



**King County**

# Critical Areas Ordinance Update

Local Services and Land Use Committee, Metropolitan King County Council  
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# Critical Areas Ordinance Update

## Focus today:

- What are critical areas and why do we protect them?
- What does the state require?
- What is the County's approach to protecting critical areas functions and values?
- What are the key proposed updates?

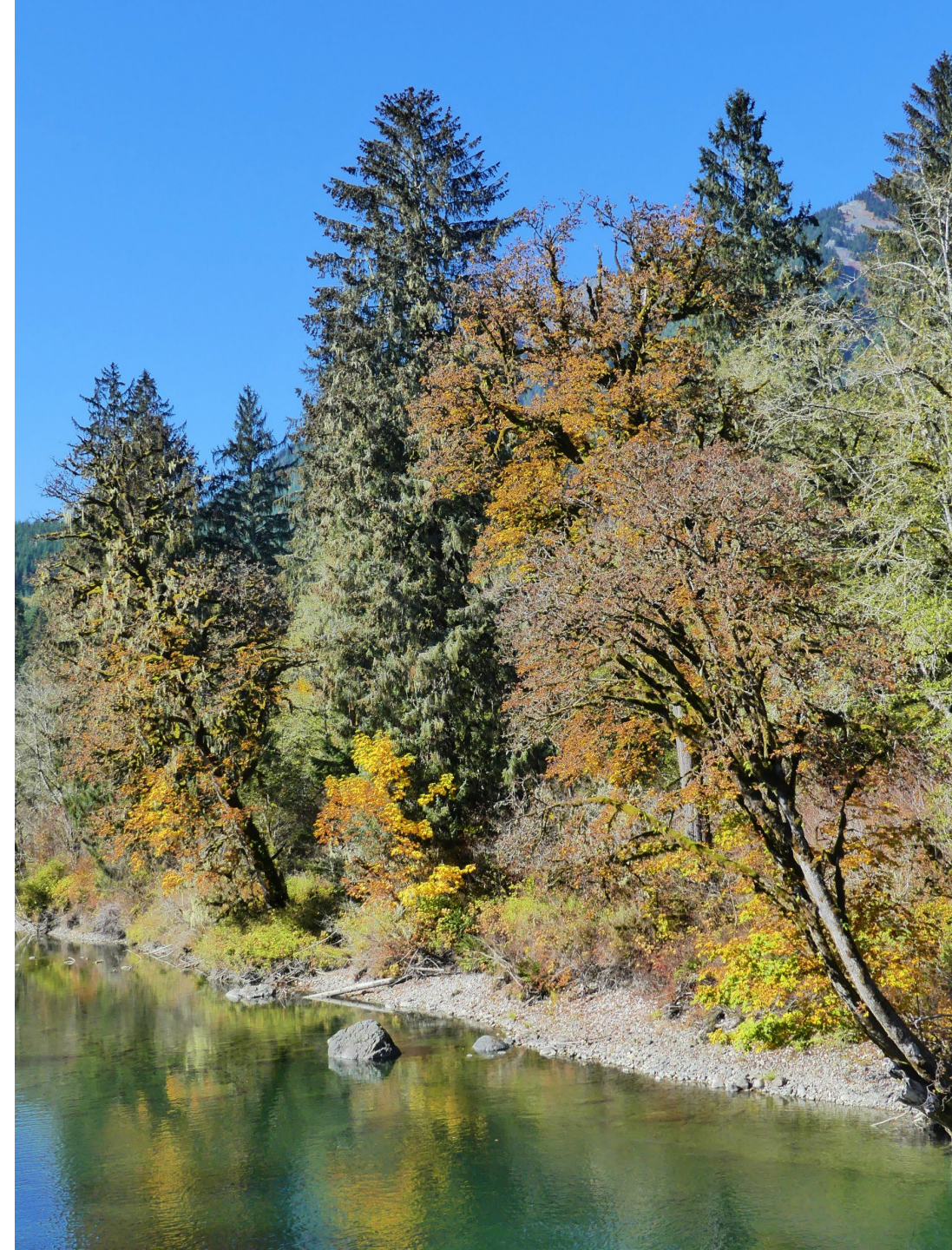
# What are critical areas?

State Growth Management Act 5 types of critical areas:

- Wetlands
- Fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas
  - ✓ Includes “riparian areas”
- Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas
- Frequently flooded areas
- Geologically hazardous areas

Intent: Both public safety and environmental protection

Critical Areas codes apply to new development and redevelopment in unincorporated King County



