

April 15, 2026
Thurston County Planning
Commission

CAO Update: Riparian Areas BAS and Concepts

Claire Swearingen
Associate Planner

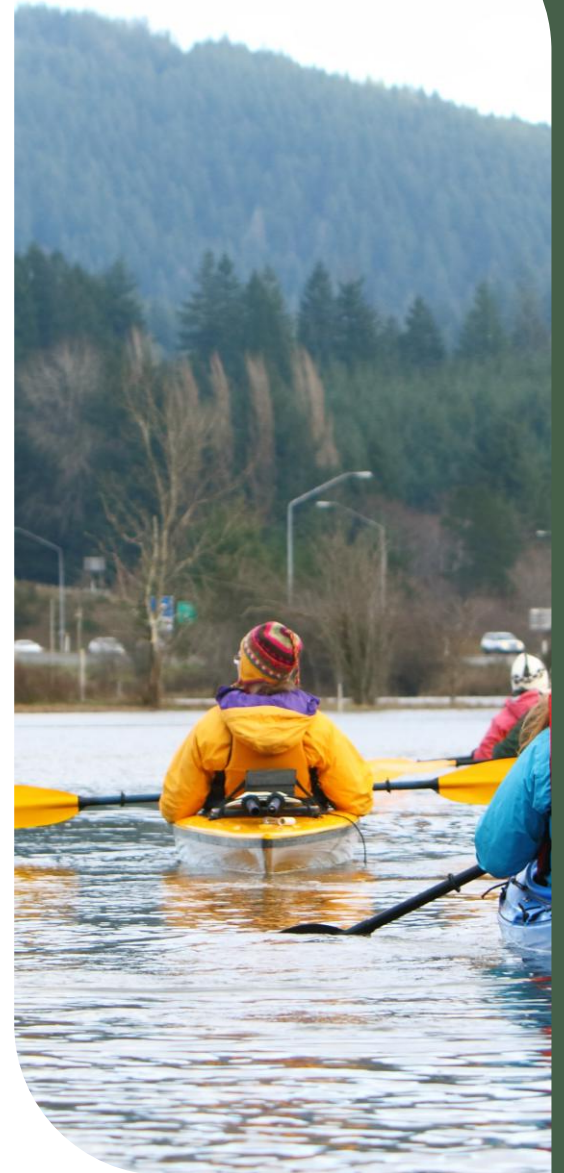


Presentation Outline

- Introduction and Definition
- Functions and Values
- Climate Change
- Protection Strategies
- Discussion



2 Intro



FWHCAs Definition – WAC 365-190-030

"Fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas" are areas that serve a critical role in sustaining needed habitats and species for the functional integrity of the ecosystem, and which, if altered, may reduce the likelihood that the species will persist over the long term. These areas may include, but are not limited to, rare or vulnerable ecological systems, communities, and habitat or habitat elements including seasonal ranges, breeding habitat, winter range, and movement corridors; and areas with high relative population density or species richness. Counties and cities may also designate locally important habitats and species."

"Habitats of local importance" designated as fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas include those areas found to be locally important by counties and cities.

"Fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas" does not include such artificial features or constructs as irrigation delivery systems, irrigation infrastructure, irrigation canals, or drainage ditches that lie within the boundaries of, and are maintained by, a port district or an irrigation district or company.

