What our sewage treatment choices today mean for our region’s future

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A NOTE FROM OUR CEO

It’ukdi wigwa! Qngi mait’a?
(Good day. How are you?)

Recently, I moved to the traditional lands of the Lh’aqTeMish People (Lummi and Sq’elx’en descendants) in Northwestern Washington. Here time has slowed down, Bellingham Bay is directly out my window, and I savor the longer days that end with humbling sunsets. I count my blessings for my health and safety during this time. I hope you and your loved ones are doing well, too.

Since I wrote you last, Russia launched a war on Ukraine, the climate crisis is accelerating, and gun violence continues terrorizing communities across the country. What do you do when it all seems too much?

I need to slow down. And breathe. And if I can make it, there’s this perfect tree perched atop a point overlooking the water near me in Whatcom County. For some reason, it connects me to my ancestors and I pray and reflect.

For the last year, I have been reflecting on a quote I’ve mentioned before by Lame Deer (Lakota) from “Seeker of Visions,” his book of healing wisdom and interviews, “We must pray for mankind which is on the road to self-destruction...This can be done only if all of us, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike can again see ourselves as part of the earth, not as an enemy from the outside who tries to impose its will on it.”

We are all interconnected. We are not enemies. We are part of the earth — we are all relatives. The ocean is our relative. The orca is our relative. The trees are our relative. The salmon is our relative. You are my relative. We are all relatives. And it is that interconnectedness that must drive how all of us fight for people and the planet we occupy.

Our summer 2022 issue of Convene will certainly become a favorite. We lean into interconnectedness and ask you to think broadly about how our actions affect those downstream. Literally. We explore this in our story about wastewater in Washington state, called “Ripples of Impact.”

We also have a community feature — a first for Convene — which is our way of exploring topics and issues related to our work. This issue’s community feature explores how immigrants and refugees who have undergone varying degrees of displacement from their homeland connect back to the earth through grounding practices like community gardening.

We also have a short civic engagement primer about County Auditors, their role and responsibility, and why holding these elected officials is connected to election integrity.

As always, we share our take on the 2022 legislative session and robust organizational updates. One I want to note for you is brand unification. WEC and our partner organization WCV are aiming to unify under one single brand name, logo, and identity to fully leverage our power for people and planet over the next fifty years.

I hope you truly enjoy our Summer 2022 issue of Convene. I believe these stories and our successes will invite and inspire you to stay connected with yourself, your relatives, and the Earth at a time we all need it more than ever.

Alqalma ayamglglaya,

Alyssa Macy (she/her)*
CEO, Washington Environmental Council

*learn more about pronouns and their importance this Pride month at: https://www.npr.org/2021/06/02/996319297/gender-identity-pronouns-expression-guide-lgbtq
Part 1: Poop in Puget Sound

You are standing at a waterfront park, perhaps somewhere on the edges of Puget Sound. Maybe you are a local, or maybe you are visiting from afar. It’s one of those beautiful summer days clear enough to see the dark blue outline of the Olympic Mountains in the distance. A breeze blows and then suddenly the smell breaks this serene moment — the putrid stench of sewage floating on the surface. You grow alarmed when you see what looks like paint — an orangish layer of blooming algae that fouls the water as far as you can see. Both remind you that sewage has to go … somewhere.

Our seemingly crystal clear Puget Sound waters are the repository for more than 150 billion gallons of sewage released from wastewater treatment plants every year. That’s equivalent to filling 26 Olympic-size swimming pools with treated sewage every hour of every day throughout the year. If you thought all our wastewater was purified before being dumped into our shared water bodies, or that our marine ecosystem is able to handle all that sewage you would be wrong.

There are many ways wastewater from your household eventually gets into Puget Sound. Once it does, it combines with many other factors to create conditions that strain our marine ecosystems and eventually circle back to harm communities and even the food at your dinner table.

Let’s start from the beginning. Once you do your thing in the bathroom, the raw fecal matter goes through a maze of pipes in the sewer system to get to a wastewater treatment plant. Some communities are served by onsite sewage systems that partially treat and discharge underneath the ground; these waters can still get into Puget Sound through streams and rivers, just through a different path.

The treatment plant itself uses complex processes to reduce wastewater pollution. Sewage includes pollution like chemicals and microorganisms. One pollutant is nitrogen, which is also used during the treatment process leading to an excessive amount of nitrogen, which is not filtered out before the water is discharged into Puget Sound.

Nitrogen is a naturally occurring element in our ecosystems, but this is a classic case of too much of a good thing. Too much of a nutrient, like nitrogen, leads to consequences for human health, natural ecosystems, and our local economy, especially with the added pressure of population growth and climate change. So what exactly happens?

Part 2: Good stuff Gone Bad

When there’s too much nitrogen in a marine ecosystem, algae begins to grow at an alarming rate leading to algal blooms. It’s like dumping a ton of fertilizer into your garden — you’ll get a lot of growth but in this case that growth throws the ecosystem out of balance. Some blooms release biotoxins that harm the health of other organisms and humans (you may see notices for shellfish beach closures during the summer). When algal blooms die, they also
deplete the water of oxygen, putting stress on other marine life like salmon and Orcas that rely on a balanced food web for survival. Sewage pollution is detrimental to marine life and to the economies of downstream communities who rely on shellfish harvesting.

