



Planning for the Disproportionate Impacts of Climate Change in Washington State

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Summary

State and local climate action plans describe how a jurisdiction intends to reduce greenhouse gases to prevent climate change. Sometimes these plans include attention to adapting to the negative effects of climate change, such as extreme heat. Overall, climate action plans offer a place to begin to prepare for and adapt to the effects of climate change. Key findings from this report are:

- Some of the government commissioned climate plans in Washington State recognize there are disproportionately impacted communities, but few adequately identify or describe how to address the disparities.
- Existing efforts to build community resilience, such as emergency preparedness, should be tied to equity in a way that empowers communities to achieve their goals.
- Work to advance the connection between social and economic conditions and climate resilience should prioritize such co-benefits by incorporating these concepts into each phase of resilience building: assessment, planning, implementation, and sustaining the efforts over time.

Some Climate action plans recognize disproportionate impacts, but most fail to adequately advance equitable resilience.

Research on climate change adaptation shows that harm from global warming will affect some people more than others (see our last report *The Disproportionate Impacts of Climate Change on Communities of Color in Washington State*), and that adaptation strategies must support communities that, systemically and individually, and have been made less resilient. For example, the Climate Impacts Group at the University of Washington states, “the climate-related effects on human health will disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.”¹ Unfortunately, the solutions that are proposed and undertaken to address these threats often fail to actually address the needs of communities. In many ways, rare

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disruptions to normal life are planned for with a higher priority than the chronic emergencies that life in poverty can create, and which climate change exacerbates.

In Washington State, the main climate action plan currently used is the Washington State Integrated Climate Response Strategy. Titled *Preparing for a Changing Climate*, the report finds that the purpose of adaption work is to “increase our resilience and protect the most vulnerable populations.”² However, the strategies and priority given to such communities do little to address the root causes of the current inequities and adaptive capacity needed. For example, the strategy report describes the need to “develop communication materials focused on vulnerable communities that are at high risk and have a low capacity to respond, paying particular attention to low-income and underserved populations, ... enhance the ability of local organizations to understand climate risks and reach vulnerable populations, and provide vulnerable populations with information on what they need to know and how to prepare for and address the risks of climate change.” All of these strategies rely on behavioral change through communication and knowledge sharing. These are important, but not a substitute for the need to address the social, economic, and environmental root causes of vulnerability.

A sample of climate adaption plans in Washington illustrates the gap of in attention to climate justice.

When looking at Washington’s Climate Response Strategy or local climate action plans, there is a clear gap in how the plans address the unequal burdens of climate change. Additionally, the strategies and responses being proposed and undertaken to build climate change resilience fail to make the connection between the socio-economic root causes of inequity and resilient communities. In a review of seven climate action plans or response strategies from Washington, only three discuss the unequal burden that frontline communities suffer from climate change. Additionally, only two of the seven promote the participation of frontline communities in the development of the action plan or the implementation of strategies, and both examples are from within the King County.

The following table provides a summary of how some of the key climate adaptation and action planning documents in Washington address the climate concerns of frontline communities, using the following criteria:

- 1. *Discusses Unequal Effects for Frontline Communities*** describes whether the document acknowledges that the effects of climate pollution or climate change are disproportionately suffered by low-income communities and communities of color.

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2. **Promotes Participatory Planning for Frontline Communities** describes whether the document intentionally calls out participation from frontline communities in the planning and implementation of climate strategies.

3. **Promotes Co-Benefits for Frontline Communities** describes whether the document describes climate mitigation or adaptation strategies that intentionally create economic and social co-benefits for frontline communities.

Document Title	Jurisdiction	Discusses Unequal Effects for Frontline Communities	Promotes Participatory Planning for Frontline Communities	Promotes Co-Benefits for Frontline Communities
Preparing for a Changing Climate: Washington State’s Integrated Climate Response Strategy ³	WA State	✓	✗	✓
Seattle Climate Action Plan ⁴	Seattle	✓	✓	✓
Tacoma Climate Action Plan ⁵	Tacoma	✗	✗	✓
King County Strategic Climate Action Plan ⁶	King County	✓	✓	✓
City of Edmonds Climate Change Action Plan ⁷	Edmonds	✗	✗	✗
City of Spokane Sustainability Action Plan ⁸	Spokane	✗	✗	✗
UW Climate Action Plan ⁹	UW	✗	✗	✗

It should be noted that tribal climate action and adaptation plans were excluded from this analysis since their focus is exclusively on that particular frontline community.

