

Whatcom County Business & Commerce Committee

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WCBCC May Meeting Minutes (5/19/25)

WCBCC Members Present

Casey Diggs, WCBCC Chair

Ryan Allsop, Other For-Profit

Pam Brady, Energy

Pete Dawson, Commercial Real Estate

Dan Dunne, Construction

Matthew Green, Higher Education

Mayor Greg Hansen

Troy Lautenbach, Other For-Profit

Mayor Kim Lund

Heather Powell, Childcare

Brad Rader, Agriculture

Sarah Rothenbuhler, Other For-Profit

CJ Seitz, Higher Education

Russell (RB) Tewksbury, Internet Technology

Whatcom County Councilmember Mark Stremmer

Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu

WCBCC Members Not Present

Debbie Ahl, Healthcare Industry

Paul Burrill, Food Processing

Gil Lund, Manufacturing

Kevin Menard, Recreation

Tyler Schroeder, Port of Bellingham

Heather Steele, Public K-12 Education

Dana Wilson, Marine Trades

Non-Members/Public Present

Kori Olsen, Pete Dawson, CJ Seitz, Elizabeth Hampton, Whatcom County Councilmember Tyler Byrd, Carly James, R. Perry Eskridge, Jessie Everson, Samantha Cox, Joe Blodgett, Port of Bellingham Commissioner Ken Bell, Brian Heinrich, David Haws, Sage Park, Mauri Ingram, Jon Hutchings, Downtown Bellingham, Amanda McKinney, Cynthia Carlstad, Barbara Chase, Brady Gustafson, Larry Mattson, Mayor Scott Korthuis, Alan Champman, Peter Dykstra, AG Central, Brad Rader, Rob Lee, Andrew (last name not provided)

Call to Order

WCBCC Chair Casey Diggs called the meeting to order at 11:00 a.m.

Motion: Approval of the Minutes

Dan Dunne moved, seconded by RB Tewksbury, to adopt the meeting minutes from April 14, 2025.

Motion passed.

WCBCC Chair Updates

- Welcome Troy Lautenbach, WCBCC Vice-Chair
- Healthcare position open/posted on Whatcom County's website

WCBCC Chair & Vice Chair Roundtable Discussion:

WCBCC Chair Casey Diggs initiated a conversation about aligning the goals of the committee with those of the county council, suggesting it's time to clarify the committee's role. **Vice Chair Troy Lautenbach** echoed the sentiment, reflecting on his experience as a newer member and having questions about the committee's responsibilities, potential charter, and its effectiveness in meeting council expectations. Several members, including Sarah Rothenbuhler, Councilmember Mark Stremmer, and Ryan Allsop, supported revisiting the original intent of the committee, emphasizing the importance of recalibration and collaboration with council.

WCBCC committee member Ryan Allsop provided historical context, explaining the committee was formed to give the county council business community input on a wide range of local issues. The group highlighted past efforts demonstrating their community-oriented focus, including early advocacy on housing and childcare.

Councilmember Tyler Byrd responded with appreciation and acknowledgment, apologizing for any perceived lack of response and emphasizing that the committee's input has indeed influenced council decisions on housing, childcare, and other issues. He reaffirmed the value of the committee's work despite communication challenges.

Water Adjudication, Yakima Basin Information Panel

Larry Mattson, Director, Department of Ecology Office of Columbia River

Joe Blodgett, Yakama Klickitat Fish Program Project Policy Coordinator, Yakama Nation

Sage Park, Policy Director, Roza Irrigation

Samantha Cox, Water Resources Specialist, Kittitas County

Commissioner Amanda McKinney, Yakima County

David Yaws, Environmental Services Director, Yakima County

Peter Dykstra, Consultant to Yakima Basin Conservation Caucus

WCBCC committee member Sarah Rothenbuhler introduced a panel of speakers from Yakima Basin to present on best practices stemming from their collaborative governance to manage water and irrigation systems, agricultural areas, and in bringing back fish throughout the water adjudication process.

The Yakima Basin was highlighted as a model of collaborative water governance, effectively managing water and agricultural systems in partnership with government agencies. Their efforts in fish restoration and securing grants were commended. Concerns were raised about the potential negative impacts of prolonged adjudication in Whatcom County, including threats to fish populations and the viability of farms due to increasing costs and bureaucracy. Sarah urged learning from Yakima's successes to avoid long-term consequences and invited the Yakima representatives to share their insights.

Larry Mattson provided an overview of the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan (YBIP), highlighting its origins, goals, and collaborative governance structure. He emphasized that the success of the YBIP depends on working together, stating, "We do this together, or it does not work."

