Stevens County Climate Policy Audit

Memo | June 11, 2026 | DRAFT

Introduction

Stevens County is developing a new Climate Resiliency Element under the Growth Management Act (RCW36.70A.070(9)). To establish a strong planning foundation for the new climate element, existing climate-related County plans and policies were evaluated to get a better understanding of the current policies and identify topics and policy gaps that currently exist.[1] This memo is an overview of the policy audit process and findings.

The following seven County plans were evaluated, and relevant policies were identified and pulled from each plan for further evaluation:

- 2022 Comprehensive Plan, as amended
- 2023 Shoreline Master Program
- 2019 Hazard Mitigation Plan
- 1995 Countywide Planning Policies
- 2007 Water Resource Inventory Areas (WRIA) 59 Watershed Plan and 2019 WRIA 59 Watershed Plan Addendum
- 2025 City of Chewelah Comprehensive Flood Hazard Mitigation Plan Work Plan
- 2021 NE Washington Regional Transportation Plan

The consultant team initially reviewed 527 policies, strategies, and actions from the six plans. From these, 353 policies were selected for a deeper review based on their direct or indirect connection to climate resiliency. Overall, nearly 70% of all policies across the seven plans had some connection to climate. Selected policies were tagged by the climate hazard they address, the most relevant sector, and evaluated for overall policy quality and community and social resilience quality. Recommendations were also provided on whether each policy should remain in its current location, be combined with other policies and added to the climate element, or be incorporated as a new climate element policy as-is.

Although policies high level strategies from the following plan were not individually assessed as part of the Policy Audit, the plans will be incorporated and referenced throughout the Climate Element development process.

- 2022-2026 Tri County Economic Development District Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) and Appendix F – Economic Recovery and Resilience Plan

[1] See: https://www.commerce.wa.gov/growth-management/climate-planning/climate-planning-guidance/ and https://deptofcommerce.app.box.com/s/glw5yo8jvfsd40eoa4kdsx0fzde3s9ij.

- 2020 DNR's Plan for Climate Resilience
- 20-Year Forest Health Strategic Plan Eastern Washington Department of natural Resources
- 2025 Forest Action Plan Department of Natural Resources
- 2019 Washington State Wildland Fire Protection 10-Year Strategic Plan Department of Natural Resources
- 2017 Stevens County Voluntary Stewardship Program Work Plan

Sectors

Growth Management Act rules regarding climate elements refer to 11 sectors to be considered in the development of climate resilience related goals and policies. (WAC 365-196-443) Sectors are distinct categories of economic, social, environmental, infrastructure, or public services.

- Agriculture & Food Systems
- Buildings & Energy
- Cultural Resources & Practices
- Economic Development
- Ecosystems
- Emergency Management
- Health & Well-being
- Transportation
- Waste Management
- Water Resources
- Zoning & Development

Commerce rules allow counties or cities to prepare a single chapter addressing climate resilience and these sectors or to address the sectors across a comprehensive plan in relevant chapters. The policy audit refers to these sectors, further defined at WAC 365-196-210:(11).

Policy Audit Key Findings

This section presents key findings; highlighting strengths and opportunities across all policies, as well as an evaluation by the eleven sectors.

High Level Takeaways

The new climate element would fill existing gaps. Although Stevens County has some strong climate-related policies, there is a clear need for a more comprehensive set of goals and policies that address 11 Department of Commerce recommended sectors and climate hazards. The 2019 HMP provides the most comprehensive climate hazard risk assessment which includes the community wildfire protection plan chapter, hazard profiles, and mitigation actions. However, it focuses on detailed, action-oriented next steps rather than higher-level policy direction, creating an opportunity for the climate element to translate identified risks and actions into overarching goals and policies that align across planning documents.

Climate policies are concentrated in Land Use related topics. As is typical for most jurisdictions, there are strong built environment and land use planning related climate policies that focus on cluster development, reducing sprawl, supporting low-density development, building connected and walkable

urban areas, and flood hazard management. See **Exhibit 1** for the full breakdown of policies across all elements.

