

# Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan



## Public Engagement Takeaways on Climate Memo

March 10, 2025

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### Introduction

This memo provides takeaways that emerged from our outreach efforts specific to climate. The scope of “climate-related” feedback was broad, covering topics such as sustainability, flooding, sea-level rise, sector-specific impacts, and threats from wildfire, heat, and drought. These takeaways can inform the County’s Climate Element or future climate strategies.

As part of Whatcom County’s Comprehensive Plan periodic update, several activities were organized to gather insights from participants, stakeholders, and community leaders. As of this memo, these efforts included orientation interviews, an online survey, and public events. Additional activities are planned consistent with the County’s adopted Public Participation Plan and will be included in an overall Engagement Summary. Outreach opportunities to date provided an opportunity to engage diverse perspectives on climate-related concerns, priorities, and opportunities. The main takeaways from each public engagement have been summarized below.

### Orientation Interviews

In December 2023, SCJ Alliance conducted 30-45 minute interviews with key Whatcom County stakeholders, including non-profit organizations, county staff, and committee members. These interviews focused on existing conditions, challenges, and opportunities to orient the project team to changes since the 2016 Comprehensive Plan update. While the team did not specifically ask climate-related questions, interviewees frequently raised climate concerns during the general fact-finding sessions. A separate Orientation Interview summary document provides more detailed information on the interviewees and process.

#### Climate-related takeaways

The orientation interviews revealed concerns and priorities of Whatcom County related to climate. The interviews highlight pressing issues such as flood risk in the Nooksack River basin, sea-level rise impacting coastal communities, increasing wildfire and heat hazards, the need for clean energy and emissions reduction, climate adaptation in the agricultural sector, and the importance of environmental justice for marginalized groups. The feedback related to climate has been described in more detail in the themes given below.

#### Flooding

A recurring theme throughout several of the stakeholder groups was flooding impact in general, but more so in the Nooksack River basin. Historical flooding has already forced people from their homes in neighborhoods such as Sumas, so proactive measures for floodplain mitigation and management must

take place. There was talk of moving developments away from areas that would naturally flood, with some proposing that policies prohibit reconstruction in floodways. There was also discussion of how climate change would increase flooding risks so that future scenarios need to be included in flood modeling to inform future developments, not just past events.

### **Sea-Level Rise and Coastal Resilience**

Coastal communities and environmental organizations expressed concerns over sea level rise and its potential impact on shorelines, marine environment, and infrastructure. There was an emphasis on the need to take projected sea level rise into account in planning outside of FEMA-floodplains. There was opposition to increasing hard armoring on shore since it degrades marine ecosystems and the habitat of salmon. Instead of hard armoring, more natural methods of shore protection through larger buffers for sensitive areas were recommended by participants.

### **Wildfire and Heat Preparedness**

The increasing wildfire hazard was yet another of the region's biggest concerns from a climate standpoint. While much of Whatcom County's wildfire hazard is on federal lands, most interviewees agreed that there is more to be done to create more fire-resistant rural settings in Whatcom. There was a need for more contemporary wildfire prevention codes, particularly in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI). Air quality impact from wildfire smoke was listed as an increasing public health hazard, with more measures requested to plan for it in the form of specific clean air shelters and more community awareness.

Urban heat islands have also been noted as a future issue of concern. Heat island mitigation strategies in the form of more stringent codes for urban tree canopy and roof reflectance have been suggested to be incorporated into future planning efforts.

### **Energy and Emissions Reduction**

There was broad agreement to make a transition to clean energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Suggestions included expanding on renewable energy resources such as solar power and geothermal power and requiring new developments to have high energy ratings. There was a discussion of green building practice incentives, such as bonus densities for builders that possess energy-efficient designs.

Transportation emissions were of similar importance, with calls to extend multimodal infrastructure such as pedestrian and cyclist corridors to curtail automobile reliance. Some interviewees emphasized that transport planning based on climate must feature in the Comprehensive Plan, particularly in metropolitan growth areas.

### **Agriculture and Climate Adaptation**

The agricultural sector was cited as a leading economic driver as well as an adaptation focus for climatic conditions. There was stakeholder fear that farming in the future would not be possible because of the increasing shortage of water, changes in weather conditions, and land rivalry. There was lobbying for more sustainable farming approaches, such as irrigation that minimizes water usage, and conservation farming approaches to increase adaptation to climates. There was discussion of how agrivoltaics or having solar arrays in combination with crops could help farmland conservation with renewable power.

