Washington's Water Future Agricultural Input Session Synthesis of Key Discussion Themes

July 15, 2026, 10am – 12pm | Virtual on Zoom

About the input session

This meeting convened over 80 members of the agricultural sector and public. Meeting objectives were to:

- Build a shared understanding of the *Washington's Water Future* (WWF) Initiative.
- Discuss what a resilient water future looks like for the region, and what local priorities drive that vision.
- Identify barriers that are in the way of achieving that vision and addressing local needs.
- Explore solutions that will move the region towards a resilient water future, and how Washington can help.

The two-hour meeting used a mix of Poll Everywhere, written Q&A/comments, and verbal Q&A/comments to collect input. Note that the results from Poll Everywhere and the written and verbal comments are not intended to be representative of broader public opinion. Comments from the meeting were grouped for the purposes of this synthesis. Full results noted in Appendix A and B (pages 3-6).

Agricultural experiences with water trends

- Strong sense of uncertainty related to future water levels and water rights for farmers.
- Lack of inclusive planning and technical support for small to midscale farms working on water conservation.
- Additional needs for outreach, technical assistance, data and research to support further adaption.
- Farmers are struggling financially, making it hard to adapt to climate change and water scarcity.

Agricultural visions of a resilient water future

- Modernized, expanded, reliable water infrastructure and management with storage capacity and above-ground reservoirs and below-ground aquifer recharge.
- Support for sustainable farming practices that grow marketable crops in more arid ecosystems.
- Flood-prepared and resilient farms and communities, recognition of the flood storage benefits of farms through protection and post-flood compensation.
- Water resilience aligned with regional energy and carbon goals.

Agricultural community input on barriers

Physical/technological

- Lack of new water storage options.

Legal/regulatory

- Antiquated water law, including relinquishment statutes that disincentivize conservation.
- Unrealistic environmental regulation and demands on farmers.

Financial

- Expensive storage and conservation financial investments that overburden individual district ratepayers.
- Rising costs of other non-water inputs like fertilizer, feed, and fuel.
- Funding cuts to university extension research.
- Natural Resources Conservation Service funds not dispensed equitably across all types of agriculture.
- Lack of understanding of the need for watershed-scale actions

Agricultural community input on solutions

Comments from the meeting were grouped for the purposes of this synthesis.

Physical/technological

- Complete the Odessa Groundwater Replacement Project.
- Expand aquifer recharge and seasonal water storage.
- Ensure that new storage is lower in the system and avoid new storage projects where costs exceed benefits.
- Cover open air canals to limit evaporation (with solar panels, e.g.), including in Columbia Basin Project canals.
- Employ preventative strategies statewide such as real-time soil moisture management, automated irrigation systems, and regenerative practices such as building soil health.
- Collect better data on minor-crop irrigation needs.
- Ensure infrastructure improvements and modernization efforts occur statewide.

Legal/regulatory

- Modernize water law (e.g., revise to allow a percentage of a water right to go unused without triggering relinquishment)
- Develop a new statewide water plan.
- Require statewide monthly reporting on surface water and groundwater consumption.
- Restrict AI data centers.

Institutional/governance

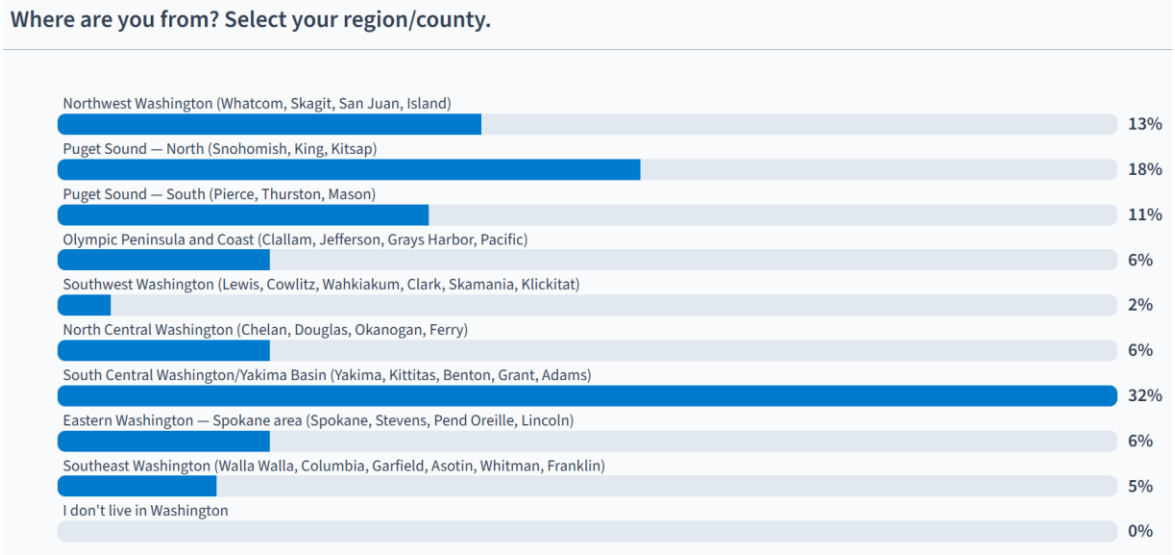
- Utilize watershed-scale, place-based approaches and learn from existing collaboratives already working on these issues to ensure an integrated approach that connects water, food systems, climate, energy, flood management, and ecosystem health.
- Simplify and streamline water transfer process across the state. Current cost-reimbursement ($50,000 over 2-3 years is too costly and slow for amending water rights).
- Promote conservation in non-agricultural industries.
- Develop a recognition program for water use efficiency similar to the “Dairy of Merit” program.
- Conduct more outreach to farm groups, especially information on what’s allowed or restricted, how to modify practices, how to optimize irrigation schedules, available cost-share options, etc.

