

Skagit Flood Risk Management Working Group Draft Meeting Notes

April 26, 2001

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Attachment 1. Agenda

Attachment 2. Attendance List

The fifth meeting of the Skagit Flood Risk Management Working Group was held on Thursday, April 26, 2001 from 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM in Hearing Room “C” of the County Administration Building in Mount Vernon. A copy of the agenda is included as Attachment 1 and an attendance list is included as Attachment 2. The meeting began around 9:15 AM after the attendees had an opportunity to sign in, acknowledge others and take their seats.

I. Introduction and Adoption of March 1st Notes

Valerie Lee started the meeting by welcoming the Working Group members and expressing her hopes for a productive meeting. She reminded participants that the schedule was full for this half-day meeting. She began by asking the group if there were any changes to the notes from the previous meeting. Several corrections were recorded and all participants approved the minutes.

II. Presentation by Commissioner Dahlstedt

Dave Brookings introduced **Skagit County Commissioner Ken Dahlstedt** by describing some of his activities in the area of flood risk management. **Commissioner**

Dahlstedt has taken the lead in flood risk management, and traveled to Washington DC and Olympia to discuss the issue with legislators. He is attending the Working Group Meeting to show the energy and commitment of the County Commissioners for this project.

Commissioner Dahlstedt expressed his excitement about speaking with the Working Group, and the desire of all the Commissioners to move ahead with a flood risk management plan. He said that he understands the importance of the issue, and does not want to be the Commissioner in office when a major flood causes homes and lives to be lost.

In his visits to state and federal capitols, and his discussions with people about flood control, he has heard the same refrain from many people: no money. The federal government is trying to implement a tax cut, and the state is having a hard time passing a budget; neither government seems to have much money available for flood risk management projects.

The Commissioner said that he appreciated the hard work of the group and was supportive of the process. He has been trying to identify potential funding sources, and right now, funding is available for salmon projects. Recognizing that the Working Group has yet to finish their process, his reaction to the information that the Corps and the Working Group had generated was that the bypass option offers benefits to salmon. If the bypass is combined with the Highway 20 project, it could be a win-win situation for many parties. The potential benefits include

- ✓ the creation of a permanent salmon stream
- ✓ 100-year flood protection for the communities
- ✓ a combination of right-of-way with Highway 20
- ✓ recreation (hiking, biking, etc) options in the diversion area

Commissioner Dahlstedt has shared these ideas with people in Olympia and DC, who were impressed with the potential benefits of such a plan, because everyone involved would be a winner. He emphasized that the plan would receive more funding if it satisfied the needs of more groups. He mentioned that in both the 1930s and the 1960s the County had considered building a bypass but they did not move forward with it. He believes that it is hard politically for the Commissioners to support a bypass measure since people do not like more taxes or lost farmland. However, he believes that it is part of the responsibility he has as Commissioner to support flood risk management planning.

The funding options would increase if salmon recovery were included in the plan. Federal programs available for salmon recovery provide up to 65% of project funding, and federal flood risk management projects provide up to 65% of project funding as well. Additionally, the state or tribes could pay for 10-20% of projects that include salmon protection. With a combination of funding from different sources, **Commissioner Dahlstedt** calculated that perhaps 80% or more of the plan could be funded from outside the county. This high proportion of outside funding would help a project be supported and accomplished.

Commissioner Dahlstedt noted that including salmon would induce more stakeholders to get involved. President Bush may want to add green projects to his record. Norm Dicks has always been a proponent of salmon recovery. There is a potential for everyone to be a winner with this plan including people in the valley. As an example, he mentioned the tax assessor, who pays \$300 of the \$850 homeowners' policy he has for flood insurance.

Commissioner Dahlstedt complimented the Working Group on its progress and affirmed he did not intend to step on toes or rush the process, but urged the Working Group to narrow the number of alternatives. Fewer alternatives mean fewer studies and less cost, which would stretch money further. His goal is to have an option chosen and funding approved in the next 4 years. He acknowledged that it was an optimistic goal, but nevertheless he thought it could be accomplished.

Richard Smith commented that the Commissioner was not stepping on toes, and he appreciated hearing what the Commissioners were considering.

Commissioner Dahlstedt thanked the Working Group participants for the opportunity to speak with them.

