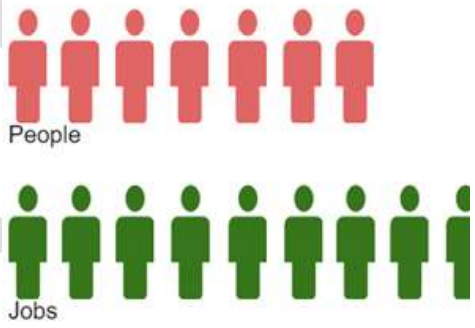
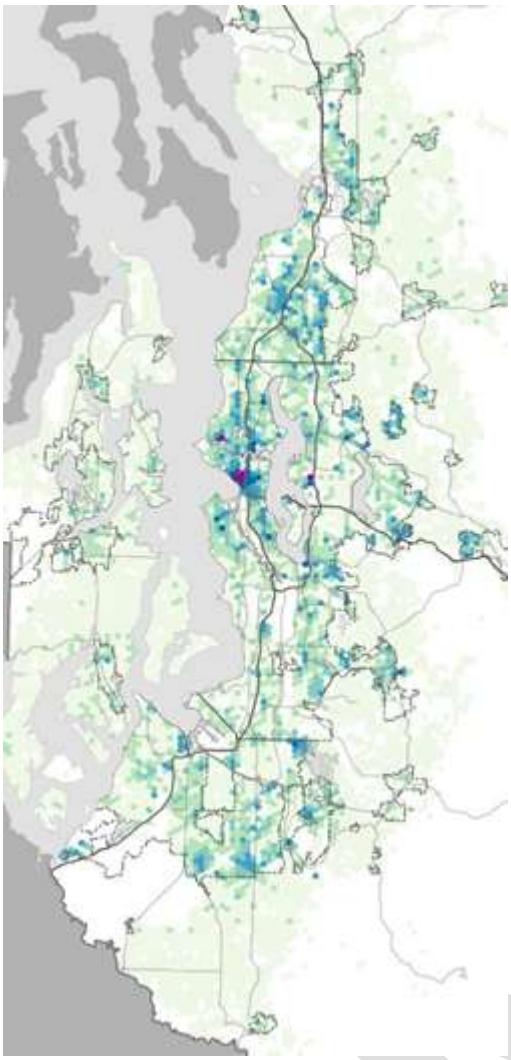
Executive Summary

Over the decades, employers and employees alike have been drawn to the unparalleled quality of life enjoyed in the Puget Sound region. This growth translates to approximately seven individuals per hour moving to the King, Pierce, Snohomish or Kitsap County areas, and almost 9 newly created jobs per hour. Over the next 25 years, **1 million** more residents are expected in the region – the current populations of Everett, Bellevue, Seattle, Bremerton and Kent combined. This expansion is a testament to the economic and environmental vitality of the region and its thriving communities. Yet, rapid growth can put tremendous strain on the same natural and built green infrastructure that supports current lifestyles and makes the Puget Sound region so attractive.



Current growth in population and jobs per hour in the Central Puget Sound. *Source: PSRC, 2016*

Safeguarding Puget Sound's unique charm and its benefits are essential to maintaining the region's vitality. Natural infrastructure is being stretched to its limits because of development, and while many significant efforts have counteracted these impacts, significantly more needs to be done. Since 1950, 60 percent of all farmland in the Puget Sound has undergone conversion, and Washington State continues to lose 23,700 acres of agricultural lands every year (Canty et al., 2012, 6; Cascade Land Conservancy, 2009). These troubling statistics have caused some to estimate that "the last acre of farmland in the region could be bulldozed or paved over by 2053" (Canty et al., 2012, 6). This loss in resource lands is occurring in tandem with increases in impervious areas that degrade fisheries and aquatic habitat, a growing risk of floods, landslides, droughts, and wildfires due to climate change, and a reduced capacity to adapt to or mitigate against these natural disasters. Rapidly growing population demands equitable access to parks and trails, yet these pressures impact both the region's biodiversity and the health benefits gained from opportunities to interact with nature.



Geographic locations of the newly permitted housing units in the region between 2000 and 2013 (318,000 new housing units in total). *Source: PSRC, 2016*

These challenges demand inclusive and comprehensive solutions. Individually, there is a lack of ability to confront these challenges at the proper scale. Efforts by the myriad of jurisdictions to protect open space are disjointed, uncoordinated and – most importantly – inadequately funded.

Over the last five years, the University of Washington's Green Futures Lab has overseen the Regional Open Space Strategy (ROSS) – a collaborative research and planning effort conducted with the region's broad network of open space experts. The ROSS undertook a cross-disciplinary, multi-pronged approach focused on:

1. Envisioning a preliminary regional open space system;
2. Improving regional coordination and decision-making;
3. Building a regional advocacy community; and
4. Developing frameworks and tools to help advance the most important projects and actions.