Nutrient pollution comes from a number of different sources, both natural as well as from human and animal activities. The largest human contribution comes from discharges of treated sewage. Nitrogen from nonpoint sources — like stormwater and agriculture — still has impacts, though not in the same way as sewage. Regardless, the impacts are cumulative. What we do know though is wastewater treatment plants that do not have the technology to remove nitrogen contribute the most to nitrogen pollution into Puget Sound.

Take a look at this illustration which maps out the location of wastewater treatment plants (WWTP) along the Puget Sound.

A majority of these wastewater treatment facilities do not have any type of nutrient pollution-control technologies in place. As the Washington Department of Ecology explains “This means the nitrogen in human waste is flowing from homes and businesses, through the facilities, directly into Puget Sound. This is imperative to transform as the health of the Salish Seas has been on severe decline due to our lack of urgent action.”

Ecology has created a new permit program that will put 58 WWTP facilities on a path to reduce nitrogen pollution. The Suquamish Tribe and WEC would like to see this move faster and get to cleaner water sooner, which is why we have appealed the new permit. The permit is one part of a bigger transition for the Puget Sound region — we need to rethink our sewage systems entirely.

While the Puget Sound region prides itself as being at the forefront of environmental protection, it turns out that we are behind. Many other
cities and bayside regions in the United States of comparable size and projected growth have already invested in the technology needed to reduce wastewater pollution and to create a more cyclical process. That means removing even more pollution from sewage and beneficially using cleaner water.

This may sound new to Washington, but cities have been modernizing approaches to sewage for decades. Mid-size regions like Olympia and mega-cities like Los Angeles are planning for population growth, reducing nitrogen pollution to marine waters, and creating systems that reuse the water. Washington’s second-largest city, Spokane, recently upgraded to modern sewage technology at its plant discharging to the Spokane River.

But closer to Puget Sound, in places like Tacoma and Seattle, the prevailing assumption is that the Puget Sound can flush out pollution and the impact will be mild because of an abundant flow of water.

This is not only the kind of short-term thinking that leads to ignoring pending ecological disasters, it’s an assumption that isn’t held up by science. That’s because of a whole series of factors, from geology to circulation. Let’s take a look at what these are.

**POLLUTION**

Did you know that some pollution flows south, toward Olympia, rather than north, toward the Pacific Ocean?

Surface water in Puget Sound is freshwater that floats on top of saltier water. Rivers and streams add more and more freshwater that eventually circulates out toward the Pacific Ocean. That’s why stormwater from places like Tacoma can impact communities to the north in King County.

However, pollution in the deeper waters of Puget Sound, including discharges from sewage treatment plants, travels inland, hugging the bottom of Puget Sound. Most people are surprised to find out that Tacoma is downstream of treated sewage from King County.

As a result, Tacoma and Seattle are each “downstream” of the other.

**HYDROLOGY**

If Pacific Ocean water swept in and out of Puget Sound, pollution might simply flow away from cities and counties without doing harm. But that isn’t what happens.

The presence of something called *sills* gets in the way. Sills were left behind when glaciers
carved out basins and left underwater ridges that can prevent the flow of water. Instead of flowing freely, water circulates in these “bowls” stagnating for longer than you might expect.

This also means that South Puget Sound, which is behind two sills, is poorly flushed. Especially during summer months, when little freshwater pushes water out of the bowl, water stagnates even more and sticks around on average for three months. South Puget Sound is also downstream of sewage discharges from the largest population centers, and its inlets are most impacted by sewage released miles and miles away.

**COMPOUNDING FACTORS**

Wastewater isn’t the only source of pollution. Many other sources of pollution put stress on the marine ecosystem, including stormwater runoff, agricultural runoff, partially treated sewage discharged from small cruise ships (yes, this happens), oil spills, and pharmaceutical traces. All of these end up in Puget Sound as a noxious cocktail.

Climate change is also a concern, including the worsening of ocean acidification and other factors. Nitrogen pollution that depletes oxygen also acidifies water locally in Puget Sound. Marine life in Puget Sound faces warming waters and less freshwater from rivers in summer months. All of these are happening simultaneously and rapidly.

In a November 2021 article, The Seattle Times reported on some pushback to the Department of Ecology’s permitting process. Academics debated the reach and severity of low-oxygen zones, and wastewater operators worried that ratepayers will lose trust in systems that already charge some of the highest rates in the country. In the article, Dan Thompson, division manager for wastewater operations for the city of Tacoma said “what is really damaging is if we build this stuff and we don’t save a fish or an orca...I could never get another dime out of ratepayers because I have lost all credibility.” King County staff quote infrastructure costs for technological improvements as billions of dollars.

But these arguments miss a number of points. The effects of wastewater compound with existing threats that put marine life in peril. **As our metropolitan population increases, so will the amount of sewage we produce; cities cannot expect “business” as usual.** Future generations will carry the burden of increasing costs, which is not fair. Prevention is always a good practice, and if we know an existing health problem will worsen, then we need to address the problem now. Finally, the argument that more science is needed before a dramatic shift in practices does not consider the circles of impact that radiate out from a single action, like putting excess nitrogen in Puget Sound.

**Part 3: Circles of Impact**

What we do know though is wastewater treatment plants that do not have the technology to remove nitrogen contribute the most to nitrogen pollution into Puget Sound.
One of the more insidious cultural and economic costs of wastewater pollution being discharged into the Puget Sound is tucked away in the flanks of salmon and shellfish — two staple foodways that are at the center of life, culture, and sustenance for Coast Salish Tribes.