Financial

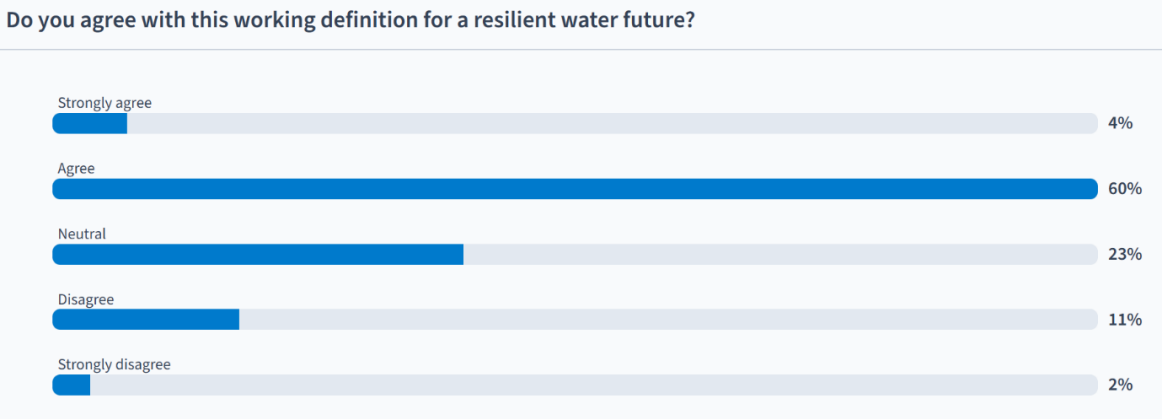
- Develop a statewide dedicated funding source for long-term capital water infrastructure projects (especially for small basins and the Columbia Basin) that avoids overburdening taxpayers.
- Expand financial incentives for water use efficiency in production/processing and rural critical-area protection.
- Fund purchasing portions of water rights from users who conserve, rewarding rather than penalizing conservation.

Appendix A: Multiple-Choice Poll Everywhere Responses

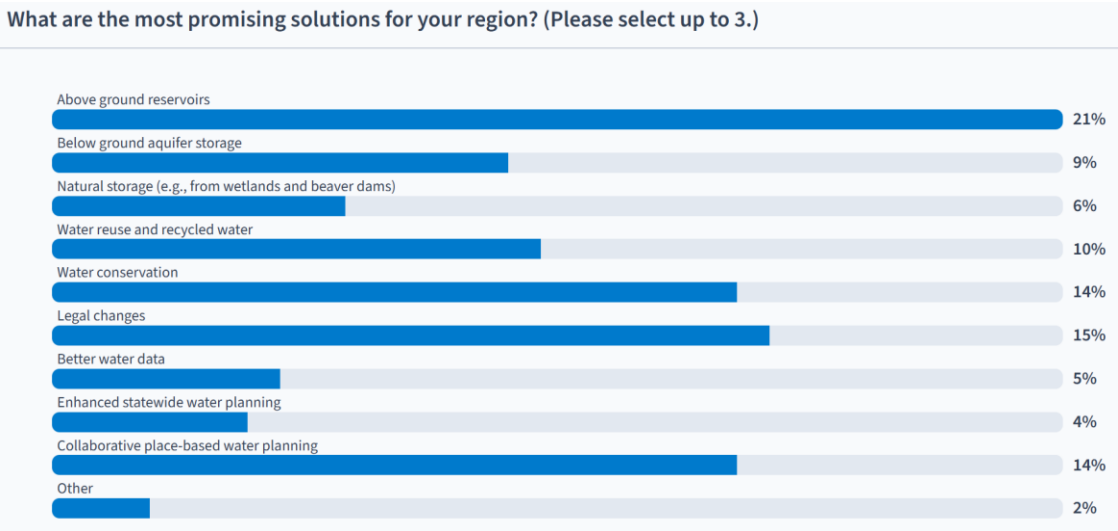
Participant Data



Draft Working Definition



Solutions



Appendix B: Open-Ended Poll Everywhere Responses

What would it look like to have water resilience for future generations of the agricultural community?