Water Adjudication, Yakima Basin Information Panel (cont'd)

Mr. Mattson described the Yakima Basin as a key agricultural region with significant historical and economic importance, supported by early federal irrigation projects. These projects, while beneficial to agriculture, led to ecological challenges including fish population declines and water supply issues, which were exacerbated by climate change.

In response, stakeholders in the region shifted from conflict to collaboration, developing the Integrated Plan in 2009. The plan received state authorization in 2013 and federal authorization through the Dingell Act in 2019. Its core goals are:

- Restoration of fish populations and habitat,
- Increased water supply reliability for agriculture and communities,
- Long-term climate resilience.

Mr. Mattson noted the importance of having a shared vision ("rudder") and clearly defined objectives ("sideboards") to guide the plan over its multi-decade timeframe. This clarity helps prevent mission drift as stakeholders and circumstances evolve.

The YBIP workgroup meets quarterly, with around 50 participants representing a broad coalition of partners. Mr. Mattson concluded by reiterating the importance of shared commitment and compromise, stating that in the Yakima Basin, "everyone gets some of what they need, but not everything they want."

Joe Blodgett, representing the Yakama Nation Fisheries Department, provided an update on the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan (YBIP) from the perspective of tribal fisheries interests and water reliability challenges. He emphasized that the YBIP was created in response to the over-allocation of water in the basin and a declining, less predictable water supply due to reduced snowpack and climate change.

Blodgett noted that YBIP strategies for improving water reliability include:

- Increased conservation and efficiency,
- Water marketing,
- Development of both large and small-scale surface and groundwater storage projects.

Blodgett explained that while the initial plan focused on three major surface storage projects, the approach has evolved to favor smaller, distributed storage solutions that can better serve a variety of water needs across the basin.

A major risk in water supply planning is ensuring protections for fish populations, particularly species once extirpated from the basin. The Yakama Nation aims to restore all native fish stocks to self-sustaining, harvestable levels—a goal that aligns with one of YBIP's seven core elements.

Water Adjudication, Yakima Basin Information Panel (cont'd)

Strategies for recovery include:

- Opening fish passage at reservoirs,
- Restoring habitat,
- Maintaining ESA (Endangered Species Act) compliance.

Key accomplishments to date:

- Surpassed the goal of acquiring 70,000 acres for ecological protection and sustainability,
- Ongoing floodplain restoration projects in Yakima and Kittitas counties,
- Continued forest management and land designation work,
- Communication and coordination mechanisms built among diverse basin stakeholders.

Blodgett highlighted several infrastructure successes:

- **Sunnyside Diversion:** Effectively keeps fish out of irrigation canals, improving survival rates.
- **Nelson Dam Removal:** Fully removed but still operational for water functions, now fish-friendly.
- **Cle Elum Reservoir:** New fish passage facility nearing completion will allow sockeye reintroduction and provide an additional 14,000 acre-feet of storage.
- **Springwood Ranch:** Planned off-channel reservoir on newly acquired land (thanks to TPL assistance) expected to store 40,000–100,000 acre-feet, benefiting fish and water users.
- **Wapato Irrigation Modernization:** Full modernization of infrastructure serving the Yakama Reservation is underway.

Blodgett concluded by reinforcing the Yakama Nation's long-term commitment to the integrated plan and to ensuring that all water users—agricultural, municipal, and ecological—are part of the solution moving forward.

Moderator Cynthia Carlstad introduced the panel discussion with two guiding questions for participants:

1. What value does the Integrated Plan bring to your entity?
2. Why is it worth the time and effort to participate?

Larry Mattson (Office of Columbia River):

Mattson emphasized the structural importance of the YBIP's "tri-sovereign" leadership—Yakama Nation, Bureau of Reclamation, and the Office of Columbia River. These entities provide the governance framework that enables other stakeholders to develop projects aligned with YBIP's seven core elements. He highlighted the importance of adaptive management, which allows the plan to remain flexible and responsive to evolving conditions such as climate change and new technologies.

Water Adjudication, Yakima Basin Information Panel (cont'd)

Sage Park (Roza Irrigation District):

Park shared that as a pro-ratable district—which receives less water in drought years (only 48% this year)—Roza benefits from the YBIP's goal of increasing supply reliability to 70%. She underscored the collaborative environment of the plan, which brings together partners like the Yakama Nation, environmental groups, and agencies to pursue shared objectives, including conservation, water leasing, and new storage development.

