



Policy Brief: Confronting Climate Change

Climate change is the paramount challenge of this generation, and has far reaching and fundamental consequences for our economy, environment, and public health and safety.

November 2013 was the warmest month on record for the globe and the 345th consecutive month of above average global temperatures. In King County, we are already experiencing the impacts of climate change: warming temperatures, acidifying marine waters, rising seas, increasing flooding risk, decreasing mountain snowpack, and less water in streams in the summer. For example:

Oceans: Puget Sound has risen more than 8 inches over the last century, and the rate of rise has increased in recent years. Across the globe and in the Puget Sound, marine waters are becoming more acidic, with potentially severe impacts to ocean ecosystems.

Rivers: In 2012, more than 80 percent of surveyed streams and rivers in King County exceeded the state temperature standard for protection of salmon habitat. Over the last 40 years, all major rivers in King County have shown more flow and increased flooding risk during the fall and significantly less water in rivers during summer.

Mountains: In the Cascade Mountain Range snowpack has decreased 25 percent from the 1950s to the 2000s, with significant implications for water supplies and recreation.

In the years ahead, climate change will affect resource-based economies like agriculture and forestry through changes in precipitation, water supplies, and pests. Climate change will also affect biodiversity of plants and animals through changes in habitat. Climate change will have uneven impacts on certain communities and economic sectors. For example, floodplain residents, who are often low income, will bear greater risk and have the least resources to prepare for flooding. Urban residents in areas with limited forest cover and parks could experience more heat-related impacts. For a summary of King County climate impacts, [please see this infographic](#).

The Opportunity

Global greenhouse gas emissions have already risen to a point that they will affect climate for many generations. Although per capita emissions are leveling off, overall emissions continue to increase as our population grows and carbon-sequestering farms and forests face greater development pressure. However, we can influence the severity of climate change impacts through concerted actions to reduce community-scale emissions and make our communities more resilient.

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be served by transportation will set the stage for success or failure in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and making our communities resilient to climate change impacts. The actions we take – including transit-oriented land use, development of

more walkable communities, expansion of trail networks, and protection of carbon-sequestering farms and forests -- can not only reduce emissions but also improve health outcomes and be an asset in attracting businesses and retaining a high quality work force.

Key sources of greenhouse gas emissions include the fuel we use to drive our cars and heat our homes. In addition, the goods and services we consume create emissions through their production and transport. The good news is that our region is home to a strong base of businesses engaged in clean fuel development, green manufacturing, and cutting edge building design – positioning King County to be a national leader in sustainable economic development. We have an opportunity in King County to capitalize on this strong base to attract additional innovation and investment.

Outdated energy policies and fuel standards continue to subsidize the extraction and export of finite fossil fuels to other countries, despite the climate, economic, and environmental impacts to our local communities. Increasingly, local governments like King County are calling for a true accounting of economic and environmental impacts of proposals to transport and export of fossil fuels.

As we prepare for the impacts of climate change, such as severe weather, additional extreme heat events, and reduced snowpack and streamflows, we can and must address disproportionate impacts on low-income residents and people whose livelihoods are tied to natural resource based economies.

What King County Is Doing

King County is committed to reducing its own impact and supporting climate friendly choices in our region. King County has set ambitious targets for improving energy efficiency and reducing carbon emissions from its own operations, with a commitment to reduce energy use and greenhouse gas emissions by 15 percent by 2015. We are also working with the broader community to reduce countywide emissions by 80 percent by 2050. Accomplishments to date include:

Greening Your Commute: King County Metro operates about 220 bus and trolley routes that provided 115 million passenger trips in 2012. Metro also operates the nation's largest publicly-owned commuter vanpool program, with nearly 1,300 vans that delivered more than 3.5 million passenger trips in 2012. RapidRide bus rapid transit is a growing part of Metro service; six RapidRide lines will be in place by spring 2014.

Promoting Smart Growth: Strong commitments to smart growth management focus 95 percent of new growth in urban areas near employment and transit, and protect carbon-capturing farms and forests. More than 200,000 acres of working forest land has been protected in eastern King County, creating a green wall against sprawl.

Saving Energy and Reducing Climate Pollution: King County set ambitious energy efficiency targets in 2010 and energy efficiency investments are now realizing \$2.6 million in annual savings for King County government operations. King County is a national leader in capturing waste energy from its landfill and wastewater treatment plants, and in 2013 surpassed its goal of meeting the equivalent of half of the County's energy needs through renewable energy.

Collaborating with Others: Recognizing that no single entity can tackle climate change alone, King County convened the King County-Cities Climate Collaboration and Sustainable Cities Roundtable to pool resources, expertise, and practical tools to reduce climate pollution.

