

Education and Outreach Topic Paper

Introduction

The Island County Water Resource Advisory Committee (WRAC) is currently working through the 2514 Watershed Planning process. The Watershed Management Act recognizes that the success of watershed planning depends upon a well-informed public, encouraging public awareness, education, and involvement in water related issues.

The WRAC has determined to develop a coordinated education and outreach strategy for water resource issues in Island County. The WRAC is strongly convinced that the best education comes from the people themselves, and that a primary role of Island County government is to support private sector community groups in undertaking educational efforts related to watershed management. Education and outreach efforts should enable an increased flow of information between Island County programs and the private sector.

Public education and outreach are two-way lines of communication, and are critical to successful watershed planning and plan implementation. Individual community members are some of the most important stakeholders in the watershed planning and implementation process. To gain meaningful public involvement and buy-in, the watershed planning process must both inform local citizens of water resource management objectives and enable private sector groups to educate each other.

This topic paper outlines what is needed to support education and outreach efforts:

1. Develop effective materials and activities such as brochures, mailings, presentations, talking points, workshops, newsletter articles, and timely media coverage,
2. Develop leverage partnerships between Island County staff and private sector community groups,
3. Develop a coordination and point-of-contact role for Island County, and
4. Identify funding assistance possibilities through small grants and leverage partnerships.

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Existing Education and Outreach Plans

Many of Island County's approved and adopted plans include education and outreach recommendations. Common elements in these plans include educating the public, promoting conservation, providing information to interested parties, and protecting our groundwater/water resources.

The Water Resources Element of the Island County Comprehensive Plan (adopted 1998) states that "public education concerning water conservation will be a continuing high priority" for its water planning policies. The goal of water planning is to "ensure that Island County plans and develops in a manner that utilizes the best available information regarding water resources, so that the resource will be preserved for current and future use." (p. 2-15)

The Island County Coordinated Water System Plan (CWSP) (adopted 1990) recommends that Regional Water Associations should be established, and that Island County should serve as the lead agency for implementation of the CWSP (p. I-5). The CWSP also recommends that Island County develop a "county-wide ongoing public education program" (p. V-9). A priority of the CWSP is public education, stating that "education can improve public awareness on a wide array of areas including individual and community conservation options and benefits, ...hazardous waste and other nonpoint pollution threats to groundwater and watershed management, and can encourage non-participating purveyors to join in coordination and conservation efforts" (p. I-20).

The Island County Groundwater Management Program (GWMP) (adopted 1992) contains an educational objective to "educate the public and groundwater manager about the characteristics of groundwater resources and about confirmed and potential impacts on the resource" (p. 3 of Executive Summary). The GWMP recommends implementing a comprehensive education program to elevate awareness of water resource issues and to support conservation and groundwater protection efforts (p. V-5 – VI-8; VI-5 – VI-9). The Program also recommends implementing a Technical Assistance Program to assist and provide technical support to water system managers, private well owners, and any other citizens requesting assistance regarding water issues (p. V-9 – V-13; VI-10 – VI-14).

Island County's North Whidbey Watershed Nonpoint Pollution Prevention Action Plan (adopted 1997) developed a public involvement and education plan. This plan focuses on outreach programs that provide information and pollution solutions at places where people congregate; it expands current educational efforts using existing resources and creates new programs where none existed (p. 1-4). Chapter 5 contains detailed descriptions for public involvement and education activities.

The Island County Comprehensive Stormwater and Flood Hazard Management Plan (adopted 1998) states the following recommended policy: "The County shall offer education and information to property owners regarding surface water issues." Specifically, this plan recommends that fact sheets be distributed to the public. (Recommended Policy #11, p. 6 of Executive Summary)

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Education and Outreach Strategy

The WRAC has set the following education and outreach objectives: to broaden awareness of water resource issues, to increase public interest and involvement in water resource issues, and to enable people to make informed decisions when considering their impacts on water resources.

To most effectively reach these public education and outreach objectives, the WRAC recommends that a variety of approaches be used, including newspaper and newsletter articles, workshops, and presentations. To reach the broadest possible number of local citizens, the WRAC could utilize leverage groups and develop partnerships to coordinate messages.