Exhibit 1. Number and Percentage of Policies for each of the Comp Plan Elements

Element	# Policies	%
Land Use	134	40%
Transportation	42	12%
Housing	9	3%
Economic Development	36	11%
Parks and Recreation	28	8%
Utilities	19	6%
Capital Facilities	25	7%
Natural Resources	44	13%

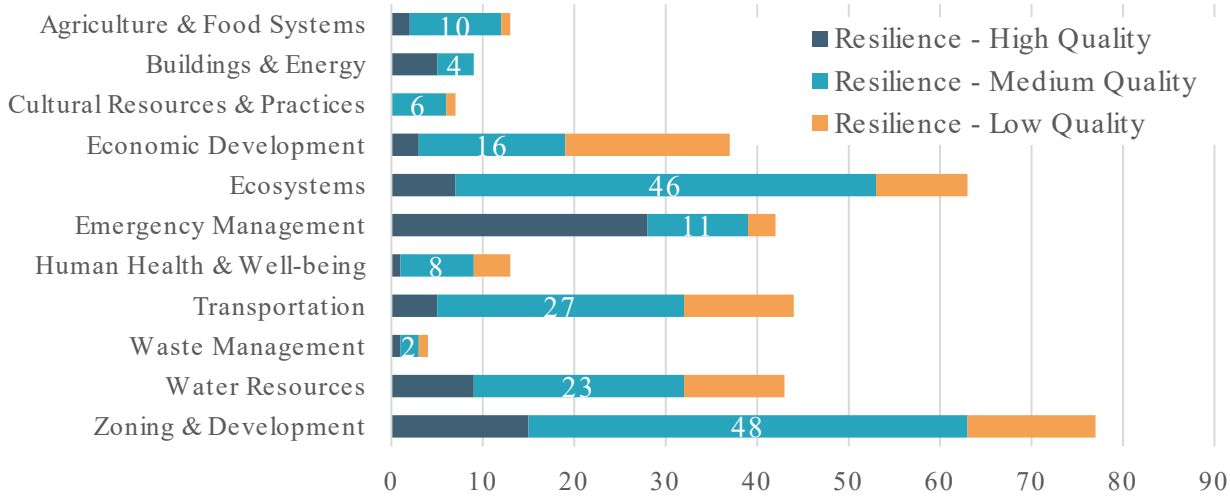
Source: BERK, 2026.

There is strong foundation for ecological and flood protection. The Shoreline Master Program Watershed Plan and Addendum establish a strong policy foundation for climate resilience through the no-net-loss standard for shoreline ecological function, along with protections for wetlands, riparian buffers, and critical areas. The City of Chewelah Comprehensive Flood Hazard Management Plan has strong policies and goals around increasing public awareness and understanding of flood hazards, improving data informed decisions through accurate mapping, investing in flood resistant infrastructure, and promoting actions that support fish and wildlife habitat to build resilience to changing climate.

There are opportunities to strengthen policies by making climate impacts and outcomes explicit. **Exhibit 2** shows that most policies were rated medium quality regarding climate resilience. Policy quality was evaluated based on whether policies improve resilience outcomes, prevent loss or degradation of existing assets[2] and capacities, or provide information without requiring action. Policies were categorized as low quality if they neither improved nor degraded conditions or if they incentivized actions that work against resilience. Policies were categorized as medium quality if they identified assets, risks, or capacities without including action or if they prevented degradation, loss, or harm to existing assets or capacity. Policies were categorized as high quality if they actively improved, expanded, or increased capacity, performance, or benefits beyond the current state.

[2] Assets are "[p]eople, resources, ecosystems, infrastructure, and the services they provide. Assets are the tangible and intangible things people or communities value." (Washington State Department of Commerce, 2025)

Exhibit 2. Policy Quality Rating – Resilience



Source: BERK, 2026.