Located on the western shores of the Puget Sound on the Kitsap Peninsula, the Suquamish Tribe has experienced the effects of sewage spills and wastewater contamination for years. In 2020, the Tribe filed a lawsuit against King County for the unlawful discharge of inadequately treated sewage from West Point, King County’s wastewater treatment plant located in Discovery Park on the eastern shores of Puget Sound.

In 2017, a catastrophic failure at the plant spilled millions of gallons into Puget Sound and required many months to rebuild the capability of treating sewage. However, repeated spills have occurred at West Point and other facilities that threatened the health, economic livelihoods, and cultural lifeways of the Suquamish Nation.

Spills like these lead to the closure of beaches where Suquamish Tribe members have collected shellfish since time immemorial. According to the Suquamish Tribe, “The discharges also prompt recalls of commercially sold shellfish, interfere with tribal member harvest and sale of salmon, and have disturbed important cultural activities such as the annual Canoe Journey.”

Suquamish Chairperson Leonard Forsman has said the lawsuit, which is still pending, isn’t just about how sewage spills affect one tribe. “The entire Puget Sound community deserves clean water. The shellfish, the orca, and all sea life rely on clean water, and all of our children — and children’s children — deserve clean water,” said Forsman.

Many Tribes’ livelihoods and lifeways are affected by sewage pollution, including the Squaxin Island Tribe in South Puget Sound, the Skokomish Tribe in Hood Canal, and the Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe on the Strait of Juan de Fuca, who have all had shellfish beds closed due to fecal coliform bacteria contamination. Pharmaceuticals were found in juvenile salmon in the Nisqually Delta, where the Nisqually Tribe has fished since time immemorial. **Even prior to the King County sewage spill that sparked the Suquamish Tribe’s legal action, Tribes and others have watched as the ecosystem has been degrading for more than forty years.**

A 2015 article from The Nation notes that when fishermen cast their nets, the nets come back covered in grime, and the loss of shellfish and salmon from low-oxygen zones and algal blooms have left a dent in the pockets of fishermen who sell their catch commercially.

**Dumping improperly treated sewage into Puget Sound while assuming the ecosystem can process the waste has wide-reaching consequences.** Science can trace wastewater pollution in Puget Sound, in areas far away from
original sources like the Nisqually Delta, and we know sewage poses a threat to the health of Puget Sound. These days with the number of strains on our environment, population gain, and climate change, solving our environmental crisis means taking action from all sides.

**What Goes in the Water Also Goes in Us:**

There are other impacts of wastewater that are far less visible but nevertheless present. Think about the amount of toxics present in wastewater — the drugs flushed down toilets, or the various chemicals, plastics, and carcinogens present in solid human waste, picked up from the foods and medicines we ingest. These toxics don’t biodegrade, and when wastewater carries all of those chemicals into Puget Sound, they can build up in aquatic ecosystems. The concentration of some toxics are even magnified through the food chain, affecting sea life in ways undetectable to the eye. Those same toxics come right back to us when we eat locally harvested shellfish and salmon. Everything is cyclic, everything connected. What we put into the water, comes back to us.

In the mid-2000s, the Squaxin Island Tribe installed a state-of-the-art wastewater treatment plant to highly treat sewage from the Little Creek Casino. The water irrigates the Salish Cliffs Golf Club during summer. During winter the Tribe stores the valuable water in a 25-million-gallon reservoir. Even though the economy was poor at the time, the Tribe invested beyond the minimum requirements and added the benefit of recharging shallow groundwater and increasing flow in a small non-fish-bearing stream that they plan to restore once railroad and highway fish-passage barriers are removed. The Tribe views water holistically and foresees a water use crisis that will worsen with climate change because of lower flows and warmer temperatures.

In the early 2000s, Pierce County needed to expand the Chambers Creek wastewater treatment plant, to consider future population growth. Nutrient controls were not required at the time, but Pierce County leaders knew the regulations currently underway through the Nutrient General Permit were coming. After ratepayers confirmed they valued additional treatment technology to protect Puget Sound, engineers designed the plant to begin removing nutrients when the regulations were adopted. As a result, Pierce County now has a plant capable of removing nutrients and won’t need large capital investments to comply with the regulations.

**Part 4: What do we owe our water?**

Water is life. Many cultures and traditions around the world recognize this and consider water not only as a valued resource but a sacred one.

Ebony Welborn and Savannah Smith are the co-founders of Sea Potential, a non-profit organization seeking to make maritime professions accessible to people of diverse backgrounds. They consult with government and private entities and work with youth to provide holistic environmental education. Sea Potential is currently part of the King County Wastewater Treatment Division’s Community Building Organizations team and is funded by a King County Water Works grant. Their work considers the multiple impacts from a number of different sources that affect Puget Sound’s marine ecosystems.

“The entire Puget Sound community deserves clean water. The shellfish, the orca, and all sea life rely on clean water, and all of our children – and children’s children – deserve clean water.”
Last summer King County Wastewater operators came to talk to the youth Welborn and Smith were working with. One striking statistic they shared — the Duwamish River experienced one of the largest influxes of sewage overflow in 2018. It takes the Duwamish River watershed seven years to cycle through. “That made me think about the combined sewage overflow and how long an impact can actually stay in the environment,” said Smith.