Samantha Cox (Kittitas County Public Works):

Cox noted that YBIP participation has significantly helped the county in two ways:

- Water marketing through the Kittitas County Water Bank, enabling ongoing property development.
- Floodplain restoration through property acquisitions, supporting groundwater storage.

Cox also emphasized the value of building lasting partnerships through the YBIP framework.

Peter Dykstra (Environmental Community – Trust for Public Land):

Dykstra highlighted that the YBIP has allowed environmental organizations to achieve goals they could not accomplish alone, including land preservation, habitat restoration, and working agriculture. He cited the Springwood Ranch project as a groundbreaking example where a national environmental group purchased land for water storage—an outcome only possible through cross-sector collaboration with tribes, agencies, and local partners.

Larry Mattson (additional remarks):

Mattson added that once projects are vetted and accepted into the YBIP framework, they become eligible for stacked capital funding from multiple sources, including state and federal agencies. This multi-source funding model increases feasibility and reduces the burden on individual partners, although it does require careful coordination.

Commissioner Amanda McKinney (Yakima County):

McKinney emphasized the critical role of county governments in long-term success. She stressed the need for consistent county involvement and robust internal staffing, such as Yakima County's dedicated water resources team. She described water as the economic and cultural lifeblood of the basin, and reiterated the importance of a long-term, coordinated partnership among state, federal, tribal, and local governments.

Moderator Cynthia Carlstad introduced the next series of discussion questions focused on the importance of relationships and strategies for handling challenges in collaborative governance settings.

Water Adjudication, Yakima Basin Information Panel (cont'd)

Commissioner Amanda McKinney (Yakima County):

Emphasized that participants serve as stewards of their roles and that strong working relationships often extend beyond YBIP. These partnerships help avoid miscommunication and foster trust across various non-water-related issues. She noted that the Yakima Basin's collaborative reputation is recognized nationally.

Samantha Cox (Kittitas County Public Works):

Noted at the staff level, having a reliable network and knowing whom to call is critical. In-person interactions at meetings have helped build this network and improve communication.

Sage Park (Roza Irrigation District):

Described the importance of treating collaborators like friends—building trust by showing up during challenges, offering resources, and working together informally. Park shared examples such as Roza staff helping with fish passage and addressing environmental concerns, reinforcing that trust enables difficult but necessary conversations.

Joe Blodgett (Yakama Nation):

Added that regular, in-person, and informal meetings are essential to trust-building. During recent drought years, facilitated conversations helped address tensions constructively. Open dialogue and honest communication were critical to moving forward.

Commissioner McKinney:

Noted that the strength of local partnerships allows the basin to assert local solutions to federal agencies—effectively "driving our own destiny" with strong backing from state and federal partners.

Sage Park:

Shared that when issues arise, the first step is to communicate directly. Picking up the phone, assembling the right people, and approaching the problem respectfully are key. Having a trusted facilitator or a third party for difficult conversations can be helpful.

Peter Dykstra (Trust for Public Land):

Encouraged listening with the intent to help. Understanding others' challenges and offering resources builds reciprocity and resilience across the partnership.

Larry Mattson (Office of Columbia River):

Warned against relying solely on email, which lacks emotional context and can lead to misinterpretations. Emphasized in-person or phone conversations and "meetings between meetings" for preparation, alignment, and trust-building.

Water Adjudication, Yakima Basin Information Panel (cont'd)

Joe Blodgett:

Offered a historical perspective, explaining that prior to YBIP, many disputes were settled in courtrooms. A turning point came when the Yakama Nation and Roza Irrigation District chose to negotiate directly instead of through legal channels. That initial dialogue helped launch the YBIP, which has since allowed previously adversarial groups to jointly implement projects, secure funding, and achieve shared goals—such as fish restoration, water storage, and resiliency improvements.

Samantha Cox:

Urged groups to clearly communicate the culture and intent of collaboration, especially as new members join. A consistent message about the "how" and "why" of the group helps ensure long-term success.

Larry Mattson:

Highlighted the impact of joint advocacy trips to state and federal capitals, where stakeholders—including historic adversaries—speak with one voice. This unified front leaves a strong impression on policymakers. He also encouraged groups to ensure broad stakeholder inclusion, including agriculture and environmental sectors, and to identify a neutral, trusted convener to guide the effort.

Larry Mattson acknowledged that collaborative planning processes are inherently time-consuming but stressed that “quick wins” are critical to building early confidence. Within YBIP, certain elements (e.g., fish passage, habitat restoration) provided opportunities for early success.