There are opportunities to strengthen community and social resilience. **Exhibit 3** provides an overview of community and social resilience policy quality across the 11 sectors identified by the Department of Commerce. These sectors represent the full range of systems that may be affected by climate change and are recommended for jurisdictions to address when developing climate-related goals and policies. Across these sectors, most policies received a low-quality rating due to limited explicit mention or specific support for vulnerable and overburdened populations (see text box for definitions). This highlights an opportunity to strengthen resilience and protections for human health and well-being in context of climate hazards, with a particular focus on vulnerable communities. A policy was rated low-quality if it does not explicitly name overburdened or vulnerable communities and does not provide direct benefits to them or help them prepare for, respond to, and recover from climate impacts. Policies were categorized as high quality if they provide direct, targeted benefits to overburdened communities or vulnerable populations and includes mechanisms that are reasonably expected to produce measurable outcomes for those communities (e.g., required reductions, required delivery, performance criteria).

Climate Element Requirements – Vulnerable Populations and Overburdened Communities

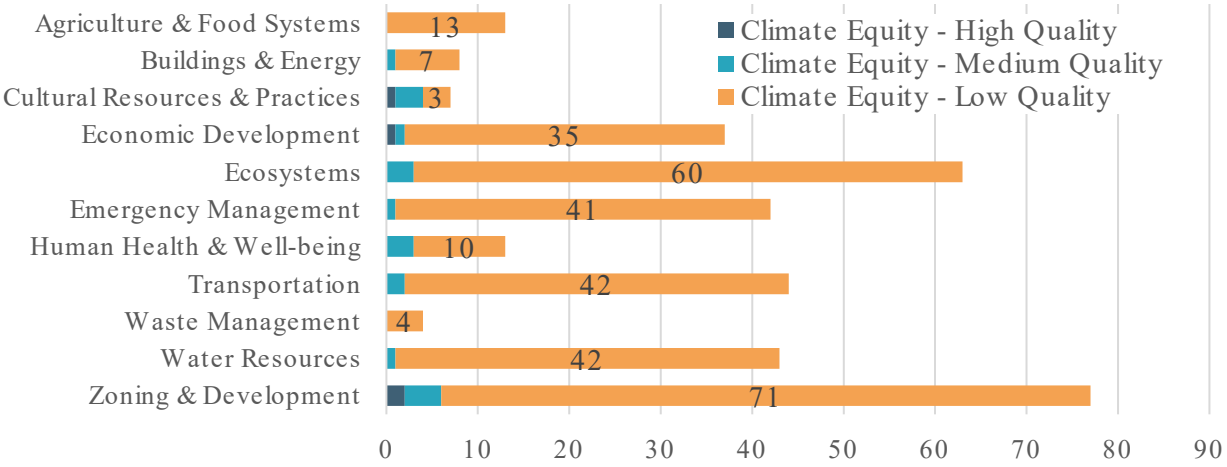
Climate resilience elements "..must include efforts to …avoid creating or worsening localized climate impacts to vulnerable populations and overburdened communities." (RCW 36.70A.070(9))

"Vulnerable populations" means population groups that are more likely to be at higher risk for poor health outcomes in response to environmental harms, due to: (i) Adverse socioeconomic factors, such as unemployment, high housing and transportation costs relative to income, limited access to nutritious food and adequate health care, linguistic isolation, and other factors that negatively affect health outcomes and increase vulnerability to the effects of environmental harms; and (ii) sensitivity factors, such as low birth weight and higher rates of hospitalization. …(RCW 36.70A.030 (51))

"Overburdened community" means a geographic area where vulnerable populations face combined, multiple environmental harms and health impacts, and includes, but is not limited to, *highly impacted communities* as defined in RCW 19.405.020. (RCW 36.70A.030 (31))

In Stevens County, highly impacted communities include "a community located in census tracts that are fully or partially on 'Indian country' as defined in 18 U.S.C. Sec. 1151" per RCW 19.405.020. These tracts are shown on the Department of Health Disparities Map.

