

Alliance for a Healthy South Sound Council Meeting

September 17, 2026, 10:00 - 11:30AM

Virtual Zoom Meeting

Participants

Alyssa Jones, City of Tumwater
Amy Hatch-Winecka, WRIA 13 Lead Entity
Chanele Holbrook, Department of Ecology/Stormwater SIL
Andrew Deffobis, Thurston County
Claire Swearingen, Thurston County
Courtney Peetz, University of Washington
Cynthia Taylor, Thurston County
David Troutt, Nisqually Indian Tribe
Emily McCartan, Thurston County
Jaal Mann, Pierce County
Karin Strelieff, Thurston Conservation District
Keith Dublanica, Deschutes Estuary Restoration Team
Keith Folkerts, WA Department of Fish and Wildlife

Lisa Spurrier, Pierce County/WRIA 10/12
Jenn Grimm, Puget Sound Partnership
Marian Berejikian, WA Department of Fish and Wildlife
Michelle Deckard, Puget Sound Partnership
Michelle Quast, Department of Ecology
Nick Norton, Recreation and Conservation Office
Lisa Spurrier, Pierce County
Paul Cereghino, Thurston Conservation District
Rene' Skaggs, Pierce Conservation District
Tom Kantz, Pierce County
Vladimir Nekrutenko, Mason County Public Health

Meeting Facilitation

Elizabeth McManus, AHSS LIO
Haley Morris, AHSS LIO

Meeting Summary

The Alliance for a Healthy South Sound Local Integrating Organization (AHSS LIO) Council met virtually on September 17, 2026. The meeting centered on the theme of riparian areas and included a variety of presentations including an overview of the Thurston County Net Ecological Gain Framework, updates from the AHSS LIO, and a round robin for members to share their own updates. The discussion proceeded as follows.

I. Thurston County Net Ecological Gain Framework Project

Andrew Deffobis, Thurston County, and Paul Cereghino, Thurston Conservation District, presented a project to develop a local-scale Net Ecological Gain framework for Thurston County. Building on existing monitoring efforts such as the Voluntary Stewardship Program, the project seeks to create a planning and decision-support tool that can assess whether county programs, regulations, restoration investments, and conservation actions are achieving desired ecological outcomes. The framework is intended to help the county measure ecosystem conditions, evaluate the effectiveness of both regulatory and voluntary programs, identify restoration opportunities, and support adaptive management while balancing development, land use, and environmental protection goals.

The project focuses on identifying and assessing Thurston County's natural assets, including riverscapes, prairies, agricultural lands, coastlines, and forests, and evaluating the ecosystem services they provide.

Using high-resolution aerial imagery, LiDAR, GIS data, and expert input, the team will develop a proof-of-concept framework that quantifies ecological conditions and tracks changes over time without assigning monetary values or creating new regulatory requirements. The effort draws inspiration from similar work in Kitsap County and emphasizes locally tailored solutions that reflect Thurston County's unique environmental conditions and community priorities. Through tribal engagement, interviews, and partner collaboration, the project aims to establish a foundation for long-term natural asset management, improved monitoring, informed policy development, and clearer measurement of progress toward ecosystem health and resilience.

AHSS Council Questions and Comments are below:

- David wondered how the project will ensure that treaty rights and other legally and culturally significant resources are appropriately respected within a natural asset accounting framework, given the challenges of assigning value to resources that are inherently invaluable? How will the framework ultimately be applied in land use decision-making and regulatory processes, and is there an example that could illustrate its practical use?
 - Paul clarified that the project is not intended to assign monetary value to ecosystem services or treaty-protected resources but rather to develop a way to describe and track the services provided by natural systems, understand how those services change over time, and create an evidence-based framework for discussing gains and losses resulting from management actions. The framework will serve as an open-ended decision-support tool that can help communities better understand ecosystem conditions and inform conversations about environmental outcomes, rather than dictate decisions or determine the value of specific resources. Paul emphasized that the framework should be developed in close collaboration with tribal co-managers to ensure their perspectives, priorities, and obligations are appropriately considered.
- Tom noted that there is growing discussion regionally about valuing shoreline habitats and natural assets, including their role in mitigation and infrastructure planning. While he sees significant value in incorporating natural assets into decision-making, he questioned what time horizon should be used when evaluating these systems, given that natural habitats can adapt and evolve over time while built infrastructure often degrades.
 - Paul noted that the project is still in the early stages of exploring approaches to ecosystem valuation and is currently leaning toward a “service acre” framework that can be applied consistently across different scales and remain flexible as future needs evolve. Paul noted that determining appropriate timeframes for ecological analysis is challenging because ecosystems and their services change over long periods and are influenced by uncertainty. Rather than prescribing specific regulatory applications, he envisions developing a decision-support framework that can be adapted for various uses in the future and serve as a foundation for more specialized models. He also expressed interest in forming a regional workgroup to explore these concepts further and help shape a framework that is broadly useful and adaptable.
- Elizabeth mentioned that the Kitsap Natural Resource Asset Management project has revealed that there's different scales of use. One scale is the impact of the accumulation of actions various actors are taking on the landscape which the county is interested in. Another scale is at

