

ENVIRONMENT

## County residents share concerns for Puget Sound

*Panel to present draft plan to governor by June*

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From polluted stormwater runoff to dwindling orca and salmon populations, Whatcom County residents voiced their environmental and political concerns Wednesday to a governor's group charged with improving the health of marine ecosystems stretching from Canada to Olympia.

The meeting drew nearly 100 people from government, environmental and community groups. The discussion about pollution and habitat loss was in sharp contrast to the backdrop - a fleet of sailboats bobbing on the sparkling blue water of Bellingham Bay outside the Cruise Terminal's enormous domed window.

But Mike Shelby, executive director of the Western Washington Agricultural Association, emphasized the importance of improving Puget Sound so that future generations can enjoy it.

Shelby is a member of the Puget Sound Partnership, a group assembled by Gov. Chris Gregoire in December 2005 as part of her Puget Sound Initiative to clean up the sound.

The 15-member panel includes representatives of government, environmental groups, education and business. Port of Bellingham Executive Director Jim Darling is on the panel.

The primary goal of the initiative is to improve and protect Puget Sound by 2020.

The state set aside \$42 million to get the effort off the ground. The governor has asked for draft recommendations by June, and final recommendations by this fall.

Shelby said that in order to reverse the ecological degradation of the area, people will have to change their lifestyles.

"We've got to go in and change society's mindset," he said.

Jim Kramer, a Puget Sound Partnership project manager, said improving Puget Sound requires focusing on individual local concerns and projects.

Members of the community offered plenty of ideas, including the environmental impacts of urban sprawl and fish farms.

Closer to home, Marie Hitchman, who has lived in Bellingham for 40 years, said she would like to see Cherry Point designated as a marine sanctuary.

Robyn du Pre, executive director of environmental group RE Sources, said carbon emissions should be addressed immediately to limit climate warming, a problem that is already having a local effect.

"Cherry Point herring stocks are at the edge of their temperature tolerance now," she said.

Randy Kinley, a fish policy representative for the Lummi tribe's Natural Resources Department, said officials have to identify their canary - find a struggling species and solve the problems leading to it's demise.

Orcas, for example, rely on chinook salmon for food, a population that also is dangerously low.

"It gets back to the way of life," Kinley said. "Everybody says we've done enough. If we had, we would see it in the harvest of our fish coming back."