Key Findings:

Regional Planning is an Opportunity to Confront Five Key Challenges – The defining issues of our time: climate change, human health, social equity, economic development, and biodiversity are challenges that can best be addressed at least at a regional scale, more difficult at a municipal scale. Making open space resource management decisions at a regional level would empower our response to many of these challenges. The ROSS Task Forces, comprised of regional experts, identified how a robust regional open space system would directly help to address these challenges. This work takes the form of five Regional Challenge Overview Reports which are located within Appendix X.

The Region Lacks a Coordinated Vision for Open Space Protection – Efforts by dozens of federal and state agencies, the 900-plus municipalities and taxing authorities, and the hundreds of non-profit and volunteer organizations in the region are inadequately funded and mostly uncoordinated. Despite significant efforts made to protect open space resources, the region lacks a unifying vision of how to connect and leverage that energy at the regional level. Work tends to focus on a particular project area or on a specific issue, and is often driven by opportunistic considerations rather than a carefully constructed set of priorities. This silo-ing of efforts and money hampers the ability to maximize scarce dollars and multiple benefits for people and the environment. An initial effort to sketch a regional vision is represented in Section X, and in a video that can be accessed at: XXX

The eight watersheds of the Central Puget Sound Region.

We might want to include the rubric of the Open Space Services here.

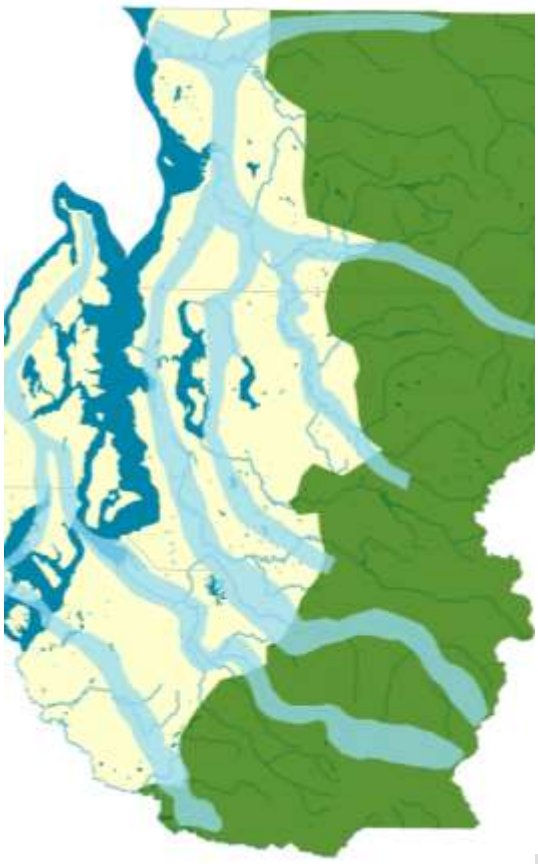
The Growth Strategy Has Resulted in Imbalanced Protections – The regional growth strategy has done a remarkable job of preserving resource lands in rural areas, and maintaining density in the urban areas, as agreed upon in the Puget Sound Regional Council's VISION 2040 documents. The time has come to refine the details of that vision to ensure green and open spaces are not neglected in the urban areas, as well. The conservation of working forest and farm lands in urban growth areas is a method of retaining and connecting green space, but it is also a means to retain diverse life styles and economies, promote public health, reduce the risks of climate change impacts (flooding, landslides and wildfires), and improve habitat that increases biodiversity. Clarity from the state to the local level to allow and support existing working farm and forest lands within urban floodplains, for example, could influence changes in policies, zoning and regulations necessary to facilitate this refinement. It could also improve habitat protection and enhancement. ROSS conducted an analysis of this topic within the Puyallup-White Watershed. The full report is located in Appendix X.

Watershed-Scale Planning Is Critical – Environmental systems are best analyzed within a watershed framework, rather than within municipal boundaries. Each watershed planning group must be empowered to design its own process for developing an open space plan with local priorities, guided by a regional framework. The existing Watershed Resource Inventory Area (WRIA) plans are already excellent foundations. As the WRIAs update their plans, a slight expansion of focus and spatializing protection/enhancement actions would yield great results that could benefit both people and fish. These planning efforts need to be coordinated with the local governments with land use authority and those local governments need to understand and coordinate planning with other municipal priorities. To serve as examples, the ROSS process initiated and accelerated planning efforts in three watersheds: The Puyallup White (WRIA 10), the Green-Duwamish (WRIA 9), and the Snohomish (WRIA 7) Watersheds. These reports will be discussed in more detail within Chapter X, and the full reports are located in Appendix X.

