

12. Climate Communication, Public Awareness, and Engagement



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To date, the public dialogue on climate change has largely focused on greenhouse gas emissions and reduction strategies. Moving forward, the public discussion needs expand to prepare Washington for the unavoidable consequences of climate change and extreme weather events. Without an informed public conversation, the adaptation strategies and actions will lack the support they need for effective implementation.

Building support to reduce climate risks is proving to be difficult as policymakers, local communities, and the public are currently challenged with urgent issues such as the economy and jobs. The risks that climate change will result in more frequent and severe floods, wildfires, droughts, and other extreme events make it necessary for policymakers and scientists to step up efforts to increase public awareness and build grassroots action.

Climate change is creating a new and dynamic decision environment. Citizens, governments, and businesses need an accurate understanding of the problem and its causes, the likelihood and severity of the impacts, how the risks may affect them personally and collectively, and the costs and benefits of taking action. Communication, education, and outreach are powerful tools that government agencies, private organizations, and nonprofits can use to dispel misconceptions and to bring climate impacts and hazards to the attention of the public.

Recent surveys of Washington's local government officials, planners, and stakeholders highlight the need for more outreach and education about impacts of climate change—for accessible information on how climate change could affect their communities and for insight into effective mechanisms to build resilience and engage the public.



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The state Legislature directed Ecology to identify “methods to increase public awareness of climate change, its projected impacts on the community, and to build support for meaningful adaptation policies and strategies.” The recommended strategies and accompanying actions described below are intended to:

- Raise awareness about risks and consequences of changing climate trends on various economic sectors, natural resources, and human health.
- Foster dialogue between state and local community leaders, scientists, resource managers, and policymakers on what we can do to prepare for and respond to the threats of changing climatic conditions.
- Engage and motivate organizations and individuals to take action.
- Explore opportunities for collaboration among government agencies, the private sector, and nongovernmental organizations to shape and strengthen future efforts to adapt to climate.



Recommended Strategies and Actions—Climate Communication, Public Awareness, and Engagement

Strategy I-1. Create coordinated and cohesive communication messages and tools on climate change impacts and adaptation, and ensure they are effectively distributed to a wide variety of people and professionals across all levels of government and the public.

Actions:

1. Continue to leverage partnerships between state agencies and research organizations to develop clear and consistent messaging on climate change impacts and adaptation. The messages must connect to other priority issues and resonate with people's core values, such as health, safety, and the economy.
2. Develop targeted climate change risk communication training for use communication staff within by state agencies and other entities.
3. Conduct targeted outreach to state and local elected officials, leaders, and staff to share information and outreach materials, improve the understanding of risks, and inform decision-making.
4. Develop communication materials focused on vulnerable communities that are at high risk and have a low capacity to respond, paying particular attention to low-income and underserved populations.
5. Develop risk maps and decision-support tools to identify climate change risks for specific geographic areas throughout the state.
6. Support additional research to identify how people perceive climate risks, what messages resonate with people, and how people learn and respond to information about climate change.



Strategy I-2. Leverage existing education and outreach networks and integrate communication about climate change.

Actions:

1. Build on existing networks and integrate climate change into current state agency education and outreach efforts related to public health, land use, ecosystems, water resources, coastal management, agriculture, forests, and infrastructure.
2. Use a variety of channels to communicate about climate change, such as:
 - *Web sites, agency listservs, newsletters, and news releases.*
 - *Social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and video clips.*
 - *Meetings of climate educators and climate communicators group.*
 - *Presentations at public events.*
 - *Publications including Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).*
3. Promote effective integration of climate change education into K-12 educational programs and school curricula.
4. Bolster the network for climate educators, such as hosting peer-to-peer networking events and summits to share and exchange information, experiences, and best practices.
5. Encourage universities and community colleges to integrate climate considerations into vocational and educational training programs. For example, provide training for engineering students to incorporate more frequent and severe weather, flooding, sea level rise, or other climate impacts into design.
6. Build on the existing climate education website hosted by state agencies to provide information on existing tools, materials, and best practices in teaching and learning about climate change.
7. Partner with extension programs to incorporate climate information into community outreach efforts and programs. Build on successful models such as the Washington State University Extension's Carbon Masters program, the Master Gardeners program, and others.¹⁶⁸
8. Provide peer-to-peer professional training opportunities and encourage sharing of information among levels of government, nongovernmental organizations, and professional associations.



¹⁶⁸ See <http://carbonmasters.wsu.edu/> and <http://mastergardener.wsu.edu/>

Strategy I-3. Engage the public in climate change conversations and solutions for addressing impacts.

Actions:

1. Develop a framework for citizen engagement and action, modeled after the framework developed in 2007 as part of the Governor's climate change challenge.¹⁶⁹
2. Develop compelling, visual stories and social media to connect climate change impacts to concerns people already have, convey the benefits of addressing climate change, and demonstrate how actions currently underway can address impacts of climate change.
3. Partner with scientists, community leaders, and organizations credible to target audiences and those affected directly by the impacts of climate change when delivering messages on climate change to citizens.

King Tide Photo Initiative

"King tides" occur naturally when the sun and the moon align, causing an increased gravitational pull on the Earth's oceans. The Washington Department of Ecology invites residents and visitors to take photos of Washington's king tides. Documenting how very high tides affect the natural environment and our coastal infrastructure will help us visualize what sea level rise might look like in the future.

In 2010 and 2011, Washington's King Tides Photo Initiative gathered over 400 photos.

Ecology's King Tide website:
www.ecy.wa.gov/climatechange/ipa_hightide.htm



¹⁶⁹ See <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/pubs/0801005.pdf>

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4. Engage the news media and provide information to help citizens make informed choices.
5. Develop “citizen science” initiatives that engage the public in making observations and collecting and recording data on climate change and its effects on communities and the environment. Build on successful initiatives, such as the Washington King Tides Photo Initiative,¹⁷⁰ Washington Sea Grant citizen science initiatives,¹⁷¹ National Phenology Network, and Audubon’s Christmas Bird Count.
6. Improve Ecology’s climate change clearinghouse to make the information more accessible and easier to understand. Build off successful models in other states, such as the Cal-Adapt website¹⁷² and link to existing tools, case studies, projects, and portals, such as the Climate Adaptation Knowledge Exchange (CAKE) and the Georgetown Climate Center’s Adaptation Clearinghouse.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ See http://www.ecy.wa.gov/climatechange/ipa_hightide.htm

¹⁷¹ See <http://www.wsg.washington.edu/citizenscience/projects.html>

¹⁷² See <http://cal-adapt.org/>

¹⁷³ See www.cakex.org and www.georgetownclimate.org/adaptation/clearinghouse

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Climate Adaptation Knowledge Exchange (CAKE)

Climate Adaptation Knowledge Exchange (CAKE), a joint project of Island Press and EcoAdapt, is aimed at building a shared knowledge base for managing natural systems in the face of climate change. It includes a virtual library of adaptation resources, case studies, a directory of individuals and organizations working on climate adaptation, and tools to help make adaptation decisions.

CAKE website:
www.cakex.org



The Adaptation Clearinghouse

The Adaptation Clearinghouse, developed by the Georgetown Climate Center, seeks to assist state policymakers, resource managers, academics, and others who are working to help communities adapt to climate change. The clearinghouse contains resources, tools, and case studies to help planners understand climate risks and effective response strategies.

Adaptation Clearinghouse website:
www.georgetownclimate.org/adaptation/clearinghouse