Welborn and Smith center the conversation about water and marine ecosystems around the relationship each of us holds with water. In their work, water is not just a resource. It is a community member.

“We like to have folks think about what are all the ways water gives to you and supports you and how are you giving back to water? Sometimes that is a turning point for people to think of how they are in a reciprocal relationship with water,” said Smith.

Welborn and Smith also ask their attendees to think about water as a source of healing, a quality that is impeded by pollution. Taking a relational approach treats water as its own being worth protecting for its own inherent worth.

“Simply thinking about the length of time we’ve been engaging on this earth and in relationship with the earth, most of the entities we are talking about have so much more history in this place so [we are] looking to them like an elder and an ability to guide us to a nice balance and to a reciprocal relationship and seeing them as leaders in this space,” said Welborn.

With this attitude towards water, our region’s looming question about how to approach wastewater might be less about the perils that nitrogen from treatment plants pose to the Puget Sound and more about something else entirely. What responsibility do we owe the water that sustains us, our ecosystems, and the other creatures we share this place with?

Like a ripple, the impact of our current choices around wastewater may not seem immediate but will reach out into the future. Updating our wastewater treatment plants will have ramifications as does any choice. But inaction is a choice too, and the consequences can’t be reversed.
For immigrants and refugees, community gardening is a way of placemaking in new lands.

Every family that has had to leave home only to make a new one on unfamiliar land left for different reasons. Some families flee circumstances of war and political conflict, seeking asylum as refugees. Others leave their homes in pursuit of better job prospects and long-term stability unavailable to them in their country of origin because of political, social, or economic circumstances.

There is no uniform experience for immigrants and refugees — but building a sense of belonging, rooting and thriving isn’t easy amongst unfamiliar surroundings, and varying levels of support. One particular grounding factor though can be the very substance that we tread on daily — soil.

“My world can be falling apart, I don’t understand the culture... but this I know. I know how to get my hands in soil, I know if I plant this seed, it will grow. That sense of connection becomes familiar and to be able to harvest something you know you’ll be able to cook. Not only is it satisfying... it’s the fastest way of connecting back to land,” says Tahmina Martelly, who is a tireless advocate for immigrant and refugee rights and managed the Paradise Parking Plots community garden in Kent, WA during her time as a project manager at World Relief Seattle.

Growing food, even if it’s in the small rectangular planter of a community garden, is one of those ways of connecting back to something stable. For Martelly, a refugee herself, gardening was life giving. Born in what is today Bangladesh, Martelly’s family fled the country as a five year old when it was still East Pakistan. Her family lived in multiple places before Martelly became the first of her family to come to the United States.

Upon arrival, she stayed with a family in Idaho who owned a farm. It was this introduction to growing food that returned her to a sense of grounding and peace. Food is a symbol of comfort and safety. Think for a moment if you were in a new place, unfamiliar languages, accents, scents and sights and none of your favorite foods even at the supermarket. That is a kind of alienation that countless immigrants have to navigate.

For Martelly, being able to grow a familiar vegetable that won’t be at the grocery store even if you had the money was a game changer.
Placemaking is the inverse of the defining aspect of life for immigrants and refugees — displacement. Martelly draws on the experience of being displaced to help immigrants and refugees make parallels with and understand how displacement has impacted local Indigenous Tribes through the brutality of settler colonialism.

“That sense of connection with land, with the places that ground you, is lost whether you are in [your own] country and you’ve been displaced, or you are displaced entirely,” says Martelly.

A huge part of this is a Western view of land ownership, viewing the earth as something to be owned and controlled. In this individualistic worldview, one’s voice and power is almost determined by whether or not they own land. For example, many new immigrants and refugees start off by living in affordable housing or public housing projects — but they have no say in how they want to connect with that sense of place, right from access to greenspace to bus stops and public transportation.

When you consider the number of other challenges families face — from trying to find jobs and securing their immigration status, to learning a new language and fighting the constant status of a racial, or cultural “other” — there are few systemic ways immigrants and refugees have a voice in the systems that govern their and our lives.

But, Martelly says that community gardens might be a quiet way of pushing back against disconnection and voicelessness.

“To be able to have a voice in that process, to be able to be connected to land even if it’s shared land, like community gardens for instance, it gives you that connectivity back.”

This sensitivity is at the heart of what Martelly has done with families she worked with at Paradise Parking Plots, a multi-functional gardening and stormwater project which also engenders environmental education and cultural exchange.

This community garden spans the area of what was once a church parking lot. The paved surfaces have now become home to lush, bountiful gardens serving one of the region’s most diverse areas. Over 23 different countries are represented throughout the plots and it serves as a food forest that will also be a model in finding solutions for flooding and pollution from stormwater.

“My world can be falling apart, I don’t understand the culture… but this I know. I know how to get my hands in soil, I know if I plant this seed, it will grow.”
The garden, though, isn’t just a place. It’s a whole cultural ecosystem that changes the community’s relationship to land and to one another. In other words, it’s placemaking. “That bigger conversation that this earth doesn’t belong to any one of us. We are here for a finite time so how do we take care of this place even if we are displaced?”

One of the biggest mistakes made by our mainstream narratives about immigrants and refugees is conflating a lack of fluency in English with a lack of intelligence. Not only is this a racist, colonialist and prejudiced view, but it also ignores the fact that sharing knowledge sometimes doesn’t even require a common language. Martelly has seen people at Paradise Parking Plots exchange ideas, techniques, and cultural knowledge without even speaking the same language. It happens time and time again.