### **Environmental Justice for Marginalized Groups**

A recurring theme was that disproportionate global warming effects on marginalized individuals need to be considered. Low-income neighborhoods, farm workers, and indigenous peoples were noted to be

particularly susceptible based on their dependence on natural resources and greater environmental exposure. There was a call for more substantial equity in climate policies in the way of protections for farm workers, investment in affordable housing that has measures of climate resiliency, and more integration with Indigenous governments to preserve treaty rights and natural resources.

## Public Events

A series of workshops and pop-ups were conducted in the summer of 2024. A separate Engagement Summary document provides more detailed information on the events.

### Climate-related takeaways

Responses from the various pop-up events and workshops reveal several key perspectives on climate-related issues, especially regarding community priorities and concerns. Climate change and environmental issues were recurring themes across multiple events. In terms of climate resilience, there were mixed opinions on the urgency of proactive climate adaptation. While some, particularly in Lynden, felt that climate change would resolve itself or was not a pressing issue for local governance, the younger demographic, particularly in Bellingham, expressed strong support for climate action. The need for planning for climate adaptation and resilience ranked as a priority in some community circles, particularly in Bellingham, where participants showed a clear interest in sustainable practices and climate change preparedness.

Climate change adaptation, including wildfire prevention, flood management, and infrastructure improvements, was viewed as crucial for ensuring resilience in vulnerable areas. For instance, respondents from East Whatcom highlighted the need for climate resilience strategies, particularly addressing air quality and wildlife displacement, alongside energy and emergency mitigation and preparedness upgrades. Moreover, the idea of preserving and restoring natural areas was a common thread, with the public calling for stronger policies to safeguard critical habitats and climate impacts. The integration of climate resilience measures into planning policies and infrastructure decisions appeared to resonate with a broad cross-section of participants, particularly those concerned about the long-term environmental sustainability of the region.

While there was some division in how urgent climate change is perceived by different community groups, there was a shared acknowledgment of the need for sustainable planning, climate resilience, and protection of natural resources. Climate-related concerns of natural hazards, environmental protection, and water supply were continuously cited as priorities for future planning in Whatcom County.

## Online Survey

From December 17, 2024 to January 28, 2025, the County conducted a 30-question online survey to gather public feedback on the Comprehensive Plan update, including climate-related concerns. The “Climate and Environment” survey section explored community experiences with natural hazards such as floods, droughts, wildfires, extreme heat, and storms. Participants' level of concern about climate change's impacts on Whatcom County was assessed, identifying their most pressing anxieties regarding specific hazards: flooding, drought, heat waves, wildfires, storms, and sea-level rise. Participants also ranked climate resilience measures like flood and drought protection, emergency plans, wildfire prevention, and green space conservation, and evaluated the perceived impact of recent natural hazards. Finally, the survey gauged the level of agreement/disagreement with Whatcom County

Council Resolution 2022-036 priorities about climate, including wetland mitigation (#11) and integrating greenhouse gas reduction/climate resilience (#3) into the Comprehensive Plan.