Need for a Streamlined Funding Process – Funding for conservation and restoration efforts are under-sourced and unsystematic, originating from over 50 federal and dozens of state agencies and programs. Grants are made available on varying schedules – typically with a single purpose and seldom coordinated for multiple benefits. Organizations attempting to initiate or continue projects spend time, money, and resources applying for and often competing with others to obtain grants when they could be focused on

executing projects. This results in diminishing returns on already limited investments.

Current Systems Fail to Account for the Value of Natural Capital – Our economic and natural resource decision-making models fail to capture the true value of natural and human-made green infrastructure. Accounting for the role that nature, and nature-based systems, play in civic infrastructure is essential for making informed decisions. In 2015, the ROSS oversaw an analysis measuring the economic value of the "open space services" that our regional green infrastructure system provides at low or no cost. The report concluded that the open space services of the Central Puget Sound yields the monetary equivalent of at least $11M annually, and as a whole can be valued at $328B (Earth Economics, 2015). A cost/benefit analysis based on natural capital accounting must be incorporated into every major infrastructure, growth planning, and development decision so the full ramifications of decisions can be understood. An example of this type of analysis was applied to integrated conservation proposals in the Puyallup-White watershed, which can be found in Appendix X.



Example spatialized ROSS Sketch for protection and enhancement of open space resources in the Central Puget Sound.

This version of the graphic is in the process of further refinement.

Recommended Strategies:

Spatialize a Dynamic Regional Vision – Central Puget Sound must develop a forward-looking regional vision that integrates the growth strategy with conservation and restoration efforts. As the Metropolitan Planning Organization, the Puget Sound Regional Council regularly convenes regional decision makers for dialogue and action on regional growth strategies. This organization should be resourced to develop a geographically-based, prioritized regional open space plan as authorized in VISION 2040. Building upon the completed Watershed Open Space Plans and the initial Regional Open Space Strategy Sketch, this plan would be similar in scale and detail as the regional transportation plan, consistent with VISION. It would also need to be consistent with the goals and objectives established by the Puget Sound Partnership, the state agency leading the larger region's collective effort to restore and protect Puget Sound.

Establish an Integrating Regional Planning Structure – If given the resources, the PSRC has the authority to guide and coordinate open space activities across the four counties. There is no other regional entity positioned to provide this needed regional leadership and coordination. This type of regional model is key to improved efficiencies by integrating environmental priorities with land use and transportation. Integration could be accomplished through strengthening existing Multi-county Planning Policies to coordinate existing planning activities with Water Resource Inventory Areas

A few of the many ROSS stakeholders.

(WRIAs 7-12, and 15), their accompanying Local Integrating Organizations (LIOs) plans, and with local comprehensive plans (including capital facility plans), development regulations, and practices. Such a comprehensive framework would result in multiple benefits and efficiencies.

Streamline Funding – Regional leaders should encourage the consolidation of federal and state dollars into as few categories as possible (e.g., acquisition, conservation planning, restoration, education/outreach) and allocate a majority of those funds directly to a regional entity. The regional entity should be given the flexibility for distribution to approved prioritized programs, projects, and activities that serve multiple benefits. This would allow staff and volunteer hours currently devoted to responding to grant requests to be focused on direct services benefiting open space resources. This model has been proven effective. It would be similar to that used by the Washington State Department of Transportation for transportation projects funded by the U.S. Department of Transportation to oversee Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Authority projects. Instead of creating a new entity, one option would be to activate the non-profit foundation allowed under the Puget Sound Partnership to provide a nimble and flexible mechanism to respond to opportunities where local governments are not able. The region could work to promote this non-profit foundation as a hub to expand funding through authorizations, grants, and donations.

Regularly Convene Stakeholders Across the Region – The Pacific Northwest is home to an extensive network of Tribal nations, non-profit organizations, governments, experts, business leaders, advocates, and other stakeholders with a vested interest in open space protection. These organizations have accomplished much toward preserving the assets we enjoy today, largely independently. The region would be well served by the creation of a new umbrella organization that provides a forum for collaboration toward common goals. This organization could convene this network on topics associated with the regional challenges on a regular basis which would improve coordination among the hundreds of organizations, surface opportunities for cross-sector partnerships, and encourage resource-sharing. Such an alliance would furnish the region with a consolidated voice of advocacy; critical, ongoing input; education; and outreach.

Advance Supportive Tools – The region needs more tools enabling planners and decision makers to evaluate land use options according to various criteria including ecosystem benefits such as carbon storage capacity, flood hazard reduction, and social equity improvement, as well as monetized investment benefits. To be effective, such tools will require an expanded regional database of environmental and natural resource information. These tools will help

prioritize projects based on the multiple benefits a particular scheme might provide. Some of this work is already underway, including the web-based Open Space Services Assessment Tool (OSSAT) under development by the Trust for Public Land (TPL) and ROSS, which will allow quantification of the values of our natural capital. See Chapter X for more details on this tool.

Example output from the online ecosystem services valuation tool in development by TPL and ROSS.