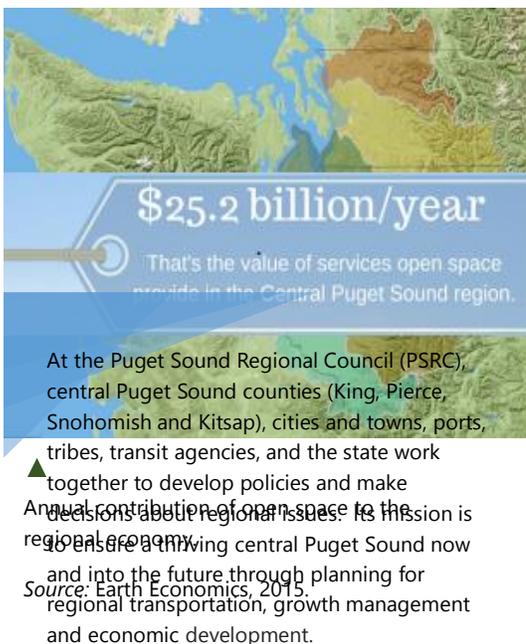
The conservation of open spaces such as working forest and farm lands, greenbelts, and trails in both rural and urban areas is a method of connecting us to nature, but it is also a means to retain diverse life styles and economies, promote public health, reduce the risks of climate change impacts and improve habitat that increases biodiversity.

Watershed-scale Planning Is Critical. Environmental systems are best analyzed within a watershed framework, rather than within municipal boundaries. Each watershed planning group must be empowered to design its own process for developing an open space plan with local priorities, guided by a regional framework. The existing Watershed Resource Inventory Area (WRIA) salmon recovery plans are already excellent foundations. As the WRIAs update their recovery plans, an expansion of focus to incorporate the expanded PSP vital signs of healthy human populations and quality of life would benefit both people and fish. These planning efforts which specify restoration and protection priorities must be better coordinated with local governments, and those local governments need to understand and coordinate salmon recovery planning with other municipal priorities. To serve as examples, the ROSS process initiated and accelerated planning efforts in three watersheds: The Puyallup White (WRIA 10), the Green-Duwamish (WRIA 9), and the Snohomish (WRIA 7) Watersheds. These reports will be discussed in more detail within **Chapter 5**, and the full reports are located in **Appendices H-J**.

The True Value of Nature Goes Unrecognized. Our economic and natural resource decision-making models fail to capture the true value of open space as natural infrastructure. Accounting for the role that nature, and nature-based systems, play in civic infrastructure is essential for making informed decisions. Our regional green infrastructure system has been valued at more than \$300 billion, annually contributing \$11 to \$25 billion in services to the regional economy. Because these are not just optional services but essential services, such as keeping our air and water clean, when these assets and their services are lost, they need to be replaced. Replacing these services with grey infrastructure solutions is generally much more costly (Earth Economics, 2015). We need to ensure that the true value of these natural assets and services are incorporated into our regional decision-making.

Recommended Strategy: Five Key Actions

In response to the findings above, the ROSS recommends five



Source: <http://www.psrc.org/about/>

actions that, together provide a powerful framework for accelerating and expanding the region's conservation goals:

Create a Dynamic Regional Vision. The central Puget Sound region must develop a forward-looking regional vision that integrates the strategy for population growth with ongoing conservation and restoration efforts. This new vision must advance progress on climate resilience, biodiversity conservation, enhancing human health, accelerating social justice, and continued economic development. As a blueprint for action, this new regional vision needs to be geographically, and graphically, represented as an open space system map that provides clear direction on regional priorities for conservation investment. As the Metropolitan Planning Organization, the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) regularly convenes regional decision makers for dialogue and action on plans for our growing region and is well positioned to coordinate this type of effort. PSRC should be resourced to better articulate and integrate these concepts into its regional planning process, consistent with the goals and objectives established by the Puget Sound Partnership (PSP), the state agency leading the larger region's collective effort to restore and protect Puget Sound. And, similar in scale and detail to the regional transportation plan and map, PSRC needs to coordinate the development of a geographically-based, prioritized, regional open space plan and map as identified in VISION 2040.