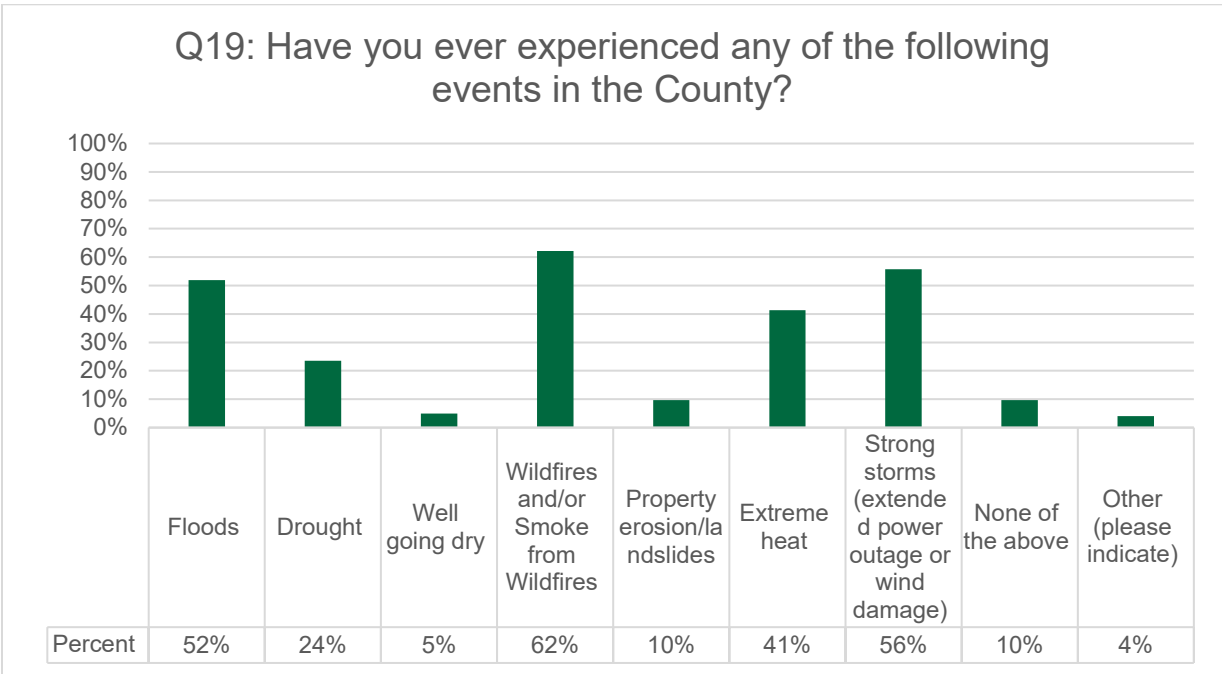
Climate-related takeaways

The survey results show that the community of Whatcom County has mixed views on climate change and its impacts, with significant concerns about how climate events will affect agriculture and the environment. Survey participants expressed significant concern about climate change impacts, particularly wildfires, storms, and flooding. They perceive climate issues as intertwined with broader community challenges like homelessness and infrastructure damage. Participants are worried about climate change and have experienced moderate to mild impacts from recent natural hazards. They prioritize flood management, wildfire prevention, infrastructure improvements, and emergency response planning for climate resilience.

There's support for integrating environmental considerations, such as wetland mitigation and greenhouse gas reduction, into the Comprehensive Plan, though some participants have reservations. In conclusion, participants want a comprehensive and proactive approach to climate resilience that balances environmental protection with effective resource management.

Experience with Climate-Related Events

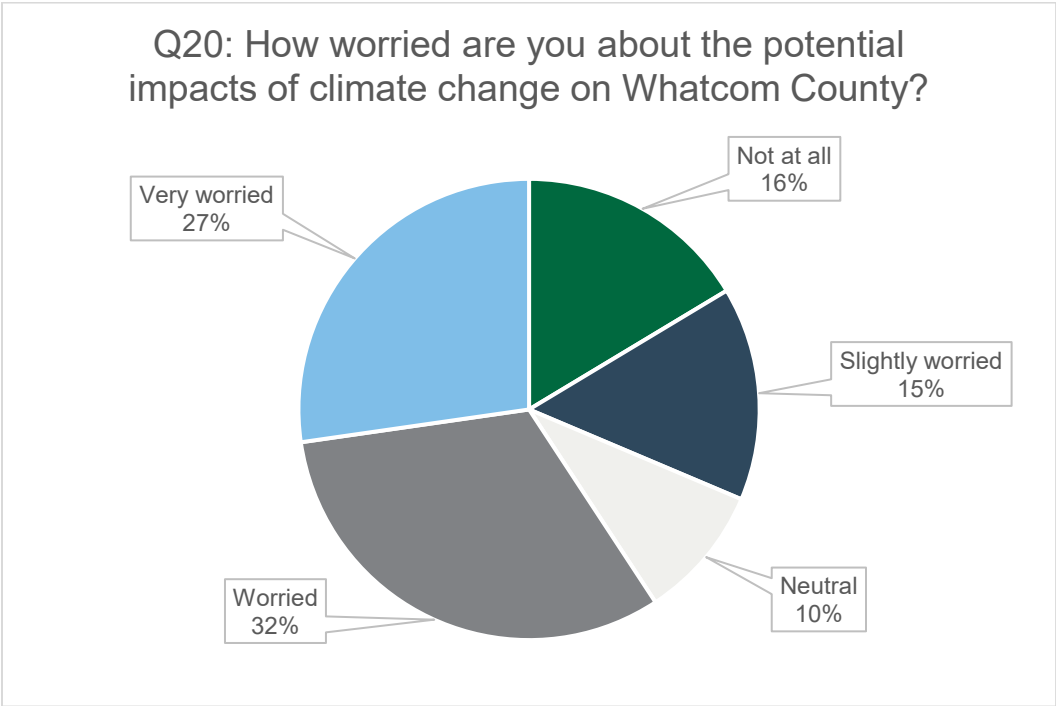
Surveyed participants are most concerned about wildfires and smoke (62%), strong storms causing power outages or wind damage (56%), and flooding (52%). Additionally, 41% worry about extreme heat, while 24% are concerned about drought. Other concerns include property erosion/landslides (10%) and wells going dry (5%).