Building Resilient Communities: King County has taken steps to make our communities, economy, and environment more resilient to climate change impacts. The County joined with cities in 2006 to form a countywide Flood District and today King County is recognized as one of the top-two counties in the country for addressing flood hazards, which are expected to become more severe with climate change.

What King County Will Do Next

King County Executive Dow Constantine is committed to reducing the County's own footprint and being a model for local government actions that will reduce community-

wide impacts. Greenhouse gas emissions from county operations are a small percentage of countywide emissions. King County can have the most impact in reducing regional emissions through working with cities, county residents, and businesses on land use and transportation decisions that support climate friendly actions. Our region is uniquely positioned to be a national leader in climate-friendly economic development, and we should work across business, government, academic, and non-profit sectors to capitalize on this asset.

Pledging to “do good things” to reduce climate pollution is not enough; we need to identify specific actions that will be required to meet climate targets and make clear commitments to accomplish them. Under the Executive’s leadership, King County will move with a sense of urgency over the next four years to put us on a path to meeting climate targets and make our communities, economy, and environment more resilient to climate change. During his second term, the Executive will focus on the following initiatives:

Joint County-Cities Action Plan: Building on commitments by the King County-Cities Climate Collaboration and the King County Growth Management Planning Council, the Executive will help convene city leaders in February 2014 to chart specific actions, commitments, and an accountability framework needed to achieve ambitious reductions in regional greenhouse gas emissions and meet State and County climate targets. The goal is to identify a package of joint County-cities actions by May 2014.

Funding to Preserve and Expand Transit: Transportation accounts for nearly half of all greenhouse gas emissions in King County. Puget Sound Regional Council’s Transportation 2040 plan and King County’s Strategic Climate Action Plan call for a doubling of transit service by 2040. However, without new revenue tools, King County Metro faces transit cuts of 17 percent in 2014. In collaboration with the Council and county residents, the Executive will make establishment of a Transportation Benefit District in King County one of his top priorities for 2014. King County will also work to extend and link our world class regional trail system to transit centers.

Coal Exports: Proposed coal export terminals in Oregon and Washington would result in greenhouse gas emissions that would drown out local efforts, harm air and water quality, subsidize competition with our local economy, and tie up traffic and freight along rail corridors. Although the public has turned out at public hearings in record numbers to oppose coal export, three proposals for coal export terminals are still under consideration. The Executive will convene local governments, tribes, environmental groups, and business to oppose coal export and push for federal and state policies requiring full accounting of impacts of proposals to transport and export finite fossil fuels, including coal, oil, and natural gas.

Clean Energy & Technology: Building on the successful model of the King County Aerospace Alliance, the Executive will convene a *King County Climate Alliance* of clean tech industries, economic development organizations, local corporations with strong sustainability commitments, academia, and community groups to identify shared outcomes and commitments to reduce emissions and make King County a national center for clean technology innovation, manufacturing, and training.

King County Operations: The Executive will continue to set ambitious targets and make investments to reduce the footprint of King County operations – and realize savings through energy efficiency. Actions include:

- Phase in a new fleet of 155 electric trolley buses that are 30 percent more efficient than current electric buses.
- Complete replacement of 100 percent of diesel bus fleet with hybrids by 2017.
- Institute an internal *Carbon and Energy Investment Pilot Program* to achieve carbon-neutral operations by the King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks to go “[Beyond Carbon Neutral](#)”.
- Fully integrate King County’s energy efficiency, climate change, and green building plans and policies to focus action and investments.
- Implement the 2013 Green Building Ordinance, which calls for new King County owned and operated buildings to strive for the highest building sustainability rating, LEED Platinum.

Climate Resiliency: King County will take several actions in the Executive’s second term to strengthen climate resiliency throughout the County. These include:

- Accelerating stormwater and flood hazard capital investments that reduce flood risks and improve habitat and water quality.
- Strengthening local farm productivity through the creation of new networks of producers, distributors, restaurants, and schools.
- Developing and implementing Forest Stewardship Plans for all King County Parks over 200 acres in size.
- Acquiring, managing and restoring parks and other natural lands in ways that maximize biological carbon storage and are resilient to changing climate conditions.

Conclusion

Both climate change impacts and solutions will unfold over decades, but the decisions that our region makes now about natural and built infrastructure will cast the die for our success or failure in making dramatic reductions in community greenhouse gas emissions and being resilient to climate change impacts. Fortunately, many of the actions the region must take – from focused development in vibrant urban centers, to expanded transit, to innovation in the clean technology sector – can also benefit our health and economy.

During his second term, the Executive will engage local governments, businesses, community groups, and local residents to chart a path to reducing our community greenhouse gas emissions while making King County an even better place to live, start a business, or find a family wage job.

For more information on King County climate actions, please see our climate page at <http://www.kingcounty.gov/environment/climate.aspx>.