Martelly points to the cultural attitudes towards land cultivation in the Kenyan, Bhutanese, Nepali, and Hmong communities, all of whom have long histories of cultivating crops and practice the ethics of sharing.

Different cultures might grow the same plant but use them in varying ways. Mustard is a good example; some communities — like those from South Asia — harvest the seeds and use it as a tempering spice whereas communities form places like Vietnam and China will use the leafy greens of the plant for pickling or stir fries. Squash is another example where some might prefer the gourd itself while others use the blossoms in their traditional cuisine.

Together, these cultural practices create a knowledge ecosystem about how to plant, grow, save seeds, harvest and cook crops that actually have an elevating benefit for soil ecology.

Soil health does not fare well in the face of monocropping, when the same crops are planted in the same spot year after year. Such practices, prevalent in farming today, require chemical additions to rejuvenate depleted soil. In a community garden like Paradise Parking Plots though, there’s an extra boost to crop rotation cycles because of the knowledge and practices embodied by the people themselves.

“My world can be falling apart, I don’t understand the culture... but this I know. I know how to get my hands in soil, I know if I plant this seed, it will grow.”
“[When] you have a diverse community growing diverse crops you can just rotate people and automatically create that diversity so that the soil is enriched,” said Martelly. “They know ‘I grew food in [this plot] this season but I will switch.’ They are taking care of the soil for all of us.”

This approach is simple but powerful, directly challenging the idea of individual land ownership and control and instilling an ethic of community care into the very functioning of the community garden.

Meeting Communities On their Terms

Along with a culture of collaboration, cultivation, and sharing, Paradise Parking Plots also irrigates its own growing areas. 80% of its irrigation comes from rainwater that is captured in four 4,000 gallon cisterns. The garden is playing double duty, capturing stormwater while also irrigating an urban food forest.

Part of what Martelly has to do when acquainting newcomers to the space is to explain why the water from the cisterns is not potable. Sure, it comes out of the hose, but that doesn’t mean it’s drinkable. This has been Martelly’s inroad to address a common practice to buy disposable plastic water bottles amongst many immigrant and refugee households who come from countries where tap water isn’t potable. She has to explain that here in the Pacific Northwest, our tap water IS safe to drink.

Working with them means meeting them where they are at and pursuing environmental education in a way that is relatable to their lived experience. “If you just talk to someone about climate change or environmental justice or environmental degradation or watershed, those are big concepts. When you are holding down multiple jobs, learning a new language, new job, I don’t think you have time to think about climate change,” said Martelly.

Community gardens, especially where multiple processes are happening in the same place where your food is being grown, can help turn these giant abstract environmental concepts into something digestible.

“So you can now talk about bigger issues tied to something immediate and it’s part of what is happening...you are solving more than one problem, It’s something easily understood unlike this broad concept like climate change,” said Martelly. Approaching environmental issues in this way also communicates the interconnectedness of action and impacts — that the actions taken in the garden contribute to something larger.

Putting climate change in the context of something relatable can help reach and involve immigrant and refugee communities in a broader environmental justice movement while also mending the disconnection from being displaced. These types of localized community touchpoints help seed a sense of place and investment in our shared land.

But this isn’t enough to fully serve the needs of immigrant and refugee communities, especially from an environmental justice point of view. When it comes to policies, Martelly says there needs to be far more engagement with the people who are on the receiving end of policy decisions.

For example, last summer during the deadly heat wave that struck Washington, Martelly remembers taking families, their babies red and hot to the touch, to the local ice center to escape the scalding temperature in affordable housing units built without air conditioning. While lack of AC is systemic negligence in our region, the fact that
low-income immigrant families may have barriers in access to afford AC units is an environmental health and justice issue.

There are many other issues at the nexus of housing, immigration, and environmental justice that affect immigrants and refugees in particular ways. How do families afford a good quality of life when they are fined if their children play in the parking lot for lack of any green space or parks nearby? Or, what use are recycling and compost guides in fourteen different languages if building management hasn’t invested in pick-up services for recycling and compost?

“If you have someone with zero lived experience making those decisions, then policies and the ideas are in broad sweeps,” said Martelly. “You can have a really good idea but it may not benefit the people you had the good idea for because you never asked them. If you didn’t include them in the decision making then the great idea may not be the best.”

When it comes to environmental justice policy, immigrants and refugee communities are one of the most impacted, especially those who do not have access to financial resources. Their voices are seldom listened to, whether it be in the realm of farmworkers rights or urban housing access. For truly just and fair policies for everyone, their voices need to be included. When a community is left behind, we collectively lose out on the cultural enrichment and benefit that would come from centering our shared land.

“I think when you look at the grand design... our differences make us better,” said Martelly. “The diversity of people gives us diversity of thought, diversity of ideas, diversity of managing resources that the earth provides.”

To learn more watch WEC’s We Are Puget Sound video featuring Tahmina and the Paradise Parking Plots at: https://www.wearepugetsound.org/
If you are in Washington, you likely fill in your ballot with a ballpoint pen, slip it into its envelope and either send it off into the mail or find your nearest dropbox to have your vote counted. But in order for that ballot to be counted, you have to sign it. You might think that as long as you’ve filled out the scantron and signed the envelope, your vote is good to go. But in fact, there is a whole process — and a specific person in public office — that determines the fate of your ballot once you’ve done your civic duty of voting. That person is your local County Auditor.

