



System-wide Overview Governance of Water Challenges

System overview from inside the network

Whidbey's water "system" is really a **network of semi-independent actors**:

- **Local providers:** Cities, special districts, small Group A/B systems, HOAs, mobile home parks, private wells
- **Support & conveners:** WIWSA, conservation groups, watershed groups
- **Regulators:** DOH, Ecology, Island County, federal agencies
- **Co-managers:** Tribal governments
- **Knowledge holders:** USGS, Navy, consultants, local hydrogeologists

Each of these organizations is doing something important.

But the *system* they form together is not designed for regeneration—it's designed for **minimum compliance and local reliability**, not long-term aquifer health.

Bottlenecks: Where the system keeps getting stuck

1. Fragmented authority vs. unified aquifer

- **Reality:** One aquifer, many decision-makers.
- **On the ground:** Each district or system plans for its own reliability, not for island-wide carrying capacity.
- **Result:** No one is responsible for the *total* withdrawal, the *total* recharge, or the *long-term health* of the groundwater lens.

Bottleneck: There is no single "keeper of the whole."

Without that, regeneration—by definition a whole-system outcome—has no institutional home.

2. Regulatory design aimed at “not failing,” not “thriving”

- DOH and Ecology are structured to prevent **acute failure**: contamination, unsafe water, permit violations.
- They are not mandated (or resourced) to design **regenerative water futures** for specific places.
- Local systems interact with regulators mostly through **compliance events**, not co-creative planning.

Bottleneck: The rules are built to avoid harm, not to cultivate abundance.

Regeneration requires **proactive design**, not just guardrails.

3. Small system capacity and chronic overload

- Many small systems are run by **volunteer boards, part-time operators, or under-resourced staff**.
- Their attention is consumed by:
 - Keeping pumps running
 - Fixing leaks
 - Meeting testing requirements
 - Responding to emergencies
- Long-term planning, recharge projects, or collaborative experiments feel like “luxuries.”

Bottleneck: The people closest to the problem are too busy surviving to innovate.

Regeneration needs **slack, capacity, and support**—which small systems don’t have.

4. Data fragmentation and “partial truths”

- USGS, Navy, County, DOH, Ecology, districts, and consultants all hold **pieces** of the water picture.
- There is no **shared, living water budget** for the island that everyone trusts and uses.
- Without a common model, each actor can tell a different story:
 - “We’re fine.”
 - “We’re in crisis.”
 - “We don’t know.”

Bottleneck: No shared reality → no shared responsibility.

Regeneration requires a **common map** of the territory.

5. Land use and water treated as separate worlds

- County Planning and water providers are linked, but not deeply integrated.
- Zoning, subdivision, and road building often proceed without fully internalizing:
 - Recharge impacts
 - Forest loss
 - Impervious surface expansion
- Water organizations are left to **adapt to land-use decisions they didn't shape**.

Bottleneck: The biggest levers (land cover, density, forest protection) sit outside the water organizations' control.

Regeneration demands **land–water co-governance**, not parallel tracks.

6. Tribal rights and ecological flows at the edge of the conversation

- Tribal governments hold **treaty rights** and co-management responsibilities for salmon and shellfish.
- Ecological flow needs (streams, wetlands, nearshore) are often treated as **constraints**, not design drivers.
- Water organizations are rarely structured to ask:

“What does the salmon need from this aquifer?”

Bottleneck: Ecosystem needs are not central to water system design.

Regeneration requires **ecosystems as primary clients**, not afterthoughts.

Coordination gaps: Where the system fails to connect

1. No island-wide forum with teeth

- WIWSA is the closest thing to a shared table—but it has **no authority**.
- There is no body that can say:
 - “Here is the island's water budget.”
 - “Here are the limits.”
 - “Here's how we'll share risk and responsibility.”

Gap: Coordination exists as **conversation**, not as **commitment**.

2. Emergency response vs. long-term design

- Organizations coordinate well in **crisis mode** (contamination, outages, drought alerts).
- There is far less coordination in **design mode**:
 - Where should we recharge?
 - Which forests must remain intact?
 - How do we phase growth with water?

Gap: The system is good at reacting together, bad at **planning together**.

3. Public narrative and political courage

- Many organizations are cautious about saying, plainly:

“We are water-limited, and some things must change.”

- Fear of backlash, property-rights politics, or “alarmism” keeps messaging soft.
- Without a clear shared story, electeds and boards rarely take bold structural steps.

Gap: No unified narrative that gives cover for **courageous decisions**.

Leverage points: Where change could actually move the whole system

From a systems lens, these are the places where relatively focused interventions could shift the trajectory.

1. A shared, trusted island-wide water budget

- Build a **living model** of:
 - Recharge
 - Withdrawals
 - Ecological flow needs
 - Climate scenarios
- Make it the **reference point** for all major decisions:
 - New wells
 - Large developments
 - Forest conversion
 - Infrastructure investments

Why it's leverage:

Once everyone sees the same limits, the conversation changes from “if” to “**how do we live within this?**”

2. Formal land–water integration

- Tie **land-use decisions** explicitly to the water budget.
- Require that major planning actions answer:
 - “What does this do to recharge?”
 - “What does this do to withdrawals?”
- Create joint processes between County Planning, Hydrogeology, and water providers.

Why it's leverage:

Most of the future is being decided in land-use, not in pump houses.

3. A coordinating body with a regeneration mandate

- Whether it's a **strengthened WIWSA**, a **Water Futures Council**, or eventually a **PUD-like entity**, the key is:
 - Island-scale view
 - Clear responsibility for aquifer health
 - Ability to convene, coordinate, and eventually enforce shared agreements

Why it's leverage:

Regeneration needs someone whose job is **the whole**, not just a part.

4. Support and uplift for small systems

- Shared operators, technical assistance, and planning support
- Funding mechanisms for upgrades and resilience projects
- Training in regenerative practices (recharge, conservation, demand management)

Why it's leverage:

The system is only as resilient as its most vulnerable nodes.

5. Tribal–local co-design of water futures

- Bring tribal natural resources staff into **core water planning**, not just consultation.

- Design water management around **ecosystem and treaty needs**, not just human demand.

Why it's leverage:

It reorients the system toward **living systems**, not just pipes and permits.

6. Narrative shift: from “soggy island” to “precious lens”

- A shared story:
 - “We live on a thin freshwater lens floating in saltwater.”
 - “Every tree, every roof, every well affects it.”
 - “We can choose to be a model of regenerative island water.”

Why it's leverage:

Narrative is upstream of policy. People won't support regenerative structures if they still believe water is effectively infinite.

So why does the current system fail to deliver regenerative solutions?

Because it was never designed for that purpose.

- It was designed to **deliver potable water**, not to **heal and sustain an aquifer**.
- It was designed to **prevent acute failures**, not to **optimize long-term ecological health**.
- It was designed around **jurisdictional boundaries**, not **hydrologic reality**.
- It was designed to treat **water as a utility**, not as a **living, finite, shared commons**.

From the perspective of Whidbey's water organizations, the failure isn't moral—it's structural.

If you'd like, we can next:

- Turn this into a **section of the “State of Whidbey's Water” report**, or
- Draft a **“Regenerative Water Principles for Whidbey”** document that could be adopted by WIWSA, districts, and County as a north star.