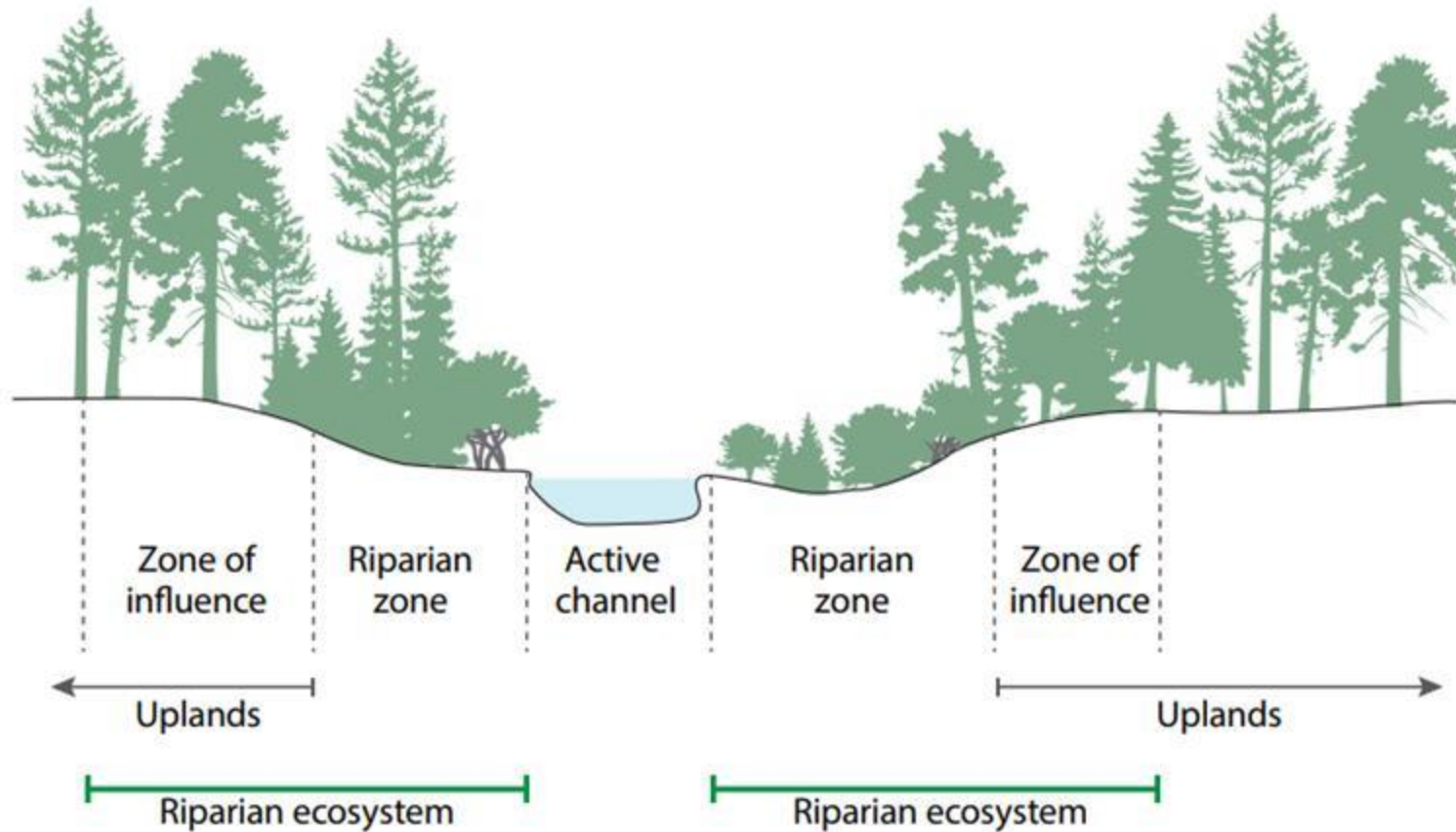


What are Riparian Areas?

- One kind of Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Area
- Areas where waterbodies (streams, lakes, rivers, and the Puget Sound) interact with dry land
- Important for both aquatic and terrestrial habitat and maintaining water quality
- Healthy riparian areas keep water cool and clean



What are Riparian Areas?