There is one auditor per county and they oversee daily civic processes as well as all elections. King County is the exception where a Director of Elections oversees elections. County Auditors supervise elections and voter registration, licensing vehicles, maintaining county records (including marriage licenses!), and other financial services. If you’ve ever flipped through your Washington State ballot book, it’s likely you’ve seen incumbents for County Auditor…because well, they rarely have any competition.

Why are we talking to you about County Auditors? Environmental policy change and transformative justice happens on many fronts, one of them being through voting and elections. Voter suppression tactics are increasing and lead to lasting consequences by removing whole groups of people from accessing the polls and exercising their voices through voting. County Auditors and the office they hold have the power to perpetuate,
or disrupt those patterns. So, it’s worth learning a little more about what they can do, and how this elected office is part of our larger participatory democracy.

**The Auditor’s Office and Elections**

In Washington state, County Auditors are tasked with overseeing the logistics of elections as supervisors for all elections along with appointed assistants. They collect all ballots that are mailed in and gathered in collection boxes, and they also oversee the process that validates and counts ballots. One of the ways that election officials validate ballots is by matching names and signatures.

A guiding document for Washington election officials (including county auditors and their offices) says counties must use the elections administration system called VoteWA. This system holds all voter records including a “lifetime database” of voters’ signatures, which it gathers from the state Department of Licensings’ records of drivers license and state-issued identification signatures. VoteWA also allows letters — called “cure letters” — to be customized for the recipient if there are any issues with that individual’s record or signature on a ballot. These issues can result in a ballot being rejected by the county. If your ballot is rejected and the issue is not corrected, your vote doesn’t count.

County auditor offices have a long and meticulous process before a ballot is rejected, but there is no clear explanation of what that due process looks like. If your ballot is rejected, you will be mailed a letter notifying you of the rejection and how to fix it. Often, a ballot is rejected because of a mismatched signature, or a mismatch in name (if you signed with a different last name).

In February, the Office of Washington State Auditors released a legislatively mandated audit of 10 Washington state counties and how they handled the 2020 elections. The report found that few ballots were rejected or less than 1% of ballots cast for the 2020 election. But the ballots of younger voters and voters with Hispanic-sounding names were rejected at a higher rate in some counties. The report did not find any evidence of “bias”, leading the state auditor to write “while that is good news, it also means we are not able to explain what causes rejection rates to vary for those groups of voters.”

While all the ten counties audited did not exceed the 1.25% rejection rate for ballots overall, ballots cast by Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, Asian and Pacific Islander voters were rejected at 1.2% compared to the rejection rate for white voters which stood at 0.63%. Even if these numbers seem relatively small at first, the fact that minority communities have a higher rejection rate does raise concerning questions. For one, there are many races that are won or lost by a margin of a few, sometimes even a single, vote. So these rejection numbers are not insignificant.
Benton county is one county where those questions have been raised. According to the most recent data from the US Census Bureau, 22.6% of Benton County’s population is Latino or Hispanic. The county is being sued by League of United Latin American Citizens for discriminating against Latino voters by rejecting more ballots with Hispanic sounding last names. In a March 2022 report from Northwest Public Broadcasting, the county auditor claims that there are no “indications of discrimination.”

The state auditor’s office has released recommendations on innovative ways to make sure voters ballots are counted. If someone’s signature nullifies their vote, there are fair and accessible terms to fix it. However, it is up to each county’s auditor to implement and enforce these recommendations into their policies. One recommendation is for counties to send information about how to remedy a discrepancy in ballot signature in the signer’s primary language, something that not all counties have taken to doing quite yet. Since every county has only one county auditor, that responsibility rests heavily on one person’s shoulders...and that means that how they run elections and validate ballots will be subject to that one person’s implicit biases.

Why is all of this important? A county auditor’s enforcement of the ballot verification process might have the effects of gatekeeping certain voices out of exercising their right to vote if best practices aren’t followed, or if an auditor’s biases subconsciously or consciously plays into how they manage elections processes. For voters of all backgrounds to be able to exercise their right to vote, and to express their support for environmental protections and policies at the intersection of environmental and racial justice, it is crucial that every vote counts.

Voting equity and justice has to be approached from many different angles, through activism, through the ballot, by voting into power officials who will work to further voting rights and education. Given that county auditors hold so much power in enforcing and overseeing elections processes from set up to post-election ballot verification, it is crucial we give our attention to auditor races and vote responsible candidates into office.

### What Can You Do?

A little learning goes a long way. As we approach another election season this fall, keep an eye out for your county’s candidates for the Auditor’s office. But also, check your signatures!

- Make sure your voter registration is up to date with your name, address, and other information.
- Check your signature to make sure it matches what’s on file for you at voteWA.
- Rally as many people as you can to do the same — let’s make sure no one’s ballot is rejected this fall.

We need everyone’s vote to count during the midterm elections this fall.

Here’s a guide to best practices for election officials:
https://portal.sao.wa.gov/PerformanceCenter/#/address?mid=6&rpid=18576
The 2022 legislative session adjourned on March 10th, 2022. With your help, we accomplished some major victories.

**Wins:**

**Move Ahead Washington**

The legislature passed a groundbreaking $17 billion dollar transportation package investing in transit, bike, and pedestrian infrastructure. It includes funding to reduce toxic stormwater runoff from existing roads; and implementing the Healthy Environment for All (HEAL) Act to center environmental justice in the agency’s work.

