



*Western
Washington
Agricultural
Association*

August 5, 2014

To: United States Army Corps of Engineers

From: Western Washington Agricultural Association

Re: Draft FR/EIS for the Skagit River Flood Risk Management General Investigation Study

Dear Ms. Hannah Hadley;

Western Washington Agricultural Association (WWAA) is a non-profit, grower-based organization primarily concerned with providing economic, environmental and regulatory support to Puget Sound farmers, with our primary membership including agricultural landowners within the greater Skagit River watershed. In addition to that workload, WWAA provides contract services to Skagit County special purpose districts, including dike and drainage, that maintain the critical infrastructure necessary for the agricultural industry and rural community. The Skagit River General Investigation (GI) must address several key concerns and questions before expecting community support.

Currently, the GI preferred alternative, which best protects incorporated Skagit County businesses and landowners, provides little protection or options for rural businesses and landowners in the event of catastrophic Skagit River flooding. As a representative for those landowners, and contractor for the districts, WWAA is very concerned with both the transfer of risk associated with the diversion of, as well as the current infrastructures ability to efficiently and effectively drain these flood waters. Under current conditions, both regulatory and financial constraints prevent current infrastructural upkeep and upgrade to a level necessary for typical winter conditions, let alone 100-year flood flows. The rural Skagit community cannot accept responsibility for the entire Skagit population without some assurance and ability to necessarily maintain and upgrade infrastructure.

Rural Skagit County residents have long stated that with the appropriate regulatory framework, flood events can be dampened and mitigated by rural, agricultural lands. However, this commitment is dependent upon several key factors. If flood waters are diverted to inundate croplands, residences, and businesses, the ability and infrastructure to effectively remove these waters in a timely manner must be place. Some of these structures are in place, and only need proper maintenance or expansion, including ditches/canals and culverts. However, some infrastructure including floodgates, pumps, and reservoirs need funding, approval and installation to best remove excess waters during emergency events. Due to locally assessed budgets, these districts do not have adequate funding or manpower to install these

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features. Additionally, due to federal regulatory constraints disregarding districts' statutory authorities and responsibilities, as well as lack of environmental and political support, Skagit County dike and drainage districts do not have the operating capacity and discretion to support the preferred GI alternative.

Further, in order to satisfy environmental concerns, regulatory agencies continue to slow and limit normal maintenance and upkeep of the agricultural and surface water drainage system. It is counter-intuitive for them to then place further burden upon these infrastructure systems and those that manage them only to need additional infrastructure during emergency flows. If, in order to make simple modifications and improvements to the drainage infrastructure, these landowners and districts must acquire federal, state, and local authorizations, it is inconceivable to think that the investment required for 100-year flood conditions could ever be met due to painfully slow approval process. However, if the same entities acknowledged the jurisdictional authority of the special purpose districts, and utilized and small amount of regulatory discretion, many of these drainage infrastructure needs could be met and improved system-wide with no environmental impact and little monetary investment.

Generally, Skagit delta (including Samish River delta) landowners understand risks of living within the sub-tidal floodplain. However, added responsibility and protection of municipal areas at their expense is unacceptable. If floods come, rural landowners will respond to the need. They come together and support their neighbors, even if not next door. This area has seen floods due to breached and over-topped dikes, and with time the affected areas recovered. However, those were not 100-year floods, and flood waters were not diverted to those areas. The current GI recommendation calls for both, with little in terms of addressing the recovery needs of those most impacted. These rural and agricultural landowners are those same individuals who volunteer as first responders in catastrophic events. Please do not forget their needs, knowledge, and expertise while deciding their fate, only to rely upon them for help when the inevitable comes from the Skagit River.

Based on size, population, and topography, some drainage districts require larger volume, higher capacity infrastructure than other districts. Other districts' drainage infrastructure serves residences above and outside of their boundaries because water flow goes downhill. Now, in response to the GI, some districts will be required to manage flood water flow, greatly exceeding any of these factors/conditions previously listed. Do Skagit County districts have the facilities and infrastructure necessary for this demand? We are fearful and concerned that they do not. Furthermore, without a lengthy permit process, regulatory agencies limit even small level changes and improvements designed for better drainage and water delivery on the landscape. WWAA would like to propose an alternative to the status quo.

We suggest an assessment of current dike and drainage infrastructure, along with some prioritization of infrastructure deficiencies, needs, and costs would identify and direct resource needs to incrementally and systematically prepare the districts for 100-year flood events. WWAA encourages our natural resource and regulatory agencies to work closely with Skagit County districts to better understand day-to-day operations, and how those operations do, or do not, impact the watershed so there is clear, reasonable requirements associated with clear, desired outcomes. Where the agencies have jurisdiction

or regulatory authority over a water body or infrastructure activity, they too should have the responsibility to help ensure and fund its statutory function. The agencies should analyze their role and desired outcome, and assist those entities that protect the land and life of this area, without constant bureaucratic and regulatory red tape increasing costs and slowing maintenance.

Skagit County dike and drainage residents know how to remove water from the landscape for agricultural production without negatively impacting the environment. Help the special purpose districts and rural landowners help you. By stifling and delaying daily functions, less time is spent on addressing the real threats to our environment and resources. Rather than the current model, utilize the district knowledge and history of this landscape and improve the drainage infrastructure to a level that gains public support for this alternative.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important matter. If you would like further comment or additional information, please contact Brandon Roozen at 360-424-7327 (broozen@westag.org).

Sincerely,



Brandon Roozen

Executive Director