III. Timeline

The facilitator led the group into a discussion of the timeline and immediate goals. She reviewed the literature that participants had received about the environmental impacts and benefits and cultural and economic studies. The Corps had prepared these documents and Environment International had reformatted some of them for clarity. She reminded the group that the County wanted their opinion by the end of June. She asked if individuals felt that they had enough information to proceed with decisions by June and inquired whether the agencies thought that they could provide more environmental information soon.

Lou Ellyn Jones felt that they did not have enough information. She pointed out that the diversion alternative was never fully scoped, because it had been discarded in the reconnaissance studies. From a resource management perspective, June is an unrealistic goal.

The facilitator asked what scoping meant to **Lou Ellyn**. She said that she did not mean it in a formal sense, but rather meant that she needed more details and information about the alternatives.

Dave Brookings believed that the process was on track. The reconnaissance studies were done originally to identify different alternatives; they did not preclude any options. He also reminded the participants that at the last meeting, the group agreed that it had a difficult decision ahead and had asked for input from an agency representative group, which **Mike Scuderi** agreed to arrange. He said he had talked to **Mike**, who could not be present, and **Mike** had been trying hard to arrange a meeting of the agency

representatives to discuss the environmental impacts. The agency subgroup has not met, and Dave believes the Working Group should not wait for them.

The facilitator clarified the challenge at hand: how to balance a linear process of selection, studies and approval with a non-linear world. She diagramed the process.

The **facilitator** explained that realistically some actions happen in parallel, such as educating the public and finding funding sources. Others, such as planning and identifying alternatives are most effectively accomplished with the input and feedback from agencies. All of these actions are happening in a shifting political context.

The issue was raised again regarding what information the Working Group now has from the agencies. **Stephen Pierce** read a statement from **Mike Scuderi**. Mike scheduled a meeting with agency personnel for May 4th, and there are plans to have three more meetings before the end of June. The agency representatives will work on scoping the different alternatives and finding out what needs to be known for an EIS. He is also working with Ron Thom, the eelgrass expert, to determine the impact of freshwater in the Bay. **Larry Kunzler** agreed that **Mike** has been working hard to arrange this meeting, and the agencies need to follow through on their commitments to participate, because lack of environmental knowledge is delaying the process.

Jackie Vander Veen reassured Lou Ellyn that the group appreciated her efforts representing the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to participate in and work with the Working Group. **Lou Ellyn** responded, mentioning everyone at the agencies, including the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), has a very full plate right now. **The facilitator** agreed, pointing out that the Working Group's request does not fit neatly into any prioritized category such as Section 7 Consultation or Habitat Conservation Plan, which makes it difficult for the agencies.

Dave Brookings urged the group to move forward. He agrees that the agencies are very busy, and feels that they may respond better when the Working Group has something more concrete to give them and request feedback on. He wanted to invite people to attend meetings, but not let the group get held up if agency representatives or individuals cannot be present.

Bob Boudinot explained that he did not have enough information about the alternatives to make a decision. This is an enormously important decision for the counties, agencies and tribes, and one cannot rush into a \$300 million project. The diversion has failed twice because of lack of planning, and he does not want it to happen again. He also wanted more information about the Highway 20 project that was shut down in the 1980s for environmental reasons.

Todd Harrison complimented the facilitator for her explanation of the process, and said that it was the same process that the DOT has struggled with many times. In his experience the more stakeholders, agencies and others are involved early in the process, the more successful the project is down the road. He also added that Highway 20 project

was slowed because of serious concerns about filling and building in the floodplain but it is now going forward.

The facilitator wanted to further define what is meant by a preferred alternative. An EIS includes a preferred alternative(s), as well as several other alternatives. During the comment process, opinions and available information may change, which leads to changes in the preferred alternative or a selection of a different alternative. She also clarified another step in the process. The Wildlife Coordination Act mandates that the Corps, when planning activities that might affect the waters of the US, funds studies performed by the FWS to determine the environmental impacts of the Corps actions. These studies are included with the EIS when it is sent out for review.

Expressing a desire to focus on narrowing the alternatives, **Stephen Pierce** categorized the alternatives under consideration into three “families:” diversion, setbacks and overtopping. Other participants added a fourth “family,” that represents the alternatives that include a combination of the three strategies.