The table illustrates that many climate action and adaptation plans describe the fact that “vulnerable populations” face an inequitable burden of potential negative effects from

climate change. However, as with the examples provided in *Preparing for a Changing Climate*, the problems and solutions offered in such analyses often paint a disempowered picture of frontline communities whose voice is not incorporated into planning or decision-making processes and who the government and other organizations can do work for, rather than with.

From awareness to solutions

Knowing how low-income communities and communities of color suffer a disproportionate burden of the negative effects of climate change due to existing inequities, what can be done to address this “climate gap”?

Supporting the adaptive capacity of the communities bearing a disproportionate burden from the negative effects of climate change might be best achieved by supporting their social and economic opportunities. This could include tying existing efforts to build community resilience, such as emergency preparedness, to equity in a way that empowers communities to address their own social and economic priorities. It could also include intentionally creating the space for frontline communities to have more decision-making power in the development of local and state climate solutions. It could also include prioritizing communities suffering from existing inequities when climate resilience resources are used.

Currently, a gap exists in terms of understanding and assessing how spending to advance climate resilience is capitalizing on co-benefits in low-income communities and communities of color. Future work to advance the connection between social and economic conditions with climate resilience should prioritize such co-benefits by incorporating these concepts into each phase of resilience building: assessment, planning, implementation, and sustaining the efforts over time.

These co-benefits are often missed for a number of reasons. First, governmental documents such as the action plans described in this paper often strive to provide “for all people,” intentionally not calling out any specific group. However, this often leads to strategies that policy makers think benefit “all people”, understanding that bias will push decisions to existing power and infrastructure and away from where it may be needed most. One clear example of this would be the use of a cost-benefit analysis with climate projects, where the intention is to use tax-payer dollars “most efficiently.” In order to do that, projects that protect the costliest infrastructure are prioritized. Unfortunately, we know that due to historical practices such as redlining and discriminatory local government practices, many

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frontline neighborhoods are systematically under-resourced. As a result, communities with fewer resources are again ignored for a new round of potential investment.

Only through the intentional allocation of resources to empower and build the capacity of low-income communities and communities of color through climate resilience-building efforts will the full benefits of those dollars be reaped. Research on how this is being approached throughout Washington by local governments and organizations as well as successful examples of local climate solutions that provide co-benefits to frontline communities is needed. This will help local jurisdictions throughout the state plan for the effects of climate change, engage frontline communities as partners in these efforts, and ultimately better support the needs of their communities.

Front and Centered (formerly Communities of Color for Climate Justice) is a statewide coalition of organizations and groups rooted in communities of color and people with lower incomes; we're on the frontlines of economic and environmental change. As thought leaders and organizers our agenda and strength is built with our grassroots community. We work together to build power and capacity for a Just Transition that centers equity and is led by people of color.

Sources:

¹ University of Washington Climate Impacts Group, *Observed Changes in Pacific Northwest Climate: Human Health* (2015). http://cses.washington.edu/picea/mauger/ps-sok/ps-sok_sec13_humanhealth_2015.pdf.

² Washington State Department of Ecology, *Preparing for a Changing Climate: Washington State's Integrated Climate Response Strategy* (2012). <https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/documents/1201004.pdf>.

³ Washington State Department of Ecology, *Preparing for a Changing Climate: Washington State's Integrated Climate Response Strategy* (2012). <https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/documents/1201004.pdf>.

⁴ City of Seattle, *Seattle Climate Action Plan* (2013). http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/OSE/2013_CAP_20130612.pdf.

⁵ City of Tacoma, *Tacoma Climate Action Plan* (2008). <http://cms.cityoftacoma.org/enviro/sustain/ClimateActionPlanJuly2008.pdf>.

⁶ King County, *King County Strategic Climate Action Plan* (2015). http://your.kingcounty.gov/dnrp/climate/documents/2015_King_County_SCAP-Full_Plan.pdf.

⁷ City of Edmonds, *City of Edmonds Climate Change Action Plan* (2010). <http://www.edmondswa.gov/climate-action-plan.html>.

⁸ City of Spokane, *City of Spokane Sustainability Action Plan* (2009). <https://static.spokanecity.org/documents/publicworks/environmental/sustainability-action-plan.pdf>

⁹ University of Washington, *UW Climate Action Plan* (2009). https://green.uw.edu/sites/default/files/cap/uw_climate_action_plan.pdf.