Beyond these environmental threats, individual respondents highlighted concerns such as tree die-offs, infrastructure damage, snow removal challenges, and unpermitted tree removal. Some also linked climate-related issues to broader community concerns, including homelessness, crime, and ferry service disruptions. These responses suggest that participants see climate change as interconnected with both environmental and social challenges in Whatcom County.

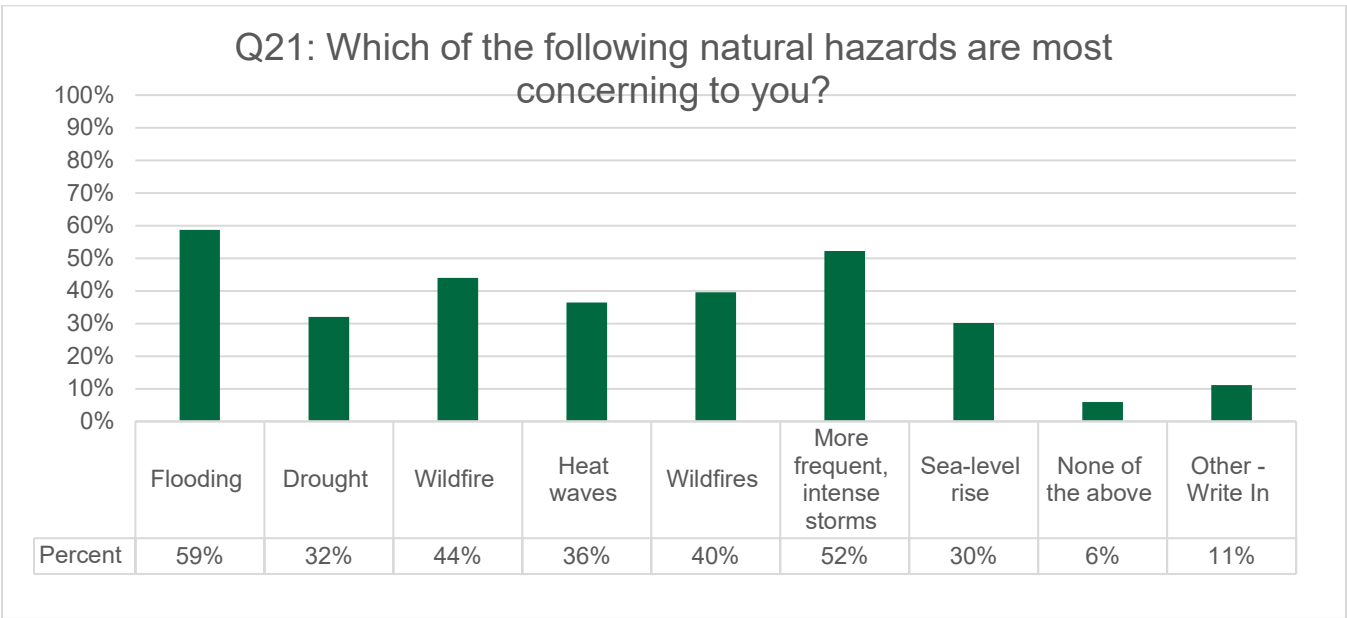
**Climate Change Impacts Concern**

When asked about their level of concern regarding climate change, most participants were either worried (32%) or very worried (27.3%) about the potential impacts.