the project level that explores where we think projects could make the most difference given our desired levels of service.

II. 2024 Riparian Workshop Follow-up

In 2024, the AHSS LIO hosted a workshop intended to connect funders with project sponsors and practitioners in the riparian space to understand the needs and challenges that practitioners and projects sponsors face, to help funders understand how to alleviate some of challenges. Funders and project sponsors/practitioners who attended the workshop two years ago were invited to this meeting to serve on two different panels to provide updates since 2024 and to understand from funders how they used information from practitioners.

Project Sponsor/Practitioner Panel:

- **Keith Folkerts, Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife**, provided an update on the [Riparian Data Engine](#), an online decision-support tool that helps users identify, evaluate, and prioritize riparian and floodplain restoration opportunities by integrating datasets related to land cover, land use, protected lands, stream conditions, and watershed context. Since its launch in 2025, enhancements have included the addition of statewide riparian and watershed metrics, new map layers such as fish passage barriers, parcels, protected lands, water types, urban growth areas, and overburdened communities, along with interactive features that allow users to access detailed information and links to external databases directly from the map interface. Looking ahead, the team will continue expanding the underlying high-resolution land cover and change-detection datasets, improve automated reporting capabilities, and enhance integration with grant programs and other restoration processes, contingent on future funding
- **Rene' Skaggs, Pierce Conservation District**, described the use of “skinny buffers,” or densely planted hedgerows, along man-made agricultural drainage ditches as a low-cost riparian restoration practice adapted from successful efforts by the Whatcom Conservation District. These narrow plantings, typically 6 to 8 feet wide and composed of species such as ninebark, twinberry, and red-osier dogwood, help stabilize ditch banks, reduce sedimentation and maintenance needs, improve water quality, and provide shade that cools water temperatures. Rene' highlighted a pilot along Nancy's Ditch at Clear Creek through the Floodplains by Design program, which will accompany a project that was installed in 2023 which has developed into a shaded corridor that will support long-term ecological benefits.

AHSS Council Questions and Comments are below:

- One member asked whether the Nancy's Ditch project would include monitoring to evaluate whether the skinny buffer approach achieves its intended outcomes. Rene' confirmed that monitoring is planned, although the duration and scope will depend on available grant funding and staffing resources, and Amy encouraged the group to invite Rene' back in the future to share the monitoring results.

Funder Panel:

- **Michelle Quast, Washington State Department of Ecology**, provided an overview of the [Puget Sound Riparian Systems Lead Grant Program](#), a six-year, \$25 million EPA-funded initiative led by Ecology in partnership with the Washington State Conservation Commission and the Bonneville Environmental Foundation. The program was designed to accelerate riparian restoration and protection across Puget Sound through broader, programmatic approaches rather than funding individual restoration projects alone. Informed by workshops including the 2024 Riparian Workshop, tribal listening sessions, and stakeholder engagement conducted throughout Puget Sound, the program prioritized investments in planning, outreach, native plant materials, landowner incentives, etc. Through two completed funding rounds, the program has awarded approximately \$16.4 million to 15 projects across the region, including several in South Sound, supporting collaborative efforts led by conservation districts, tribes, watershed organizations, local governments, and other partners to advance riparian recovery and long-term stewardship.
- **Nick Norton, Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO)**, shared information on feedback RCO gathered through regional workshops and partner engagement to explore ways to make riparian funding more flexible, stable, and programmatic. Some avenues they are evaluating include extending project timelines, considering automatic renewals for successful projects, and developing standardized planning templates with partner agencies. Looking ahead, RCO is interested in supporting watershed-scale riparian strategies, using tools such as the Riparian Data Engine to help prioritize investments, and potentially exploring new funding approaches that provide greater flexibility and long-term support for practitioners working to improve riparian conditions across the state.

