

## Opinion

# County May Gut Environmental Laws

Last week Snohomish County Executive Aaron Reardon recommended to the county council sweeping policy changes that would pave the way for the county council to adopt significantly weaker environmental laws than current policy requires, and remove a myriad of existing policy mandates to protect aquifers, rivers, plants, animals, forested areas and air quality when the new laws are adopted.

The changes recommended by Reardon are part of the county's 10-year comprehensive plan update, and represent a departure from environmental policies adopted in 1995 following an extensive public process, as part of compliance with a state law called the Growth Management Act.

All cities and the county are currently updating their comprehensive plans to outline how and where new development will occur.

If adopted by the county council, the changes could have a significant impact

on critical areas regulations, and reverse existing policy direction aimed at strengthening protection for drinking

water, lakes, and threatened salmon, which have been returning in unexpectedly low numbers the last two years.

Reardon's plan to weaken environmental policies was released almost simultaneously with the American Rivers Council designation of the Skykomish River as the fourth most endangered river in the nation.

Just clicking on the county website, there is no indication the recommendation even exists. We found it very difficult to find Reardon's changes on the county website, and had to go through seven layers on the website through some seemingly unrelated links to find it.

Readers can type in the following direct link, [http://www1.co.snohomish.wa.us/Departments/PDS/Divisions/LR\\_Planning/Projects\\_Programs/10\\_Year\\_Update/Products/](http://www1.co.snohomish.wa.us/Departments/PDS/Divisions/LR_Planning/Projects_Programs/10_Year_Update/Products/), and view the section entitled Natural Environment.

## What's Going On?

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Here are a few of Reardon's recommended policy changes. Key word changes indicating when a mandate is removed include striking the word "Shall", and adding the word "Should".

### Page NE-12

New development regulations would no longer have to include provisions for protection of clean water.

Mandate removed that "The county maintain a balance between development and the preservation of fish and wildlife habitat."

Removal of mandate to designate wildlife habitat conservation areas.

### Page NE-10

Remove earlier recommendation for county to use more stringent state water quality protection and wildlife habitat protection measures in Puget Sound Water Quality Management Plan.

### Page NE-13

Connecting areas of native vegetation between land parcels no longer has to be encouraged.

Language added that the county "should" promote a fish habitat protection program lacks mandate.

Remove requirement that county provide information to the public about species and habitat, and how to protect and restore it.

Remove requirement for county to develop incentives to protect or enhance existing or degraded habitat areas.

Remove requirement that the county encourage public participation in programs for the protection of fish and wildlife habitat.

Added language, but no mandate to educate and encourage citizens to be water resource stewards.

### Page NE-14

Remove mandate to develop watershed management plans.

Remove requirement to protect salmon and trout species by preserving adequate vegetative buffers.

Remove requirement of incentives for developers to wait to clear land until after receiving a permit so native growth areas can be identified and preserved.

Remove requirement that the county work with other jurisdictions, agencies and tribes to protect commercial and recreational shellfish beds, and remove requirement that the county encourage the protection of other habitat networks that cross jurisdictional boundaries.

### Page NE-15

Language added, but without mandate to manage properties acquired for habitat conservation.

These are just a few of the many changes proposed by Reardon, most of which would substantially weaken existing environmental policies.

The Monitor will provide periodic updates as the county and cities prepare to update their comprehensive plans.