**Closing the Sprawl Loophole**

For decades, counties have been able to permit encroaching developments on farmlands, forests, and critical habitats. Eventually, local governments will have to fund services like transit and water for these developments. After more than a decade of work, this loophole was finally addressed this year.

**Salmon Habitat Investments**

Although the legislature failed to act on essential policy legislation, it did invest $120 million in salmon habitat restoration and recovery. This is on top of the $233 million made for salmon recovery in 2021. This funding is an immediate way to accelerate habitat recovery.

**Your Participation and Support**

Your energy this legislative session was noteworthy. More than 300 people joined Lobby Days in January. THOUSANDS of you signed in on bills during public hearings, flooding committee records. We are able to win because of your support and passion for the environment. Thank YOU!

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The work continues…

No session is perfect, and the legislature did miss some important opportunities for progress this year:

**Adding Climate Change and Salmon Recovery to the Growth Management Act (GMA)**

A bill to add a climate change goal to the state land use law died. A bill to better integrate salmon recovery obligations and land use also failed to pass. With Comprehensive Planning under GMA around the corner, expect more action on these urgent and important issues in 2023.

**Stepping Up For Salmon**

Early in the legislative session, a bill to require trees tall and wide enough to shade streams and keep water cool for salmon died in the wake of misinformation and divisive opposition. With some species on the brink, we have no time to lose.

**Buildings and Climate Change**

Buildings are the fastest growing sector of climate pollution and the use of fossil fuels in our homes harms our health. Legislation to decarbonize building codes and to expand and accelerate electrification died this year. If we want to meet state greenhouse gas limits, we need to transition to cleaner, safer, and healthier buildings now.

Later this year, we will give a preview of the 2023 legislative session where we will keep pushing for action on these issues and more!
As oil spill risk continues to change and new risks emerge, Department of Ecology’s rules must adapt to address these risks and ensure we are requiring the necessary safeguards to prevent, prepare for, and respond to spills. WEC is engaged with a rulemaking process to amend, update and strengthen oil spill prevention and oil transfer requirements for regulated oil handling facilities and for vessels delivering oil in bulk on or over waters of the state. Certain regulations have not been updated since 2007 and administrative updates are needed to provide clear direction to the regulated community. We expect a formal public comment period in mid to late 2022 at which time we will be enlisting your support.

No Discharge Zone Update

In February 2022, a federal court judge upheld the Puget Sound No Discharge Zone, denying a move by tugboats and small cruise ships to undermine this needed protection! WEC had intervened in the lawsuit along with Puget Soundkeeper Alliance and Friends of the Earth, together represented by Earthjustice, to block a sweetheart deal between the industry and Trump’s EPA. The judge acknowledged how important our role in the litigation was in his ruling, and that we “‘took up the mantle’ to defend Puget Sound when the Trump-EPA would not.”

Brand unification

We are beginning the process of bringing two organizations together - WEC and WCV. As we go through this time of integrating our policy and political work, we hope to be able to share with you the reasons why and to show how our work can be more impactful when an advocacy/policy org and a political org come together. Stay tuned for more details this year!

Senator Patty Murray and Governor Inslee convened stakeholders to discuss options around meeting everyone’s needs around the Lower Snake River. Organizations have worked together to find solutions for health, clean energy, transportation, irrigation, and salmon recovery. WEC is hosting Snake River Dinner Hours monthly to learn from others and seek paths forward, featuring Native Nations, agricultural interests, energy experts, farmers/irrigators, transportation experts, and various nonprofit groups. As we await the outcome of the Murray-Inslee process, with a report due in July, WEC has been busy with voter registration and civic engagement in the Tri-Cities area. Learn more at snake riverdinnerhour.com
Our state’s **Building Code Council** establishes the minimum codes that guide all development in our state. Buildings are the largest growing source of climate emissions in our state so they must become part of the solution to address climate pollution. In April, the Council passed the most climate-friendly commercial energy codes in the country. The code now requires efficient electric heat pumps and water heaters in new commercial and 4+ story multifamily buildings. The next big push with the Council will focus on residential codes.

In May, we supported the House of Tears Carvers of the Lummi Nation and Se’Si’Le (saw-see-lah) who led a Totem Pole Journey across the Columbia and Snake River basins to support the indigenous-led movement to remove the four dams on the lower Snake River. The **Spirit of the Waters Totem Pole Journey** inspired and engaged communities along the way to restore to health the Snake River salmon runs and their relatives, the Southern Resident Killer Whales (Skali’Chelhin the Lummi language) that depend on them. Through our Native Vote WA project, we registered people to vote in Indian Country.

**Climate Commitment Act Rulemaking**

The details of how our state’s cap & invest law are being finalized now and you can get involved. Go to our website to keep up to date on sending in comments and making your voice heard on this important issue. Everything from defining overburdened communities and deciding where more air quality monitoring should occur to how industry will be held accountable for their climate emissions is on the table as the state creates the structure for implementing the law starting in 2023.

June is **Orca Action Month** in the Pacific Northwest! And with the news of a new calf born in J Pod and KPod, Orca Action Month is a chance to celebrate one of our region’s most iconic wildlife species and reflect on the plight of this fragile population numbering only 74 individuals.