**Most Concerning Natural Hazards**

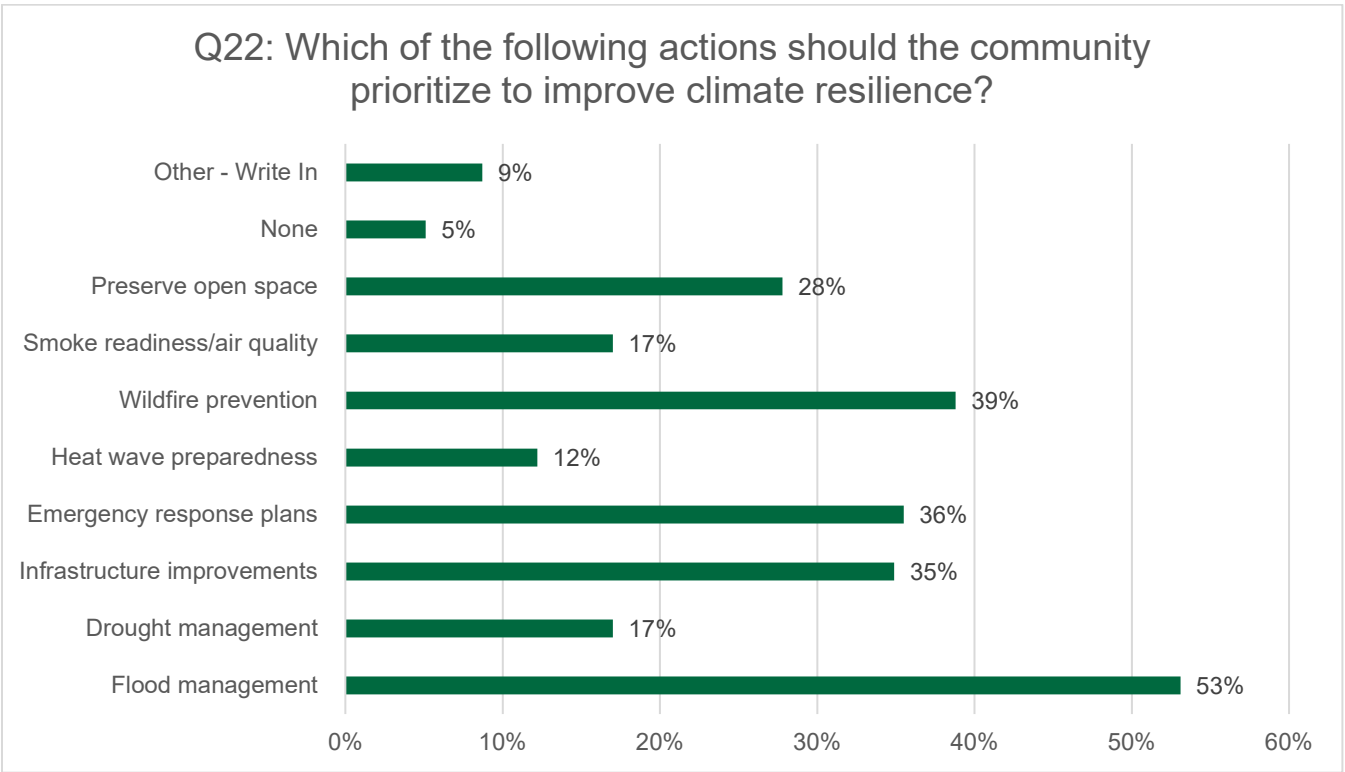
Flooding emerged as the top concern, with 58.7% of participants selecting it as a significant hazard, followed by wildfire (44%) and more frequent, intense storms (52.2%). A majority (38.9%) reported being somewhat affected by natural hazards in recent years, while 37% stated they had been moderately affected.