Partnerships and Leverage Groups

“Leverage groups” are groups that reach a broad audience of people through established communication networks. These groups, while small, have influence and hence have a multiplier effect in the greater population. When partnerships are made with leverage groups, their audiences can be reached through their existing contacts and influence. Partnerships develop between groups that share common interests, with all parties contributing equal amounts of influence and resources. Developing partnerships enables organizations to coordinate their efforts and increase their impacts.

To identify compatible leverage groups and develop partnerships with them, the WRAC could establish dialogue with groups to determine what compatible interests and needs exist. WRAC messages may be helpful for leverage groups, and so may be willing to disseminate these messages. Motivators will vary from group to group, and the WRAC will need to identify how it can most effectively help each leverage group. For example, identifying the bottom line of “what’s in a partnership” for a leverage group.

The following are potential leverage groups and partnerships:

- Water Purveyors: Water System Managers and Water Associations could be provided with timely water resource issue information. The messages for Group A and Group B water systems will differ, due to their differing infrastructure and audiences. Outreach efforts could target Group A water systems, but allow Group B water systems to participate and learn of successful methodologies. The WRAC could provide newsletter articles and, if needed, help with mailing costs for water system manager and water association newsletters. Newsletter-style information could be included in Group A public water system’s yearly “consumer confidence reports.” Also, the development of an organization of water system managers and water associations could provide a venue for disseminating specific and effective education and outreach messages; see page 5 of the WRAC’s “Water Conservation” topic paper for detailed recommendations. Island County could develop a coordination and point-of-contact role for this type of organization; see Section 3.7 below.
- Realtors and Realtor Boards: Realtors could be offered clock hours/re-certification hours through water resource issue seminars and workshops. Public education materials could be made available to them, as well as contact

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information for further questions from their clients. Making contact with Realtors and Realtor Boards in efforts to better understand their clients' needs may reveal new opportunities for education. Realtor workshops are currently offered by WSU Cooperative Extension, and are funded by a DOE Non-point Pollution Education grant (through Island County Public Works). It is possible for Realtors to earn 7½ clock hours for a one day workshop (the State Department of Licensing currently requires 30 clock hours/year). Past workshop topics have included coastal geology and bluff stability, low impact development, water wells, and septic systems. Local topics, especially those related to water quality, wetlands, and salmon regulations, are often requested.

- Teachers: Focusing on children is a high WRAC priority, and “teaching their teachers” may be an effective form of leverage. Teachers could be offered credit hours through water resource issue seminars and workshops. WRAC messages could be incorporated into school curriculums and educational materials. Children are highly effective at passing on basic household “how-to’s”; brochures and education materials could be made available for children to take home to their families. One example could be to produce a children’s art calendar: this could be an effective tool for disseminating information while involving children, families, and teachers in the education and outreach process.
- Homeowner Associations and Community Service Groups: Homeowner associations and community service groups such as the Soroptomists and Lions could be provided with how-to information and newsletter articles. Some service groups may be willing to present WRAC messages at their existing events. WRAC members and staff could speak at these groups’ regular meetings to educate these broad audiences about water resource issues. It has been observed that these presentations have already changed local conversations regarding water resources: people are eager to learn about technical information if it is interesting and relevant to them, and is presented in a personal way.

Media

People generally need to be exposed to a topic six times before they remember its significance. One method of regular exposure is through media outlets. Timely notice and receipt of information keep issues and events “high profile.” They keep the public informed of what activities and opportunities exist for learning more about water resource issues.

A regular column or series of newspaper articles in local newspapers could feature WRAC messages. Local papers are often willing to feature relevant and timely information in articles. Newspapers have free “Community Calendar” listings for event announcements; paid advertisements may also be used. The WRAC may also be able to coordinate with its partner groups and share advertisement costs.

The Island County watershed planning website currently gives the public access to information that explains who the WRAC is and what issues they have worked on. Website information should be

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regularly updated, and can include outreach event announcements, topic papers, and newspaper/newsletter articles. The website could contain links to other sites and resources. When relevant new information and links is added to the website, announcements (using email and mailing lists) could be sent to leverage partners – water system managers, realtors, and teachers.

Educational brochures can also be effective tools if they are coupled with another action. Brochures are more likely to be read and understood if people have a reason to relate to the information. Examples include personal interaction, workshops, and the Island County permit process.