Exhibit 3. Community and Social Resilience Quality of All Existing Policies



Source: BERK, 2026.

There are no policies explicitly addressing extreme heat, representing a major single-hazard gap. Despite increasing and well-documented risks to public health, there are no provisions for cooling centers or infrastructure in homes, heat-resilient building design, occupational heat protections, emergency heat response guidance, or urban or rural heat island mitigation.

There are no policies addressing wildfire smoke as a distinct public health hazard. While wildfire preparedness and WUI are included, smoke impacts are not explicitly covered, despite their frequent duration and severity. Key gaps include indoor air quality standards, filtration access, occupational exposure protections, and public health guidance during smoke events. Although it is not a County plan, the Washington State Wildland Fire Protection 10-Year Strategic Plan, developed by the Department of Natural Resources, includes several policy concepts that may serve as useful reference points for considering smoke respite areas in high-risk communities.

Agriculture and food systems could benefit from climate hazard connection. Despite agriculture importance to the county economy and culture, few policies related to the Agriculture and Food Systems sector specifically address any climate hazard. Thirteen policies protect agricultural land designation but none link to drought risk management, heat stress on crops and livestock, wildfire threats to agricultural operations, or economic resilience of farming families. Given that much of the county agricultural land relies on snowmelt-dependent water supplies and sits in wildfire-adjacent landscapes, it could be a beneficial addition.

The Department of Natural Resources Climate Resilience Plan includes information and policy approaches related to the impacts of climate change on agricultural lands, grazing lands, and non-forested uplands. These strategies may serve as a useful reference for the County and provide opportunities to align local efforts with state priorities. The Voluntary Stewardship Program Work Plan includes goals related to protection and enhancement of critical areas and maintenance of agricultural viability. While the Work Plan does not explicitly address climate resilience, the priorities and approaches remain relevant to climate resilience planning and are an opportunity for local alignment.

Shoreline Master Program Evaluation

The County's Shoreline Master Program was evaluated in the climate policy audit consistent with Commerce Climate Guidance.[3] There are many shoreline policy concepts such as ecosystem protection and enhancement, flood hazard reduction, and recreation and well-being, among others, that may be appropriate to fold into the climate element. However, it should be noted that the Shoreline Master Programs (SMP) are not due for update along with the rest of the Comprehensive Plan under the Growth Management Act (GMA). These plans are subject to the Shoreline Management Act which has a different cycle of review. Where the audit suggests combining/editing shoreline policies, it is referring to bringing the concept into the climate element rather than formally amending the SMPs. These findings can also be considered in future SMP updates.