In addition to flooding, intense storms, and wildfires, several respondents mentioned other natural hazards they find concerning. These included earthquakes (with multiple mentions), tsunamis, and the associated risks of lahars, volcanic eruptions, and seismic activity. Other concerns included soil erosion, landslides, and the impacts of rising sea levels. Some respondents also expressed concerns about drinking water availability, human waste in unsafe areas, and the temperature of regional sea channels affecting biodiversity. A few individuals mentioned specific political concerns, such as restrictions on building and land use, and the need for more cooperative respect among stakeholders in farming and other sectors. Additionally, the threat of wildfire smoke and extreme cold events was noted, as well as the potential risks from hurricanes, windstorms, and loss of agricultural land.

**Climate Resilience Priorities**

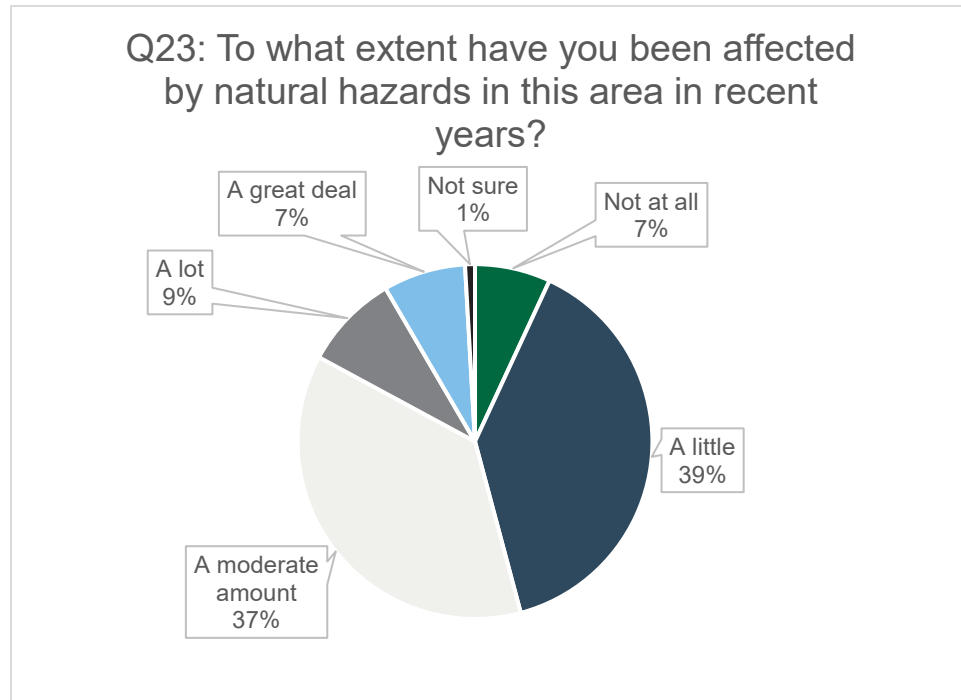
The question asked about which priorities the community should focus on to improve climate resilience, and the responses revealed several key areas of concern. The most commonly cited priorities were flood management (53% of respondents), infrastructure improvements (35%), and emergency response plans (36%). Wildfire prevention (39%) and preserving open spaces (28%) were also highlighted as important.



Additional suggestions included right-sizing culverts for flood management, creating local renewable energy grids, retrofitting buildings for energy efficiency, and expanding mass transit. Respondents also emphasized the need for community education on climate resilience, improving water management, and enhancing food resiliency. Some expressed concerns about development without adequate water supplies and called for better stormwater management in specific areas. Overall, the responses indicated a desire for a comprehensive approach that balances sustainability with effective resource management to address climate challenges.

**Personal Impact from Natural Hazards**

When asked about the extent to which natural hazards have affected them in recent years, the majority of respondents indicated moderate or mild impacts. 39% of respondents said they were affected "a little," while 37% reported being affected "a moderate amount."

