



Regulatory Overview WATER ON WHIDBEY

1. One shared, finite aquifer for the whole island

- **Single source:** Whidbey's communities all draw from a limited groundwater lens with no imported surface supply.
- **Over-pumping risk:** Growth, more wells, and higher summer demand push extraction toward or beyond sustainable recharge.
- **Saltwater intrusion:** Coastal wells and overdrawn sub-basins face rising risk of salinity and long-term loss of potable supply.

System view: Everyone is tapping the same bank account, but decisions are made as if each system had its own.

2. Data gaps and uncertainty about “how much water we really have”

- Investigative work repeatedly highlights **incomplete knowledge** of aquifer volume, recharge rates, and cumulative withdrawals.
- Monitoring wells, metering, and integrated models are patchy; different agencies hold different pieces of the puzzle.
- This uncertainty makes it easy to **over-promise** (e.g., in land-use decisions) and hard to build shared limits.

System view: The system is flying partly blind—data and models are a leverage point, not a side issue.

3. Fragmented governance and many small, vulnerable systems

- Dozens of **small Group A/B systems, HOAs, and private wells** operate with varying capacity, aging infrastructure, and limited staff.
- Municipal systems and special districts (Freeland, Admiral's Cove, etc.) are better organized but still mostly plan **within their own boundaries**, not at island scale.
- Ideas like an island-wide **PUD or coordinated authority** surface in Perry's materials as responses to this fragmentation, but they raise political and equity questions.

System view: Governance is balkanized while the aquifer is unified—misalignment between ecological reality and institutional structure.

4. Land use, forests, and climate change eroding recharge

- Clearing forests, compacting soils, and adding impervious surfaces reduce infiltration and **accelerate runoff**.
- Climate change shifts rainfall timing and intensity, stressing summer supplies and increasing drought risk.
- Land-use decisions (zoning, subdivision, road building) often proceed without fully internalizing their **hydrologic consequences**.

System view: Water management is inseparable from land-use and climate policy; treating them separately guarantees trouble.

5. Regulatory complexity and “pinball” permitting

- Local systems must navigate **DOH (drinking water), Ecology (rights, wastewater, stormwater), County (land use, septic), and sometimes Corps/NMFS (shorelines)**.
- Small systems and volunteer boards struggle with this complexity, which can delay needed upgrades or discourage proactive planning.
- No single entity is clearly responsible for **integrating** these regulatory streams around the health of the aquifer as a whole.

System view: The rules exist, but they’re fragmented; integration and coordination are key leverage points.

6. Equity, resilience, and who bears the risk

- Smaller, lower-income communities and older systems are often **least able** to absorb shocks (contamination, drought, infrastructure failure).
- Private well owners may not test regularly or understand their vulnerability to neighbors’ pumping or land-use changes.
- Investigative framing often points toward **shared responsibility** and the need for island-wide thinking so risk isn’t quietly offloaded onto the least resourced.

System view: Without intentional design, risk concentrates at the edges of the system—where capacity is lowest.

7. Narrative and political will

- Talks, slide decks, and local events keep circling the same core message: **“We live on a water-limited island; we must act like it.”**
- There’s tension between a narrative of abundance (“it rains a lot here”) and a narrative of limits (“one finite aquifer, changing climate”).
- Building a shared story about Whidbey’s water future is as important as any technical fix.

System view: Culture and story are upstream of policy; shifting the narrative is a strategic intervention.