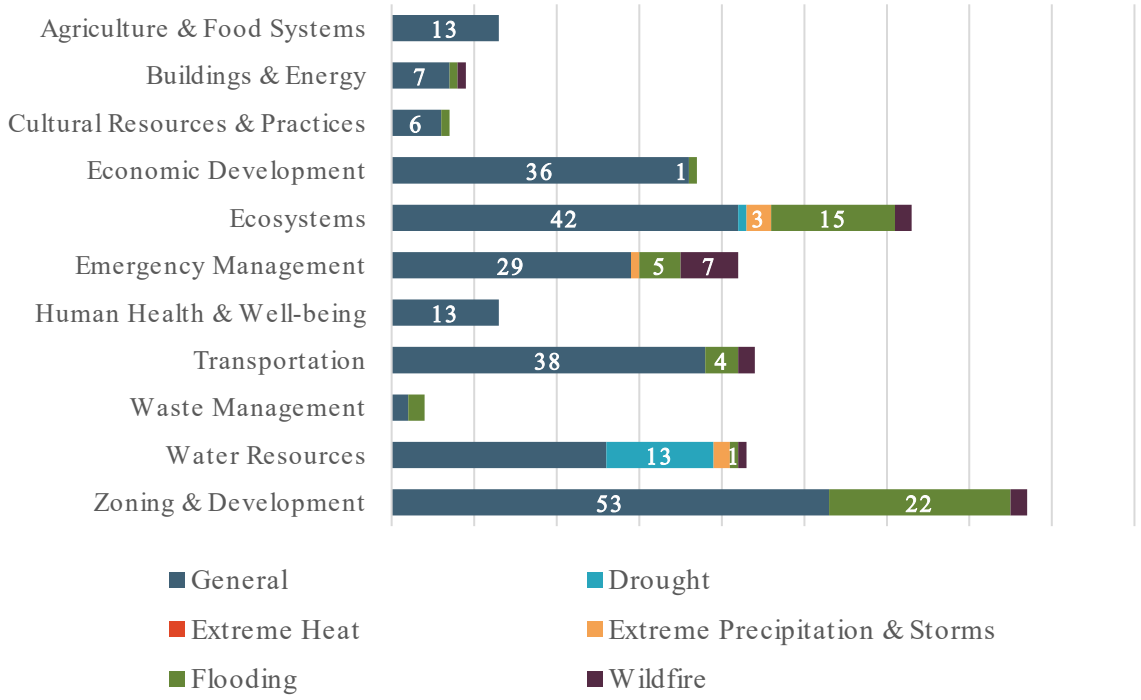
Evaluation by Sector

This section evaluates the existing policies by the 11 Department of Commerce recommended sectors. **Exhibit 4** shows the number of policies addressing each climate hazard by sector. Most policies are concentrated in the Zoning and Development and Ecosystems sectors. Many policies are not tied to a specific hazard and are supporting or mitigating these in indirect ways (and are coded as general). The Climate Element presents an opportunity to be more specific by linking sectors and policies directly to particular climate hazards, rather than addressing them in general terms or in indirect ways.

It is also important to note that organizing information strictly by sector does not fully capture the range of positive spinoff effects such as economic, environmental, and social co-benefits associated with policies. For example, addressing housing challenges can reduce climate-related risks to community members in other areas such as ability to address weatherization and food security. In Stevens County, addressing housing issues and quality can enhance residents' resilience to extreme heat, wildfire smoke, flooding, and other hazards, while also supporting social well-being and economic stability.

[3] See: https://www.commerce.wa.gov/growth-management/climate-planning/climate-planning-guidance/.

Exhibit 4. All Plans by Sector and Climate Hazard



Source: BERK, 2026.

The following sections provide a high-level assessment of existing policies and identify opportunities to strengthen them across each sector.

Agriculture & Food Systems

Agriculture and food systems could benefit from stronger connections to climate hazards. Despite the sector's importance to the county economy and culture, few policies specifically reference climate change, climate variability, or the specific hazards that most threaten the county's agricultural viability. Thirteen policies focused more on preserving and protecting agricultural land but were not connected to drought risk management, heat stress on crops and livestock, wildfire threats to agricultural operations, or economic resilience of farming communities.

There is an opportunity to build on this foundation by explicitly connecting agricultural policies to key climate impacts such as drought, extreme heat, and water scarcity, as well as by advancing climate-resilient agricultural practices and clarifying how the County can support producers in adapting to changing conditions. Although not included in the policy audit, the VSP Work Plan includes goals and objectives related to enhancing agricultural viability, protecting frequently flooded area functions, preventing degradation and promoting enhancement of critical aquifer recharge areas. These priorities could serve as a valuable foundation for aligning agricultural priorities.

Buildings & Energy

The limited building & energy policies focused on obtaining portable generators for use during power outrages and other emergency situations, establishing backup power source for Colville fire, police,

water, and sewer facilities, and support improved communication networks, and development of a County Continuity of Operations.

There are limited policies on renewable energy development such as wind, hydro[4] or solar, as well as building retrofits for extreme heat resilience, grid resilience, energy efficiency, and reducing heating and cooling demands as summers become hotter and winters more variable. The Housing element included language on affordability and housing accessibility but does not connect housing quality or energy burden to climate outcomes. Stronger connections between the County adopted Washington State Energy Codes, building codes, allowances for alternative energy sources, and climate resilience could improve building performance during extreme weather events.