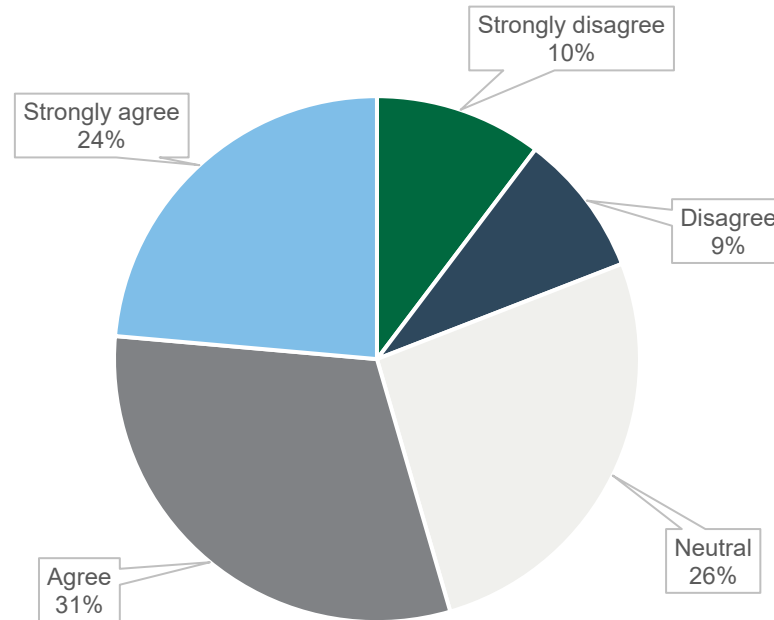


A smaller percentage experienced more severe impacts, with 9% saying they were affected "a lot" and 8% stating they were affected "a great deal." Only 7% of respondents felt they were not affected at all, and 1% were unsure.

### County Council Priorities Related to Climate

Survey results indicate general support for integrating environmental considerations into Whatcom County's planning efforts. A majority (55%) agree or strongly agree that the county should maximize the environmental benefits of wetland mitigation while allowing for increased development in urban areas through off-site mitigation with strict monitoring. However, 26% remain neutral, and 19% disagree.

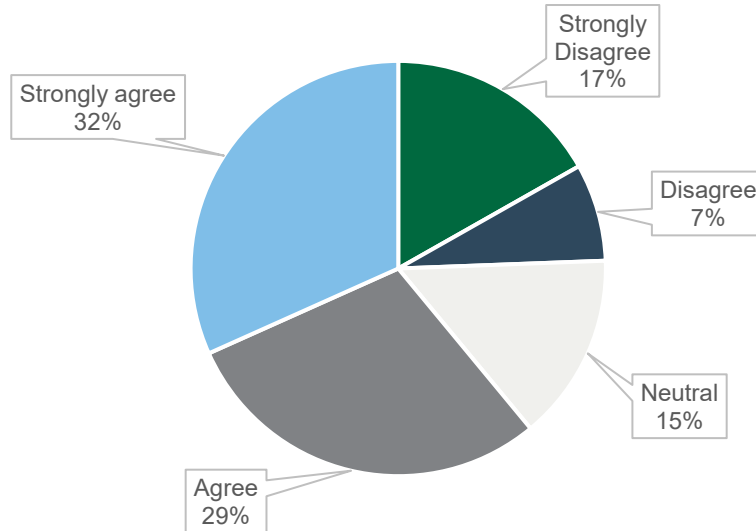
Q24: "The County should maximize the environmental benefits of wetland mitigation and consider opportunities to increase development yield in urban areas by establishing off-site wetland mitigations with rigorous monitoring and adaptive management require



Similarly, there is strong support (61%) for incorporating greenhouse gas reduction and climate resilience into the Comprehensive Plan, with 15% neutral and 25% in opposition. These results suggest a preference for proactive environmental policies while also highlighting some divided opinions within the community.



Q25: "It is important for Whatcom County to incorporate greenhouse gas emission reduction and resilience throughout the Comprehensive Plan."



## Conclusion

The feedback from the orientation interviews, public events, and online survey shows that the public has mixed views on climate change and its impacts, especially regarding urgency. While the urgency of addressing climate change varies, concern for the region's environmental wellbeing is unmistakable. The public is aware of the increasing threats posed by natural hazards, particularly wildfires, floods, and intense storms. They also recognize the connections between these climate-driven challenges and broader societal issues, such as infrastructure vulnerability and social equity.

The community's priorities are clear: robust flood management, proactive wildfire prevention, resilient infrastructure, and comprehensive emergency response planning. Simultaneously, there is a strong call for the integration of climate-related County Council Priorities into the Comprehensive Plan, with widespread support for wetland mitigation and greenhouse gas reduction.