# What does the state require?

Designate critical areas

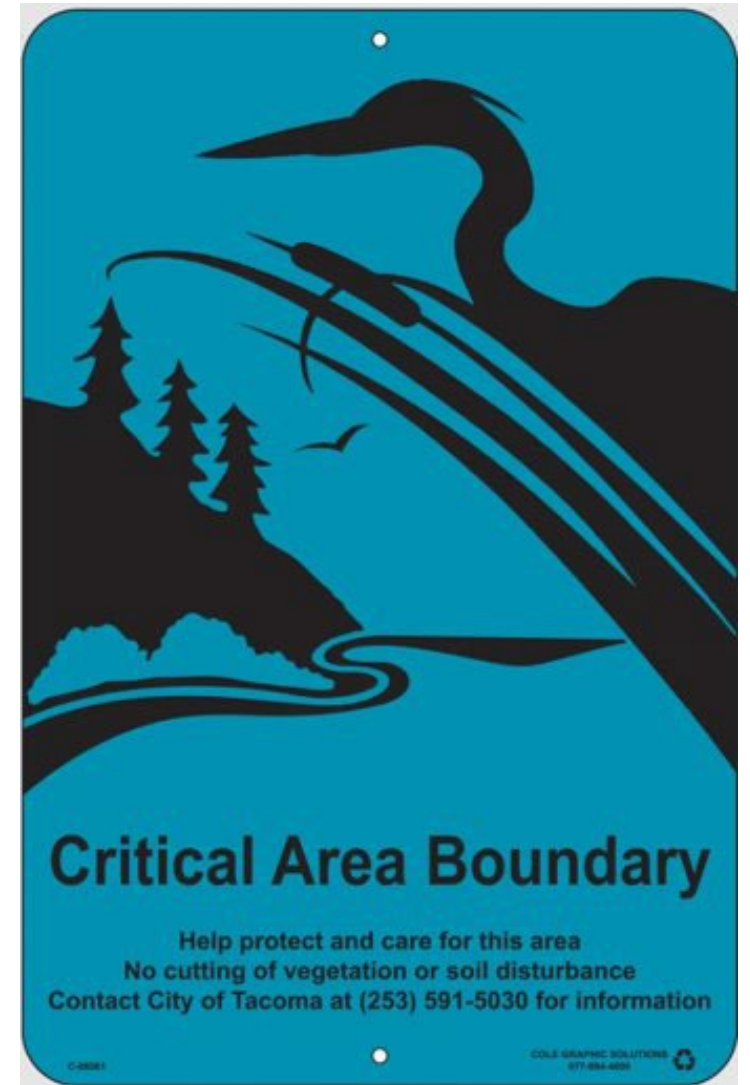
Protect “functions and values”

- Wetlands: filter pollution, store flood waters
- Riparian areas: keep water cool, provide cover and food for fish, filter runoff

Demonstrate special consideration of salmonids

*Include Best Available Science (BAS)*

- Review BAS (defined in state law)
- Include in decision-making
- Where standards depart from science, document rationale



# State Requirements (cont.)

Ensure no net loss of ecological functions & values

Address climate change and resiliency

***Must adopt critical areas ordinance update by December 2025***

***At risk: state funding, including grants, loans, sales tax, gas tax, and/or the ability to collect Real Estate Excise Taxes***