Establish an Integrating Regional Planning Structure. The region needs to identify a single agency with regional reach to guide and coordinate open space activities across the four counties. This needs to be accomplished at multiple scales: regional, watershed, outside and inside Urban Growth Areas (UGAs). The tiered system of Growth Management Act (GMA) planning from regional to countywide to local, ideally positions PSRC to be that agency. If given the resources, PSRC could guide and coordinate open space activities across the four counties, much as they do for transportation and land use. There is no other regional entity suited to provide this needed regional leadership and coordination. Integrating environmental priorities with land use and transportation will be key to improving the effectiveness of our planning processes. Such a comprehensive planning framework would result in multiple benefits and efficiencies at all scales of the regional landscape.

Expand and Streamline Funding. The region needs a new framework for achieving consistency and coordination in the use of limited resources for open space work. The framework needs to align with the priorities identified in the vision, reducing the administrative burden on organizations currently competing for

The Puget Sound Partnership is the state agency leading the region's collective effort to restore and protect Puget Sound. The Puget Sound Partnership brings together hundreds of partners to mobilize partner action around a common agenda, advance Sound investments, and advance priority actions by supporting partners. Their mission is to accelerate the collective effort to recover and sustain the Puget Sound.

Source: <http://www.psp.wa.gov/puget-sound-partnership.php>



▲
A few of the many organizations involved in promoting open space in the central Puget Sound region.

resources. Regional leaders should encourage a new system for coordinating federal and state dollars into as few categories as possible (e.g., acquisition, conservation planning, restoration, education/outreach) to be distributed by as few entities as possible. The entity(ies) should be given the flexibility to focus long-term funding on prioritized programs, projects, and activities that serve multiple benefits at multiple scales. This would allow staff and volunteer hours currently devoted to grant applications to be focused on direct services benefiting open space resources. Instead of creating a new entity, one option would be to have more funding managed by a state agency such as the Recreation and Conservation Office. Another would be to activate the non-profit foundation allowed under the Puget Sound Partnership. The region could work to promote this non-profit foundation as a hub to expand funding through authorizations, grants, and donations.

Advance Supportive Tools. The region’s policymakers need improved analytical and implementation tools for evaluating and monitoring land use options according to various criteria, such as carbon storage capacity, flood hazard reduction, and human health. They also need a way to more accurately evaluate open space project costs and to assess their full benefits. To be effective, such tools will require an expanded regional database of environmental and natural resource information, which needs to be augmented with additional research. These tools will help prioritize projects based on the full range of benefits a particular scheme might provide. Some of this work is already underway. The Trust for Public Land (TPL), as a member of the ROSS team, is developing a web-based **Open Space Benefits Assessment Tool**, which will provide quantification of the values of our natural capital within the context of the regional challenges before us, allowing policymakers to better understand tradeoffs among various options and to simultaneously address multiple policy goals. See **Chapters 3 and 5** for more details on this tool.

Snapshot of online ROSS prototype portal of Open Space Benefits Assessment Tool





Want to learn more?

The full Regional Open Space Strategy, as well as numerous other ROSS reports, are available in electronic format on the ROSS website:

www.openspacepugetsound.org

Convene a Collaborative Alliance. The region would be well served by the creation of a new umbrella organization that provides a powerful forum for collaboration and action to advance common open space goals. The Pacific Northwest is home to an extensive network of Tribal nations, non-profit organizations, government agencies, experts, business leaders, advocates, and other stakeholders with a vested interest in open space protection. These organizations have accomplished much in preserving the assets we enjoy today, largely independently. A new umbrella organization would improve coordination among these entities, surface opportunities for cross-sector partnerships, encourage resource-sharing and position the region for greatly enhancing conservation investments. Such an alliance would furnish the region with a consolidated voice of advocacy; critical, ongoing input on proposals that affect conservation efforts; a platform to educate constituents on the cross-disciplinary benefits of open space; and outreach to all who benefit from open space to continue to support conservation efforts and to take advantage of open space opportunities.

PugetSoundPartnership
our sound, our community, our chance

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