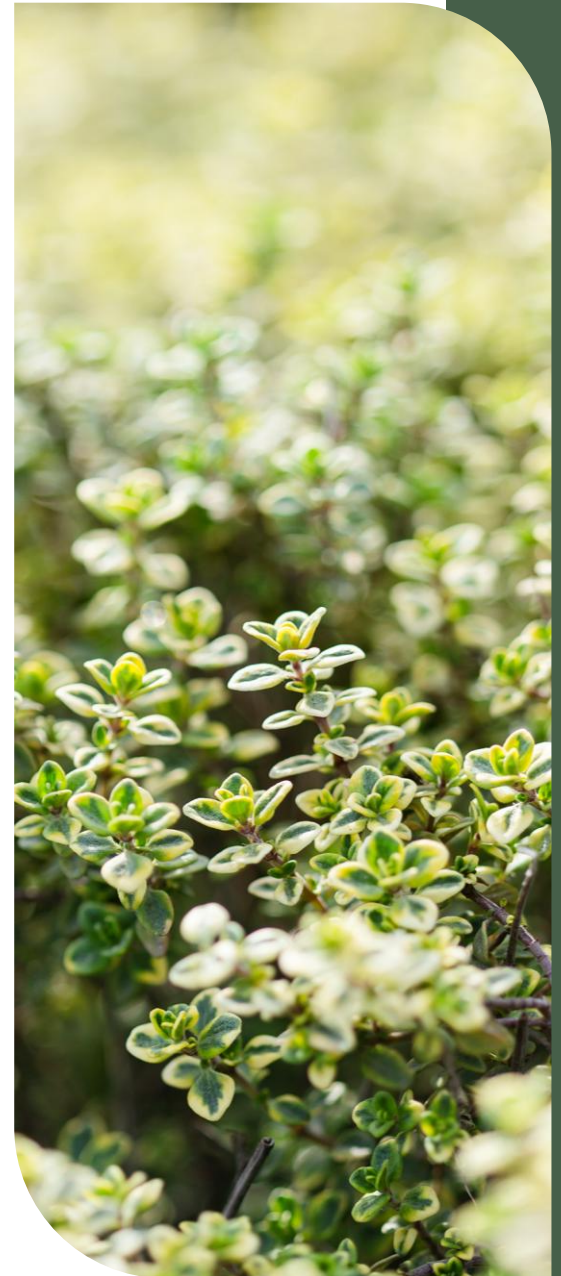


Functions and Values – Water Quality

- Vegetated buffer filter pollutants
 - Width and vegetation composition are the most important factors
- Buffers keep polluting activities away from surface waters
- Native plants and trees provide some nutrients while filtering out excess manmade nutrients from sewage and fertilizer
- Roots stabilize banks and prevent erosion



6 Functions and Values



Functions and Values - Habitat

- Trees fall or drop branches into streams, creating fish habitat and deep pools that keep streams cool
- Trees and plants provide necessary shade
- Streams connect aquatic habitats, especially important for anadromous (ocean travelling) fish
- Riparian corridors connect terrestrial habitat