Bob Boudinot still felt that the process was being hurried. He reminded participants that although the issues were very important, in order for Skagit County to receive federal money, it has to compete with high profile and well connected projects such as the current flood fight along the Mississippi. To get money, he feels this project must be done correctly and include the best possible plan.

Many participants wanted to know about possible environmental impacts and which alternatives the agencies favor. **Lou Ellyn**, as an agency representative, was asked whether the agencies were prepared to address the issue in their May 4th meeting. She affirmed that they were, but could not guarantee that the agencies would come up with definite answers at the first meeting. There might not be enough information available on all the alternatives. The facilitator emphasized the group’s need for more information from the agencies, since ESA considerations, if not properly addressed, could easily stop or hold up a project.

Dave Brookings challenged the group to identify specific areas of information that would be needed before a decision could be made, so that the information, including agency input, can be sent to the Working Group before the next meeting. That would allow the Working Group to move towards conclusion. **Commissioner Dahlstedt** concurred, warning against too many long studies because applied science can vary with political administrations.

IV. Identification of Screening Criteria for Decision-Making

The facilitator suggested that individuals name the additional criteria about which they would need more information before making identifying their preferred alternative. On the Alternatives Analysis Matrix, prepared by the Corps, several criteria were already evaluated. **Stephen Pierce** noted that the mitigation column on the Matrix was incomplete.

Larry Kunzler handed out a sheet that detailed the cost of the various alternatives for Skagit County. He commented that these were ballpark figures, but he felt it was important for the group to know the local share. To arrive at his figures, he took the total cost of each alternative less the real estate costs included in the estimate for that alternative, multiplied it by 35% to get the county's share of the building and design costs, and added the entire real estate cost to get the total county cost. **Fred Buckenmeyer** was concerned that in Mt Vernon, significant businesses will be affected, and wondered if relocation cost were included. **Stephen** clarified that currently only West Mount Vernon would be currently affected, and that those costs were included.

Bob Boudinot was still concerned that the level of detail was very crude for all the criteria. The facilitator asked him, in his professional life as an engineer, how he decides when to make a decision about going ahead with the project if not all information has been collected. He replied that it would depend on how much money was available for prior studies. On a tighter budget, he would like to have a measure of how exact the known estimates are, for example an 80% certainty that numbers given are correct. **Stephen** appreciated that idea, but suggested that the uncertainty should be given as a paragraph, not just a number.

The **facilitator** asked the participants again for issues about which they want more information and issues that could be important enough that they could be showstoppers, eliminating an alternative from further studies. The group came up with the list below.

- Cost to Skagit County
- Potential for future restoration activities
- Recreational opportunities
- Farmland acreage lost/gained
- Fisheries benefits
- Cultural and archeological studies
- FEMA's position regarding changes to flood insurance
- Compliance with laws (instream flows, GMA, ESA, Exec. Order 11988 regarding use of federal money to develop in a floodplain)
- Opportunities for partnerships
- Consistency with the 4(d) rule
- Wildlife benefits (other than salmon)
- Flood damage reduction (who gets wet, and who gets wetter than they do now)

Lou Ellyn clarified the "potential for future restoration activities" as a measure of how well the new structures would allow fish and wildlife-friendly restoration projects to be implemented in the next 5-15 years. The measure would be independent of mitigation potential, which would quantify how much mitigation would be put into place during the project. The acceptability column on the matrix was clarified as a combination of compatibility with local, state and federal laws and acceptability to the public and

relevant agencies. Although cultural studies were listed on the sheet, participants felt it was an important factor and wanted more information on it.

◆(15-Minute Break ◆(

V. Economic Presentation by Jim Smith

Participants received the Flood Inundation Damage Assessment Report in their packet prior to the meeting. **Jim Smith** wanted to explain the reasoning behind this work. The Corps must economically justify any flood control work it does with a benefit:cost ratio showing that the benefits outweigh the costs. He is the staff person responsible for calculating these ratios for various projects. The steps he uses to establish the benefit:cost ratio are

1. Define the study area.
2. Survey flood plain by comparing detailed topographical maps with hydrologic models of flood events.
3. Determine annual flood damage for potential floods under current conditions.
4. Determine annual flood damage for floods occurring with the proposed plan in place.
5. Determine flood damage reduction by subtracting the post-project flood damage from the pre-project flood damage.
6. Estimate project cost and spread it over 50 years to obtain annual flood plan cost.
7. Divide annual flood damage reduction by annual project cost to establish benefit:cost ratio.