AHSS Council Questions and Comments are below:

- One member commended RCO's efforts to reform and modernize grant delivery for riparian restoration and expressed strong support for greater consistency in proposal requirements across funding programs to encourage collaboration among funders on standardized application processes. It was noted that differing requirements among agencies can create significant complexity when implementing projects and suggested there may be opportunities to streamline compliance processes.
- Another member asked if 2026 is the last grant round for the Salmon Recovery Funding Board because of the auto renewal or if it's due to a lack of funding. This member also noted that preparing riparian grant applications requires significant effort and asked whether previously funded projects could potentially qualify for automatic renewals.
 - Nick explained that RCO is currently developing the policy framework for an auto-renewal option that could be available as early as the 2027 grant cycle, provided riparian funding continues. The concept would allow successful, technically reviewed multi-site projects to receive additional funding without repeating the full grant application process, and he agreed that previously funded projects may be able to qualify retroactively if they meet the renewal criteria.

III. LIO Updates

- **Multi-LIO Shoreline Armoring & Permitting Assessment:** This project is supported by shoreline funding that was allocated to LIOs to fund projects outlined in their Healthy Shorelines Action

Plans. The primary objectives of the project are to conduct a shoreline development change analysis, compile and analyze shoreline-related permit records, and evaluate compliance by comparing observed shoreline modifications with issued permits. Currently, Herrera, the Technical Lead, is incorporating input from the project's Technical Team (representing the AHSS LIO are staff from the Nisqually Tribe Natural Resources Department) that they provided on the assessment methodology developed by Herrera. Next, the Puget Sound Partnership will conduct a Q&A session on the methodology before moving to the next step. Down the road, LIOs will work with county staff to obtain shoreline permit records, and Herrera, along with the Project Management team, will begin analyzing data in the fall.

- **Floodplains and Estuaries Action Plan Next Steps:** The AHSS is finalizing its Floodplains and Estuaries Action Plan, which intends to synthesize and elevate existing needs and barriers identified through plans, planning efforts, and collaborative processes across South Sound jurisdictions, including Lead Entities, Conservation Districts, and County Shoreline Management Programs. Prior to submission to the Puget Sound Partnership, the draft plan will be shared with the AHSS Executive Committee and Technical Teams for final review and feedback.
- **South Sound Symposium Preview:** The next [South Sound Science Symposium](#) is on October 15, 2026, at the Little Creek Casino Resort in Shelton, hosted by the Squaxin Island Tribe.
- **Shoreline Visioning Project:** Funded by Healthy Shoreline Action Plan allocations and expected to be completed by June 2027, this project will evaluate how natural resource priorities for shoreline protection and restoration align with local shoreline policies, zoning, shoreline management programs, and land use designations across the AHSS geography. By compiling and overlaying existing datasets, the project will identify areas of alignment and conflict between conservation and development objectives, producing maps and analyses to inform future planning and decision-making;
- **Shoreline and Nearshore/Upland Mapping:** Alliance's nearshore and upland maps, developed over ten years ago, will be updated to reflect current conditions and progress toward restoration and conservation goals. The Squaxin Island Tribe is leading efforts to update the Nearshore Project Selection Tool and Nearshore Catchment Analysis using current data sources, while additional work is underway to recreate the AHSS [Nearshore](#) and [Upland](#) maps and targets. All products will be integrated into a single South Sound Strategy Tool. A subcommittee has been formed to review and update the criteria and scoring methods for the nearshore models, recognizing that updated data may change priority rankings and outcomes. The project is on track for completion by spring 2027.

IV. Round Robin

- **Pierce County reorganization:** The three staff working on Pierce County's Shoreline Management Program 2029 update have moved to Tom Kantz's Surface Water Management Department.
- **Deschutes Estuary Restoration Team (DERT):** DERT's annual fundraiser and auction is at Octapas in Olympia on October 24. Learn more and purchase tickets here: [Calendar | Join Our Conservation Efforts — Deschutes Estuary Restoration Team](#).
- **Floodplains by Design Grant Program Project List:** Ecology released its [2027-2029 ranked list of projects](#). Amy Hatch-Winecka highlighted that the Deschutes Floodplain Restoration Project, which she previously presented to the group, ranked sixth statewide and is currently positioned to receive \$53 million which will increase provided that the Legislature approves the program's \$90 million budget request. Amy encouraged members to advocate for floodplain restoration

funding, noting that these investments can leverage substantial resources for local watershed projects and deliver outsized benefits to communities and ecosystems.

V. Next Steps

The next AHSS LIO Council meeting is on December 17, 2026. If you have suggestions for agenda topics or newsletter content, please email Haley Morris (hmorris@rossstrategic.com).