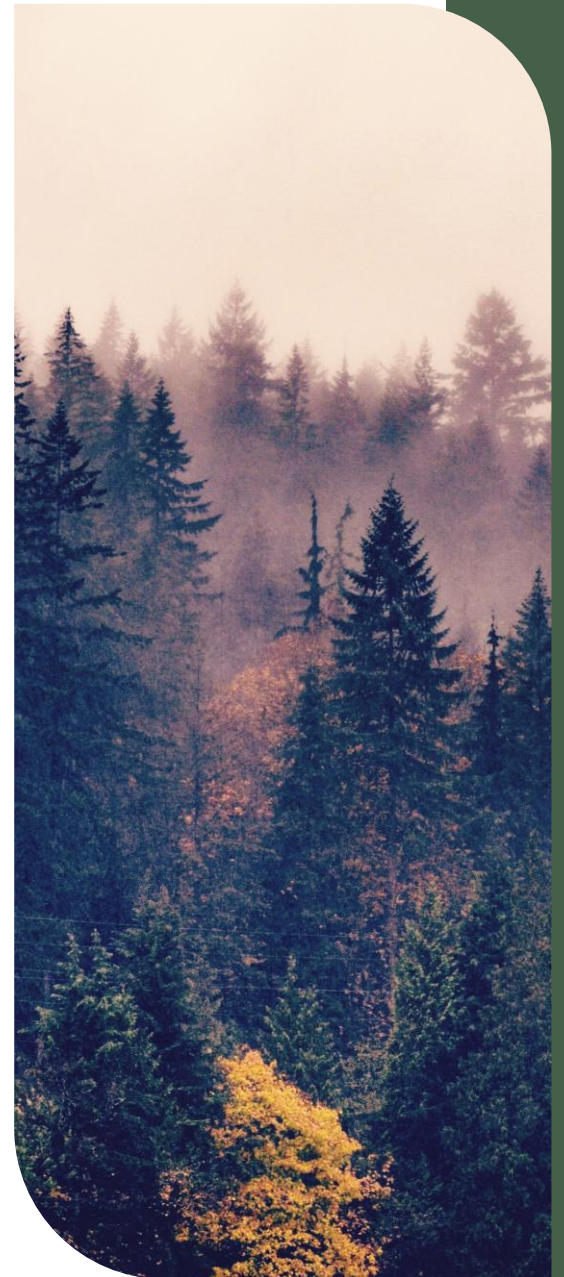
Climate Change

- Pollution, vegetation removal, and harmful human development and activity in riparian areas worsens water quality
- Vegetation loss and warmer temperatures raise stream temperatures, threatening fish survival
- Development in riparian areas disrupts necessary habitat
- More intense rain and flood events increase erosion



Protection Strategies

- Avoiding and minimizing impacts in riparian areas helps avoid pollution, and allows riparian areas to contribute important functions
- New WDFW guidance recommends site-specific Riparian Management Zones, which consider ecology of the site



Protection Strategies: RMZs

- RMZs are delineated using channel migration zone (if it exists for the site) and Site Potential Tree Height (SPTH)
- SPTH = The average height the dominant tree species on the site could reach after 200 years
- WDFW recommends a minimum buffer or RMZ of 100 feet for all streams
- WDFW recommends applying the same protections to fish-bearing and non-fish-bearing streams



Protection Strategies: Prescriptive Buffers

- Current common practice; assign buffers based on stream type
 - Current code ranges from 100' to 250' depending on stream type and characteristics
- Prescriptive buffers and RMZs could be used together
- Any deviation from WDFW recommendations should have reasoning based in BAS



Protection Strategies

- RMZs could help delineate areas where low impact development or regenerative agriculture should be implemented
- Restoration activities like *invasive* vegetation removal should be encouraged in RMZs
- Most habitat loss in riparian areas is from older development, so retrofits to nonconforming structures that reduce impacts should be encouraged



Discussion

- How should the county approach implementation of WDFW recommendations?
- How should different stream types be considered?
- What implementation resources should accompany the changes made in the update?
- Should the county designate any additional species of local importance?





4/1/26	Wetlands
4/15/26	Wetland and Hydrologic FWHCAs
5/6/26	Dryland Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas
5/20/26	Presentation on SMP and HCP integration
6/3/26	Invite DFW to present on FWHCAs
6/17/26	GHA Gap Analysis and Feedback Incorporation
7/1/26	CARA Gap Analysis and Feedback Incorporation
7/15/26	FFA Gap Analysis and Feedback Incorporation
8/5/26	Wetland Gap Analysis and Feedback Incorporation
8/19/26	FWHCA Gap Analysis and Feedback Incorporation
9/2/26	Permit Processes, FWHCAs and Wetlands code presentation
9/16/26	Revisit Permit Processes, FWHCAs and Wetlands
October 2026	Final review, public hearing, and recommendation

“Permit Processes” will also include other general standards chapters like definitions and nonconforming structures

Schedule

Questions and Comments

Associate Planner Claire Swearingen

(360) 968-9989

claire.swearingen@co.thurston.wa.us

Find future project updates at ThurstonCriticalAreas.org.