Jim explained that regional costs, such as loss of revenue at a store, are not included, but transportation delay costs are included.

Jim drew a Damage/Flood Stage curve on the board.

According to the hypothetical numbers he used he would expect to see some damage starting at a flood stage of 20 feet, \$50 million at 34 feet and \$100 at 38 feet. Based on the historic data, the curve can be very exact for smaller floods, but as it gets to larger floods, it becomes less precise.

Next, **Jim** pointed out the Flood Stage/Frequency curve on the board.

The frequency is measured by a likelihood that a river stage would occur in any given year. For example, if there is a 99% chance of a 25-foot stage, then the river would reach 25 feet 99 out of 100 years. A frequency of 20 would represent a 5-year flood, while a frequency of 1 would indicate a 100-year flood.

By combining the previous two graphs, **Jim** arrived at the frequency/damage curve.

According to the hypothetical numbers in the example, a \$50 million flood might be expected to occur 20% of the time. **Jim** explained that since the frequency/damage curve measures how often a specific amount of damages occur, the area under the curve describes the annual damages (the estimate from step 3).

To determine the benefit of a flood risk management plan, he showed the group that a line can be drawn on the last graph at the level of protection that the plan affords. For example, if you look at a close up of the previous graph, the area under the line drawn at a frequency of 1% is the amount of annual damages expected after a 100 year flood plan is in effect (the number from step 4). Step 5, then, measures the amount of saved damages, or the area *above* the curve.

To calculate the curves and the numbers for Skagit County, thousands of different scenarios were run through the model. This process also compensates for the highly unpredictable nature of floods and the sometimes imperfect information. The damage estimates do include underground utilities, public assistance costs and temporary relocation costs as well as damage costs. The numbers about flood damage costs attained are compared to historic numbers to determine their accuracy.

For Skagit County, **Jim** offered a rough estimate of \$66.7 million in annual damages. One problem in the calculations that he pointed out was that as the Corps compared historic damage numbers for certain floods with their graph, damages were consistently less than expected. **Jim** commented that Skagit County was either very lucky or, since flood fighting was not included in the estimates, very good at fighting the floods. Several people opined that both were true. Because of the need to include the effects of flood fighting measures, the \$66.7 million number might decrease. However, **Todd Harrison** pointed out that transportation costs had not yet been calculated, which might increase the number.

Given \$300 million project whose costs are spread over 50 years, and the current estimate of \$66.7 million annual flood damages, **Jim** saw no problem justifying a project with a benefit:cost ratio. In other words, the economics of the project does not eliminate any alternatives. **Jim** commented that the County had done a good job building in the flood plain, making many alternatives viable.

Jim wasn't sure when a new model would be done. He said that increases in land values would not be reassessed as they appreciate, unless the reassessment would push the benefit cost ratio into the viable range. Since the project is already viable, he did not believe a reassessment would be necessary. Environmental impacts were not included in the analysis, although an environmental benefit might help justify an economically questionable project.

VI. Evaluation of Alternatives

After thanking **Jim** for his presentation, the **facilitator** summarized what the group had accomplished. They had listed screening criteria and several areas where they needed more information, especially the agencies' opinions and preferences. Acknowledging

that not all information has been collected, the facilitator wondered if the group could eliminate any alternatives. She asked if there were any showstoppers among the alternatives: options that people thought would simply not work for any reason.

Todd Harrison from the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) suggested that Alternative 7, with the diversion along Highway 20 could be problematic, although he hesitated to call it a showstopper. He said the road improvement project was already fairly far along, and he expected all the design work to be done in 2003, at which time construction companies will bid on it. He had concerns that Alternative 7 would necessitate heavy redesign on the project, slowing it by several years.

Some questions were raised about how far along the project was. **Todd** responded by explaining that an environmental assessment has already been done, although some studies need to be updated. **Chuck Bennett** asked about funding. **Todd** stated that the design work had been funded and the actual construction costs were in front of the Legislature. In his professional opinion, he believes they will get the funding, even with the transportation budget cuts in Olympia, and the project is a number one priority for Skagit, Island and Whatcom counties. Even if the project fails to get funding this cycle, the WSDOT will move ahead and try obtain funding during the next cycle.

