

Protecting Washington's coastal communities from sea level rise through proactive planning



How will sea level rise impact our lives on Washington's coast?

For centuries, people have been drawn to live near Washington's coastline. However, the consequences of a warming planet are changing these places forever. We owe it to our children and grandchildren to be prepared.

Sea level rise is a real and growing fear

for Washington's coastal homeowners, tribes and communities. In many places, today's king tides will be "normal" high tides due to sea level rise. Thanks to constantly improving sea level rise projections, leaders, planners and decision-makers now have access to better information critical to plan for, and adapt to, Washington's future.

Rising seas are already damaging highways and sewers, intensifying erosion, shrinking beach access, causing rivers to flood and saltwater to seep into groundwater. The costs are expected to worsen with climate change, as ice caps melt and oceans rise. All of this impacts human lives and pocketbooks.

Scientists predict that floods that historically occurred only once a century could become much more common. As sea levels rise, high winds and storms become more intense, doing more damage further and further inland. In the Pacific Northwest, tides can vary more than 10 feet. Storms that coincide with high tides will exacerbate damage inland.

Unless we prepare for more major flooding events, our houses, roads, industrial sites and other coastal infrastructure adjacent will be in the crosshairs of these new "super storms." It's no exaggeration to say lives are at stake, along with millions of dollars.

Washington Sea Grant, the University of Washington's Climate Impacts Group, the

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Washington Department of Ecology and other partners have produced the *Washington Coastal Resilience Project*. The project was funded through NOAA's Office for Coastal Management. Their absolute sea level rise projections suggest a central estimate – corresponding to a 50% chance that absolute sea level will rise by at least that amount – of

1.6 ft for a low greenhouse gas scenario and 2.0 feet for a high greenhouse gas scenario, by 2100.¹ At the low end, the projections give an 83% probability that sea level will rise by at least 1.0 or 1.4 feet, again for a low and a high greenhouse gas scenario, respectively. For example, Taholah has a central estimate of 1.3 to 1.7 feet of SLR by 2100.



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What can we ask our government to do to help us prepare for the risks of sea level rise and protect our vulnerable coastal communities?

Now is the time to begin preparing for Washington’s future.

Thanks to the latest science, policymakers better know which areas within their jurisdictions are most vulnerable to higher sea levels. Armed with this information, policymakers can better plan for resilient coastal communities. Here are a few solutions available today:

- ▶ Strengthen land use planning/zoning
 - Sea level rise needs to be mandated in shoreline management planning
 - Infrastructure should not be placed in areas that are vulnerable to sea level rise
- ▶ The Washington Coast Marine Advisory Council’s coastal resiliency efforts need full support from state agencies
- ▶ Invest in habitat restoration in coastal wetlands and along shorelines vulnerable to sea level rise
- ▶ Develop a program that removes or relocates infrastructure before it is underwater

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¹ Source: <http://www.wacoastalnetwork.com/wcrp-documents.html>