Rural housing stock in counties like Stevens is statistically older, less well-insulated, and more dependent on propane and wood combustion for heating than urban housing. These characteristics create high energy cost burdens for low-income households, increase vulnerability to extreme heat and cold events, and contribute to poor indoor air quality during wildfire smoke events.

Cultural Resources & Practices

Cultural resources and practices related policies are limited. Existing policies primarily use general language focused on conserving, preserving, and protecting historical, cultural, and archaeological resources. There is an opportunity to strengthen this area by incorporating more specific recognition of Tribal communities, cultural practices, and stewardship priorities.

These policies, while appropriate as baseline commitments, do not address the climate-related dimensions of cultural resource protection. Policies could be amended to acknowledge that wildfire, flooding, drought, and extreme heat pose direct physical threats to historic properties, archaeological sites, traditional cultural places and practices, and tribal cultural landscapes. Policies could also address how climate change may affect the cultural practices of the Tribes and other Indigenous communities.

Economic Development

Existing policies address agriculture, mineral resource lands, tourism and recreation development, support for natural resource industries, workforce development, and regional coordination. However, a future Climate Element could establish an economic resilience framework that explicitly connects climate risk to economic planning. This includes directing that economic development strategies assess climate sensitivity of target industries (e.g., timber, agriculture, mining, recreation, and related industrial and commercial sectors currently identified in the Economic Development element as key to supporting local sustainable businesses). It would also elevate economic diversification as a climate adaptation strategy to support a more resilient local economy.

Depending on County priorities, scope and existing partnerships, additional policy directions could include promoting climate-resilient tourism development, addressing the vulnerability of low-income rural populations to climate-driven economic disruptions, supporting small business adaptation grants, and providing business continuity planning guidance to help businesses prepare for and remain operational during climate-related events.

[4] Some reference is made to hydropower in the 2007 Watershed Plan.

As the Climate Element is prepared, Stevens County could refer to the Tri-County CEDS, which includes goals and policies recognizing a full range of economic sectors such as natural resources, tourism, small downtown centers, and others. The CEDS identifies the importance of "institutional employment across government, education and health care, both as economic engines and as critical services for local residents." The CEDs appendix includes an economic recovery plan to "equip businesses and communities to be prepared for any crisis" with strategies such as business resiliency plans, communication channels, and others that may be useful in the Climate Vulnerability Assessment.

Ecosystems

There are about 62 ecosystem related policies, the second highest of any sectors reflecting a strong recognition and focus on natural environment protection. The policies ranged from conservation, recreational use, habitat restoration, protecting critical areas, watershed health, and shoreline stabilization. There are opportunities to reference climate hazard impacts as a driver of ecosystem stress, and need for climate adaptive ecosystem management, as well as developing policies around specific species and habitats impacted by drought and extreme heat or other climate hazards.

Although these documents were not included in the County policy audit, the Department of Natural Resources' Plan for Climate Resilience should be considered a key reference for strategies related to forest management, agriculture, ecosystem and natural area conservation, and aquatic resources. Similarly, the Department's Wildland Fire Protection 10-Year Strategic Plan, 2025 Forest Action Plan, and 20-Year Forest Health Strategic Plan provide valuable guidance and opportunities for alignment on proactive forest restoration, fuels reduction, and the creation of forests that are more resilient to disturbances such as wildfire, drought, insects, and disease while continuing to support clean water and wildlife habitat. These plans include strategies such as reducing fuels, hardening structures in developed areas, restoring more fire-adapted landscapes, and reestablishing historic low-severity fire regimes through treatments, prescribed fire, and invasive species removal.