Top open-ended responses (6 or more upvotes):

- Water resilience means ensuring future generations of farmers have reliable water, modern infrastructure, and the certainty to keep producing food
- Increased opportunities for water conservation without risk of losing water rights
- More storage is required, if there is going to be less snowpack
- Sufficient water for agriculture to provide food security
- Water storage is essential for agriculture's future security
- Implementation of innovative ways to protect and expand agricultural water rights
- We need to reduce uncertainty for farmers where we can; this reduces barriers for the next generation
- We can't talk about water without talking about energy and limits to growth. Please make sure this initiative doesn't overlook how connected water is to carbon.
- Increase all forms of water storage to adapt to current and future conditions
- Sustainable farming practices for marketable crops -that can be produced in low water ecosystems
- Ensuring water supply to provide food and ag products for our communities and the world
- Make water conservation mandatory instead of voluntary
- Encouraging farmers to grow more food using less water by incentivizing conservation, efficiency, and spreading water rights to cover more irrigated acres
- Provide incentives to encourage efficiencies in water use by farms
- Recognize that every watershed is unique, and one size fits all solutions are of limited benefit
- Water right certainty

What are the major barriers holding the agricultural community back from adapting to changing water trends?

Top open-ended responses (10 or more upvotes):

- Relinquishment acts as a disincentive to conservation
- Relinquishment disincentivizes agricultural water conservation and innovations in irrigation efficiencies
- Ag viability and financing new practices on the farm. A new WSDA report notes that, despite strong crop diversity and production, Washington producers recently faced an estimated $300 million in negative returns.
- A major barrier to conservation: current water law, specifically relinquishment, does not promote conservation. It promotes a use-it-or-lose-it mentality amongst water right holders.
- Unrealistic environmental regulation
- Regulatory uncertainty

Open-ended responses about barriers were highly dispersed with voting (more items with less votes). These responses received between 4-8 votes each (those with higher votes at the top):

- The relinquishment laws are outdated. Ecology's enforcement and regulatory standards also prevent farmers from putting in creative solutions.
- Water right permitting, WA water law, can be very restrictive when looking into creative water use solutions
- Risk of losing water right

- Lack of new water storage
- The ag sector is under water (pun intended). Growers cannot make a profit. Hard to adapt to climate change when you're going out of business.
- Washington water law needs an overhaul, discouraging efficiency while making it increasingly difficult to spread legal water rights
- More outreach efforts to farm groups and ag communities about all this information and solutions
- Policy at the county and state level and capital/funding for adaptive projects
- Water right uncertainties
- Information - on what is allowed, what is restricted, how to modify farming practices/crops and how to minimize water use through tech and what cost-share is available.
- Financing of storage and conservation investments by irrigation districts is expensive and places the burden on individual district ratepayers even when there are broader societal benefits
- Infrastructure costs
- Regulation
- The cost of other non-water inputs (fertilizer, feed, fuel, etc.)

What other solutions do you have in mind for a resilient water future?

Top open-ended responses on solutions (6 or more upvotes):

- Possible solutions to relinquishment and conservation: provide a percentage of the water right that is allowed to not be used without triggering relinquishment. That way water right holders are not encouraged to use 100% of their water right.
- Real time soil moisture management and automated irrigation systems
- Regenerative agriculture and a plan towards decreasing our needs and eventually our population.
- Provide expanded and substantial financial incentives for agriculture to increase water use efficiencies for production and processing as well as protecting critical areas in rural areas.
- Develop a new state water policy rather than relying on the outdated RCWs that are barriers to water conservation, in-stream flows, and water marketing.
- A pool of capital funding for water infrastructure improvements. These are long-term projects, and small basins often give up when they see the challenges to securing targeted funding.
- Statewide - improvements/modernization of irrigation district infrastructure to allow for better reductions in water use on farm
- Expand aquifer recharge and seasonal water storage.
- Cover open-air canals to limit evaporation; one option is with solar panels.
- Any restrictions on water use need to cover all uses -- residential, commercial, industrial and agriculture. Too often agriculture takes the biggest "hit" while industry gets priority
- Possible solution to relinquishment and conservation: fund purchasing portions of water rights from users that conserve. That way the conservation is rewarded and not penalized.
- Consider an overhaul of Washington water law
- More preventative examples, such as building soil health across the state. Proven strategies include water-holding capacity and other ecological methods.
- regenerative farming practices around soil management
- Statewide: Simplify water transfer process
- Water banking

- Regional: Education and training on water conservation, and crop selection, production methods
- Restricting AI data centers as a large water user.
- Build new storage, lower in the system
- Complete the Odessa Groundwater Replacement Program.
- Line and modernize Columbia Basin Project canals to reduce water loss.
- Ag overtime laws lead to irrigation conveyance inefficiencies due to resulting changes in farming practices