Larry Kunzler supported Alternative 7 by saying that the diversion represents where the water will go anyway, and it utilizes the transportation corridor. Others added that it offered a valuable opportunity for partnership, and that it would reduce real estate costs. Everyone agreed that Commissioner Dahlstedt and the WSDOT need to discuss a possible partnership further.

Bob Boudinot expressed a concern that by trying to link diversion construction and Highway 20 improvement, the Highway 20 project, which is needed and has been in the works for many years, could be halted. **Will Roozen** didn't think anything could stop the Highway 20 projects. **Dave Hedlin** commented that in the no-action scenario the highway would be flooded anyway.

The facilitator asked about other potential showstoppers. Alternative 4, selected overtopping, has seemed unpopular in prior meetings. **Richard Smith** agreed commenting that he lived south of Mount Vernon, in an area that would get very wet. Additionally, I-5 and the railroad would be flooded under Alternative 4. **Curt Wylie** shared concerns that other alternatives might open up the floodplain for more development. However, he agreed that overtopping had many negative aspects as well and he thought it could probably be removed from the list.

The facilitator repeated **Jim Smith's** assertion that economic considerations would not eliminate any options. **Corey Schmidt** cautioned the group that economics was still a major issue. A more expensive project would be more difficult to get funding and public approval.

By going through the list of screening criteria, the facilitator hoped to help the group evaluate Alternative 4. The first criterion was partnership opportunities. Although

Richard Smith thought that some partnerships would be available with agriculture with Alternative 4, **Will Roozen** disagreed. Compared with the other alternatives, the Working Group agreed that Alternative 4 offered low partnership alternatives.

The second criterion discussed was future restoration potential. When asked how she would rate Alternative 4 in relation to restoration potential, **Lou Ellyn Jones** was hesitant to commit without knowing more about the alternatives. She felt that the potential for Alternative 4 to impede development was a very significant factor. **Jackie Vander Veen** asked whether the Growth Management Act would take care of the development concerns. Although the Corps could economically justify all the alternatives, the cost would still make a difference since the County would have to pay for a portion of it and garner public support for it.

Dave Brookings added that the idea of overtopping has been around for a long time, but it would be a very hard concept for the community to understand. It would be very hard for the County to garner support for a plan that included potentially planning to flood certain areas. The County would have to say, “trust us” for something that the citizens do not understand.

The facilitator again asked for proponents of overtopping. When no one spoke up, she suggested that the group go around the circle, and giving everyone a chance to offer an opinion. **Bob , Chuck, Leonard, Will, Ed,** were willing to throw it out, but **Brendan, Larry, Richard,** and **Lou Ellyn** wanted more information before deciding. **Curt, Margaret, Richard, Fred, Dave Hedlin,** and **Todd** all felt that it should not be eliminated at this time, although some agreed it would rank low.

The facilitator suggested a different approach. **Jackie** had written the different alternatives on a piece of paper, and the **facilitator** asked each person to place a green dot beside his or her favorite alternative, a blue dot beside the next favorite, and an orange dot beside the third favorite. After she finished explaining, very few people rose to select the options. To overcome the group’s hesitance, she moved the paper to the back of the board, affording some privacy to participants. When many participants still hesitated, she asked people put tentative choices on the sheet just to help her in the facilitation, without having the results go to the County. **Will** commented that he wanted to know what the others in the group were thinking about the alternatives and didn’t like the anonymous selection process.

As it became clear that the group was not ready for an initial vote, the **facilitator** moved the discussion other concerns and questions people might have.

Lou Ellyn asked whether natural river meander would be allowed in the alternatives that included levee setbacks. The **facilitator** commented that in her discussion with Mike Scuderi, he indicated that the issue had not yet been decided. **Stephen Pierce** explained that they had been discussing this issue at the Corps, and one idea the Corps came up with was removing the rock from the current stream bank and placing it at the base of the new levees. He drew a diagram.

Stephen explained that the Corps could remove the rock currently stabilizing the riverbank, and then replace it in a trench in front of the new levee. That way, in a flood situation, the rock would stabilize the new levee.