- All projects are science-based and preceded by feasibility or technical studies to ensure public resources are used responsibly.
- Measuring success includes milestone achievements (e.g., ribbon cuttings, project completions) and scientific monitoring to validate effectiveness over time.

WCBCC committee member Ryan Allsop inquired whether a collaborative group could form in advance of adjudication to help accelerate and guide the process. He noted Yakima's effort came near the end of its 40-year adjudication and asked if similar collaboration could begin earlier in Whatcom County.

Peter Dykstra responded that although the YBIP formally began near the end of the Yakima adjudication, relevant work and collaboration occurred during the multi-decade process through earlier phases of federal legislation (late 1970s and 1990s).

- Collaborative progress is possible even during adjudication and can address key issues in parallel.
- However, the clarity and legal certainty that adjudication provides was essential for implementing many projects, particularly water conservation and allocation efforts.
- He emphasized that regulatory frameworks like the Endangered Species Act (ESA) are still active and influence how integrated plan elements are prioritized and executed.

Water Adjudication, Yakima Basin Information Panel (cont'd)

Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu emphasized that while water supply challenges are real, building trust is more critical than water abundance. He stated: “The abundance of water is less important than the abundance of trust.”

Sidhu and others underscored that trust enables productive, creative solutions for water management, particularly in basins like the Nooksack, where hydrologic and storage constraints are significant.

WCBCC committee member Pete Dawson asked about YBIP’s origin and leadership.

- Panel members reiterated that leadership was initially shared among local adversaries (e.g., Yakama Nation and irrigation districts) who chose dialogue over litigation.
- Moving forward, YBIP leadership continues through the "tri-sovereign" partnership: the Yakama Nation, Bureau of Reclamation, and the Washington State Office of Columbia River—supported by a broad coalition of stakeholders from environmental groups to municipal and agricultural interests.

WCBCC committee member Dan Dunne sought insight into the scale of funding used in Yakima Basin for infrastructure, habitat restoration, and land acquisition, and whether similar resources could be available to Whatcom County.

- **Response – Larry Mattson (Office of Columbia River):**
 - State committed \$200 million over the first 10 years for Columbia Basin-wide efforts, incl. Yakima.
 - Required at least 50% matching funds from federal or private sources.
- **Response – Peter Dykstra:**
 - YBIP raised approximately \$800 million over 12 years, with ~\$400 million from the state and the remainder from federal, local, and philanthropic sources.
 - Stressed that collaboration was key to unlocking funding at both state and federal levels.
 - Noted that Whatcom County could access similar funding if a strong, collaborative, multi-benefit plan is developed.

Whatcom County Councilmember Mark Stremmer asked about legal tools enabled by the Yakima adjudication that might not be available otherwise.

- **Response – Peter Dykstra:**
 - The court did not invent tools but allowed community-proposed solutions (e.g., expedited water transfers).
 - Advantage of adjudication: Court holds basin-wide authority, eliminating the need for legislative change to implement flexible management.

WCBCC committee member Sarah Rothenbuhler inquired about timeline expectations for the adjudication process in Whatcom County.

Water Adjudication, Yakima Basin Information Panel (cont'd)

Response – Peter Dykstra: Declined to estimate a timeline; acknowledged Yakima took 44 years, not desirable.

- Commented that collaboration can potentially streamline and expedite parts of the process.

WCBCC committee members Ryan Allsop & Sarah Rothenbuhler:

- Timeline of 10–20 years is deeply concerning for small farms due to high legal costs.
- Some local businesses and farms already experiencing financial strain due to legal fees and uncertainty, even before adjudication effects are formalized.

Further Discussion

- Requests made for a list of major water right holders (e.g., City of Bellingham, PUD) and expanded representation at future sessions.
- Suggestion by Troy Lautenbach and Tyler Schroeder to schedule a future work session for updates from WRIA 1, including scientific assessments and water right statuses.

Perry Eskridge noted that WRIA 1 is the first adjudication in the U.S. to attempt full groundwater quantification and allocation. Perry emphasized the need for better data on groundwater to support effective planning. He pointed out that Yakima's adjudication did not include groundwater, highlighting a key difference and added complexity for Whatcom.

General Comments:

- Participants expressed appreciation for Yakima's leadership and willingness to share experiences.
- Emphasis on the emotional and financial weight already being felt in Whatcom County due to the adjudication process.
- Noted low public engagement despite large mail outreach (35,000 letters sent, few community responses).

Adjournment:

- Meeting was concluded by Casey Diggs with consensus to hold a future session focused on WRIA 1 status and stakeholder involvement.
- With no further business, the meeting concluded at 12:03p