Education and Outreach Messages

One of the WRAC education and outreach objectives is to enable people and policy-makers to make informed decisions when considering their impacts on water resources. Some of the positive outcomes of these decisions may include reduction in water consumption, increased surface water infiltration, and decreased groundwater contamination.

Specific education and outreach messages will be identified in WRAC topic papers presented to the Island County Board of Commissioners. Topic papers will identify outcomes and messages for a wide range of water resource issues: conservation, water rights and exempt wells, water balance, water supply alternatives, seawater intrusion, surficial contamination, and habitat enhancement. Each topic paper will include a set of talking points, Q&A (Question and Answer) papers, and presentation notes and materials. These messages should be adaptable to change if new information or public input is received.

Talking points should state the reasons why each message is important; for example, why it is important to conserve water. These are uniform messages for each topic, so that WRAC members, leverage groups, and outreach partners can present consistent information.

Q & A papers should contain common themes and questions relating to each topic. Frequently-asked-questions may include the following:

- How much groundwater do we have in Island County, and do we have enough water for the future?
- Where does groundwater come from?
- What is happening to my well, and in my neighborhood?
- How will collected data be used?
- How do I find out about my water quality, and how is it protected?

Presentation notes and materials could include talk outlines, overhead sheets, slide shows, and power-point presentations. The WRAC also has a display board explaining the watershed planning process. A similar display could be created to display current topics and messages. Topic papers could also identify relevant children's activities.

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Current Education and Outreach Activities and Partnerships

Many education and outreach events occur on Whidbey and Camano Island each year. These events would be good venues for the WRAC to present its messages on water resource issues, and would be partnership opportunities for sharing resources and coordinating programs. The WRAC could create an event calendar including events such as Sound Waters and the Penn Cove Water Festival.

Partnerships may be possible with several groups working in Island County. These include the WSU Extension's "Beach Watcher" and "Waste Wise" volunteer groups, League of Women's Voters, Island County Marine Resource Committee, Whidbey Island Conservation District, and Friends of Camano Island Parks (FOCIP). It may also be possible to coordinate information and ideas with Island County departments. Private consulting engineering firms have expressed interest in holding community water seminars.

WRAC meetings are all open to the public, and are a good educational opportunity through special speakers and engaging public input. The Camano Salmon Recovery Working Team holds public meetings as a sounding board for local watershed issues.

Funding and Coordination

The WRAC is strongly convinced that the best education comes from citizens, and that a primary role of Island County government is to support private sector community groups in undertaking educational efforts related to watershed management. One of the WRAC's leverage partners could take the lead of coordinating and facilitating these identified education and outreach strategies, providing a catalyst and enabling program continuity. Providing staff support through a private sector community group would encourage project ownership and longevity. Part-time staff could coordinate a water system organization, be a centralized point-of-contact and liaison between Island County and private sector community groups, and obtain additional grant funding.

Several funding opportunities may be available for future WRAC and watershed planning outreach. Small grants may be available through the Puget Sound Action Team and the DOE (for example, Public Involvement and Education and Centennial Clean Water Funding). Island County may choose to cover printing, mailing, or advertisement costs for WRAC education and outreach. Leverage partnerships may provide new fund sources; for example, water system organizations could become self-supporting through annual membership dues.

Grant funding may become available through the Implementation Phase (Phase 4) of the Watershed Planning Act. Implementation funding grants are intended to support the implementation of the watershed plans developed through the 2514 Watershed Planning process. These grants would eliminate the need for Island County funding support, and would enable the WRAC to support a part-time coordinator staff position.

The work of the WRAC is ongoing and was meant to be a long-term advisory group overseeing Island County water resource plans and their implementation. Although the WRAC's task of watershed planning has a time limit, it is hoped that the education and outreach recommendations made for the WRIA 6 Watershed Plan will be implemented over the long term.

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In recognition that funding for education and outreach efforts will always be a challenge, the WRAC has proposed high impact and low cost recommendations. A comprehensive education and outreach program, which expands upon current efforts of leverage groups, could provide significant protection of Island County water resources. The benefits of such a program will outweigh the financial costs, especially if possible future costs of remediation are considered. In addition, a knowledgeable and well-informed public is able to make appropriate decisions on water resource issues, and will increase the effectiveness of water resource programs through voluntary cooperation and participation.