Richard Smith commented that keeping the rock in the river would be beneficial. **Chuck Bennett** agreed he didn't see the point in moving it, since it would cause sedimentation and destroy habitat. The **facilitator** explained there would be environmental benefits from removing the riverbank stabilization devices. **Dave Brookings** suggested that permits might be hard to obtain to remove the existing structures, and perhaps the time and money would be better spent on other projects beneficial to fish.

The **facilitator** pointed out that these were some of the questions the group was waiting on the resource agencies to discern. She asked for any other issues that participants wanted to bring up. She asked about salinity intrusion, since that had been a concern in previous meetings.

Richard and **Will** asked what was happening with the eelgrass studies. **Jackie** replied that it would take a year to get the results from them. **Will** expressed his frustration about still not knowing which alternatives the agencies preferred, asking which would be best for the fish.

The **facilitator** acknowledged the group's frustration and differing opinions, but stressed that she believed that the group would reach a decision. She could not name a time frame, but expressed confidence that consensus could be reached.

VII. Salinity Discussion

Stephen explained the Corps' ideas for preventing salinity intrusion at the mouth of the diversion. The sea dike would be removed and there would be 850 acres of salt marsh at the mouth, of which 200 acres would be planted to encourage successful establishment. A trench would be dug in the middle of the salt marsh to help channel the water to the Swinomish Slough, and several side trenches would be dug as well. A sand dike with a gate would be constructed at the eastern edge of the marsh. The sand dike would blow out during a flood event, allowing the water to reach the Slough.

Ed Capasso cited a situation that he's seen where the saltwater has gone under a dike and destroyed an agricultural field. **Stephen** thought that the Corps could prevent such intrusion from happening again. **Will** raised the question of how the salt intrusion would be prevented in fields to the north and south of the new salt marsh. **Stephen** expressed confidence that such a problem could be avoided.

VII. Scheduling the Next Meeting

As the meeting was drawing to a close, the **facilitator** suggested that the participants arrange a date for the next meeting. The group decided on May 22nd for a tentative date for the next meeting. Participants requested a confirmation mailing for that date.

Draft Agenda
Skagit Flood Risk Management Working Group
April 26, 2001

9:00 – 9:30 Adoption of Draft Notes from March 1st Meeting
Facilitator Valerie Lee, Environment International Ltd. (EI)

9:30 – 10:00 Update from the County Commissioners
Commissioner Dahlstedt, Skagit County

10:00 – 10:15 Next Steps – Timeline for Decisions
Facilitator Valerie Lee, EI

10:15 – 11:00 Economic Analysis Results
Jim Smith, Corps of Engineers

11:00 – 11:15 Break

11:15 – 11:45 Follow up on Alternative Discussions
Stephen Pierce, Corps of Engineers

I. Results of Preliminary Salt Intrusion Analyses

11:45 – 12:15 Timeline for Environmental Studies and Analyses
Stephen Pierce, Corps of Engineers

12:15 – 1:00 Continued Discussion of Alternatives
- **Further questions**
- **Further Environmental issues**
All Participants

Skagit Flood Risk Management Working Group

April 26 Attendance List

Name	Affiliation
Larry Kunzler	Concerned citizen
Charles Bennett	Dike District #12
Donald Dixon	Skagit County Public Works
Fred Buckenmeyer	City of Mount Vernon
Bob Boudinot	Mount Vernon
Dave Burdick	Washington Department of Ecology
Todd Harrison	WSDOT
Leonard Halverson	Upriver
Ed Capasso	City of Anacortes
Curt Wylie	Dike District #22
Dave Brookings	Skagit County
Kenneth Dahlstedt	Skagit County Commissioner
Roy Atwood	Skagit County Administrator
Brendan Brokes	WDFW
Kurt Buchanan	WDFW
Jacqueline Vander Veen	Skagit County Public Works
Stephen Pierce	Army Corps of Engineers
Lou Ellyn Jones	US Fish and Wildlife Service
Corey Schmidt	Skagit County
Jeff McGowan	Skagit County Public Works
Richard Smith	Dike District #3
William Roozen	Drainage District #19
David Hedlin	Dike District #9
Margaret Fleek	Burlington