Emergency Management

Existing policies at the intersection of climate and emergency management are strong and are largely concentrated in the HMP, some examples include delivering public education programs on hazard mitigation, improving 911 systems by addressing power disruptions/ maintenance and monitoring issues, improvement in fiberoptic cable system to provide redundancy in phone lines, promoting rural internet connectivity through improved broadband, posting "emergency evaluation route" signs along the identified primary and secondary access routes, identify and indicate safety zones and or rally points for evacuees, and obtain mobile repeater station and backup power source.

Because many of the evaluated policies originate from HMP action items, it is unclear which actions have been completed, and which remain in progress. Clarifying this distinction is recommended to better inform the Climate Element. Notable gaps and opportunities include a stronger focus on specific climate hazard events, such as wildfire smoke and extreme heat.

The Washington State Wildland Fire Protection 10-Year Strategic Plan by the Department of Natural Resources should be referenced and aligned with when developing policies related to wildfire preparedness, response, and recovery. The plan includes strategies to strengthen pre-fire planning and operations through risk analysis, suppression resource coordination, and evacuation planning; enhance communication and coordination during wildfire events; and support post-fire recovery and resilience efforts.

Human Health & Well-being

Steven County's aging population, older housing stock that may lack adequate cooling and air quality infrastructure, and resource-based outdoor workers could be addressed in climate related policies. There are opportunities to strengthen human health and well-being policies by more explicitly linking them to specific climate hazards and to vulnerable and overburdened populations that are disproportionately affected. There are opportunities to expand policies related to extreme heat, and wildfire and smoke response resources, such as air filters and clean air shelters, and to address limited mobility by supporting ways to deliver these services to homebound residents.

Transportation

Existing transportation policies in the Comprehensive Plan and the 2021 Northeast Washington Regional Transportation Plan are generally broad and do not explicitly connect transportation planning to specific climate hazards. Current policies focus on ensuring environmentally sensitive transportation design, supporting transit service improvements, developing multimodal systems (including ferry systems) with minimal shoreline impacts, reducing reliance on automobile travel through design improvements, and advancing pedestrian and bicycle safety.

The HMP includes more targeted action items related to climate hazards, such as reviewing road profiles within flood zones to determine elevation needs, posting FEMA emergency evacuation route signage on primary and secondary access routes, and improving access through roadside fuels management.

There is an opportunity to better integrate these action-oriented measures into policy by explicitly addressing transportation system resilience to climate hazards. This includes considering the impacts of extreme heat on roads and infrastructure, flooding impacts on transportation networks, and supporting energy-efficient and low-emission transportation modes that also enhance climate adaptation and resiliency.

Waste Management

There are opportunities to further develop waste management policies, including emergency operations planning, climate resilience considerations for waste facilities, expanding composting and food waste reduction efforts and generally addressing system vulnerabilities. The existing four policies focus largely on supporting development and expansion of waste management infrastructure to sustain planned growth but do not have an explicit connection to climate resiliency.

Water Resources

Declining snowpack, stream low flows, and worsening drought conditions create opportunities to better integrate water resilience planning into the new Climate Element. Surface and groundwater rights, instream flows, water storage, infiltration, recognition of the water bank as an asset, and flood management could be advanced in the policies of the Climate Element. In particular, the WRIA 59 Watershed Plan Addendum could lead to formation of relevant climate policies; the 2007 WRIA 59 plan policies are out of date.

Zoning & Development

There are strong built environment and land use related policies in existing County documents. Land use related policies make up 38% (126) of the total climate related policies evaluated. Policies included cluster development, reducing sprawl, supporting low-density development, building connected and walkable urban areas, flood hazard management, and incorporating Firewise and wildland–urban interface (WUI) principles in fire-prone areas. This sector requires few new policies; instead, existing policies should be refined to add specificity and explicitly connect to climate resiliency.

Next Steps

This policy audit provides a starting point for discussion of areas of policy strengths and gaps that can inform the development of a climate element. These findings will be shared, vetted, and refined with review by Stevens County, as well as the Climate Policy Advisory Team.