**Best Available Science Review  
and Updates to Critical Areas  
Protections**

October 2024



**King County**

Department of  
Natural Resources and Parks

# Areas of Focus – Current BAS Review

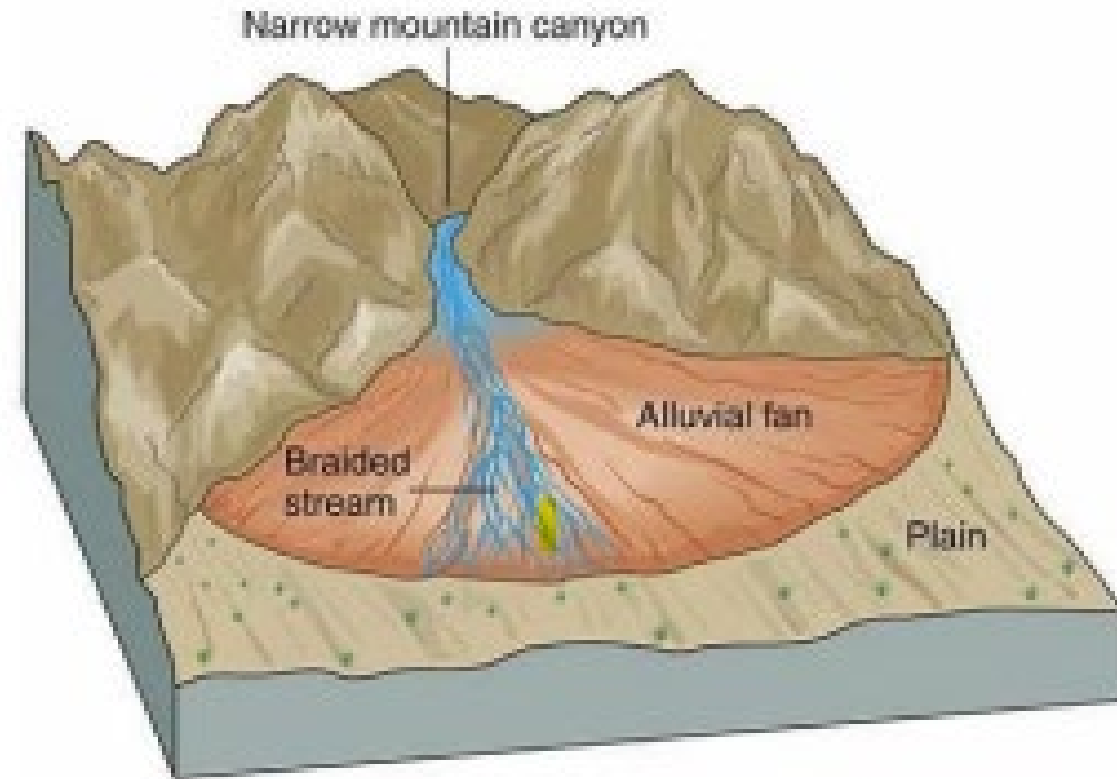
## Updated Science

- Riparian Areas
- Wetlands

## New/Clarified Requirements

- Geologically Hazardous Areas
  - Alluvial fans
  - Tsunami hazard areas

## Unique King County Land Use and Policy Context



# What is the County's approach to protecting Critical Areas?

Cannot rely on regulations alone

Use combination of regulatory and non-regulatory actions that achieves protection

Simultaneously address GMA goals and Comprehensive Plan Policies

- Includes focusing new growth in urban areas, supporting affordable housing, supporting agriculture

Proposed updates reflect unique context of King County



# Companion Actions to Critical Areas Regulations

- Accelerate land conservation investments
- Update wetland & stream maps
- Strengthen stormwater management
- Implement 30-year Forest Plan
- Restore salmon habitat
- Strengthen and prioritize code enforcement





# Key Proposed Code Updates

# Riparian Areas (formerly aquatic area buffers)

## Proposed Changes:

- Increase riparian area widths,
- Increase mitigation ratios

## Relevant GMA requirements, goals:

- No net loss, special consideration for anadromous fisheries (salmon), climate change
- Urban growth, property rights, support for agriculture, permitting in timely manner

Aquatic Area	Existing Code	Proposed Update	State BAS**
Shoreline & Fish Bearing	165' (115' in UGA*)	200' (180'-200' in UGA*)	180' to 235'
Non-Fish-Bearing	65'	100'	180' to 235'
Other	25'	50'	180' to 235'

\*Urban Growth Area (UGA)

\*\*State BAS recommends 100' minimum width when departing from BAS

# Wetlands

- Proposed changes:
  - Enhance protections for wetlands with high conservation value
  - Increase mitigation requirements
- Relevant GMA requirements, goals:
  - No net loss, special consideration for anadromous fisheries (salmon), climate change
  - Urban growth, property rights, support for agriculture, permitting in timely manner

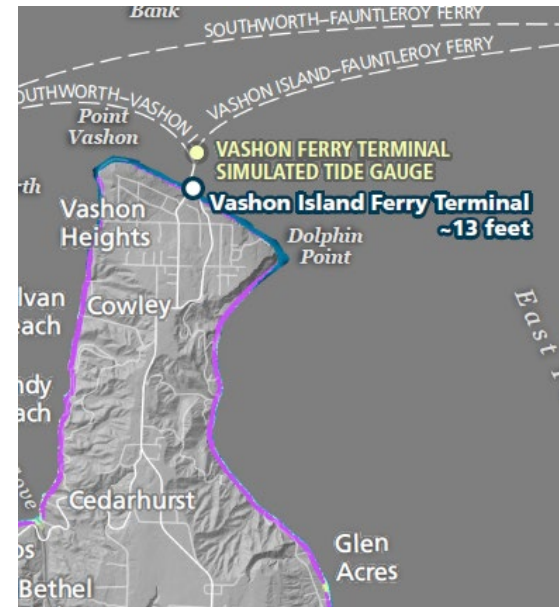
Topic	Existing Code	Proposed Update	State BAS
Cat. I Buffer Widths	100' to 250'	150' to 300'	150' to 300'*

\*BAS supports buffer width up to 1000' in limited instances

# Geologically Hazardous Areas

Proposed changes:

- Alluvial fan
  - Flood risk reduction
  - Emergency actions in alluvial fan hazard areas
- Tsunami hazard area development regulations
  - Limit placement of critical facilities in tsunami hazard areas
  - Require new development be designed to protect from inundation, debris impact



# Climate-smart Plants



- Plants from the region that will be able to adapt to the changing climate
- Proposed to be allowed for use in mitigation and restoration projects.

# Agriculture

- Code updates continue to support existing commercial agriculture operations.
- Clarifies requirements for farm field access drives and manure storage.
- Increases minimum protections for wetlands and streams under livestock standards.



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# Code Update Considerations

- Technical/clarifying updates
- Multiple policy goals
- Simplicity, speed vs. flexibility



Photo credit: King County Housing Authority

# Thank you

*For follow-up questions:*

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