This year’s Orca Month theme is “**Stream to Sea: Celebrating the Orca/Salmon Connection**.” By bringing awareness to the critical connection between watersheds, river systems, the Salish Sea, and the Pacific Ocean we explored how this connection supports, and impacts, both salmon and Southern Resident orcas. Seattle Aquarium and WEC hosted two events.
State Supreme Court considers state land management for “all the people”

The Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) manages approximately 1.5 million acres of forested lands that were given to Washington by the federal government at statehood. DNR’s current priority for these “state trust lands” is to maximize revenue from harvesting timber, above all other goals.

We know that our forests are invaluable for more than just producing timber and generating money. The Washington State Constitution states that “all the public lands granted to the state are held in trust for all the people.” WEC and our partners filed a lawsuit based on this language and asked the courts to confirm that, when managing these lands, the state must consider the many other benefits that state lands provide to all Washingtonians, along with revenue generation.

At the time of this publication, we are still awaiting the Court’s decision. We hope the Court will confirm that state lands are indeed “held in trust for all the people,” such that DNR has a constitutional responsibility to manage forests in the long-term best interests of the public. Washingtonians should not be forced to choose between receiving logging revenue and having healthy forests that protect local air, water, and habitat — particularly in a time of climate crisis and mass extinction of species.

When forests are managed for a diversity of values beyond only economic return, management practices can better reflect and support our state’s evolving environmental, economic, and social needs.

We will share the news with our supporters as soon as we receive a decision from the Court. For now, you can visit our website and follow us on social media to learn more about the case and our work to promote ecological forest management on Washington’s state lands.

Later this year, we will give a preview of the 2023 legislative session where we will keep pushing for action on these issues and more!

Tony Ivey (he/him) is the Political & Civil Engagement Manager. After graduating with a B.A. in Political Science from Howard University Tony moved to the PNW to further develop his skills in political action and advocacy. Since then, he has worked as a field organizer and a legislative assistant in the House legislature. Tony is never one to shy away from a conversation on political news, the best local parks, or DC Comics.
Tanya Eison, a Quinault Indian Nation member (she/her), is the Executive Assistant & Board Liaison. Prior to joining WEC, she worked for her tribe as Legislative Aide for the Vice President of their environmental protection department. Tanya holds a Bachelor of Arts in Environmental Studies from the UW Tacoma and a Master of Marine Affairs from the University of Washington. Her graduate research studied Tribal equity within a Washington floodplain management program. In her spare time, Tanya likes to try out new recipes, go camping, and take walks with her partner and their dog, Callie.

Sonia Hitchcock (she/her) is joining as a Digital Field Organizer. After graduating from UC Santa Cruz with a B.S. in Plant Sciences and a Minor in Sustainability Studies, she became passionate about community-based education focused on creating tangible and equitable environmental progress. Sonia has a background in organizing as a Resident Assistant, member of the Sunrise Movement, and Field Intern with Washington Conservation Voters. In her spare time, she likes cooking, listening to music, and spending time outdoors with her dog!

David Gorton (he/him), has worked as a fundraiser for more than 15 years for regional and national conservation and environmental policy organizations. He previously worked at WEC, developing our membership program and securing support from institutional donors. More recently, he led The Trust for Public Land’s corporate and foundation fundraising efforts in the Northwest. In his free time, David likes to enjoy the Cascades or Washington’s waters with his wife. David is from the Great Lakes State of Michigan and graduated from Eastern Michigan with a BA in History.

Adri Hennessey (she/her) loves biking, cooking, and adventuring with her partner and their two dogs. Originally from the Idaho, Adri’s passion for the environment originated from hiking and camping in the Sawtooths every summer with her grandma while growing up. She left Idaho to attend Seattle University where she received her BS in Environmental Science and has been living in Seattle ever since. More recently, she received her MPA from the UW’s Evan’s School of Public Policy and Governance. Prior to joining WEC, she was the Operations Director for grassroots nonprofit CascadiaNow!

Sam Montell (she/her) has had a passion for environmental work since a young age. She recently completed her BA in Environmental Studies with an emphasis on sustainability and social justice from San Francisco State University. Sam is also a recipient of the Climate Change: Causes, Impacts, and Solutions certificate from SFSU. During her studies in the Bay Area, she worked at an environmental education nonprofit that taught about the native California honeybee. Now in Seattle, Sam is often found hiking, cooking, or (learning to) kayak.

Aida Amirul (she/they) is joining WEC/WCV as the Digital Communications Associate. She is coming from Kalamazoo Michigan, where she completed her Bachelors in Environmental and Sustainability Studies at Western Michigan University. Aida has a background in digital organizing and communications working with local climate organizations in Kalamazoo, the Michigan League of Conservation Voters, and the national League of Conservation Voters. In her freetime, she enjoys nature trails, thrift-shopping, and trying out new recipes!
Washington Environmental Council is a nonprofit, statewide advocacy organization that has been driving positive change to solve Washington’s most critical environmental challenges since 1967. Our mission is to develop, advocate, and defend policies that ensure environmental progress and justice by centering and amplifying the voices of the most impacted communities.

We are at a critical juncture in addressing the present-day reality of people, the environment and our democracy. We’d be honored for you to join us at Unite - An Evening with WEC and WCV, to take part in creating the Washington we all deserve today and for generations to come.

Please join us!

https://wcvoters.ejoinme.org/wecinperson
Friday, October 14, 2022
5 – 9PM
Westin Seattle | Online

UNITE
AN EVENING WITH WEC AND WCV