



Whidbey Island Water System Association

What it is, where it came from, & the challenges it faces today.

WIWSA: What It Is

Whidbey Island Water Systems Association (WIWSA) is a nonprofit membership organization that serves as the **central convening, training, and information-sharing hub** for Whidbey's many independent water systems.

It is **not** a regulatory agency and **not** a utility.

Its power comes from **coordination, education, and relationships**, not authority.

Core functions:

- Provides training and technical support for small water systems
- Helps systems understand and comply with DOH and Ecology regulations
- Shares information about water quality, infrastructure, and best practices
- Hosts meetings where operators, commissioners, and agencies can talk
- Acts as a bridge between local systems and state/federal regulators
- Raises awareness about island-wide water issues (aquifer, contamination, drought)

In a fragmented landscape, WIWSA is the closest thing Whidbey has to a **unifying water forum**.

WIWSA: A Brief History

While WIWSA's early years were informal, its evolution follows a clear pattern:

1. Origin in necessity

Whidbey has dozens of small Group A and Group B water systems, many run by volunteers or part-time operators.

These systems struggled with:

- Regulatory complexity
- Limited technical expertise

- Aging infrastructure
- Lack of coordination

WIWSA emerged as a **peer-support network** to help these systems survive and comply.

2. Growth into a recognized island-wide forum

Over time, WIWSA became the place where:

- DOH and Ecology present updates
- Operators share challenges
- Commissioners learn governance basics
- Systems coordinate on emergencies and best practices

It became a **trusted intermediary** between local systems and state agencies.

3. Increasing focus on island-scale issues

In the last decade, WIWSA's role expanded to include:

- Aquifer sustainability
- Saltwater intrusion
- PFAS and contamination
- Climate impacts on recharge
- Growth and water availability

WIWSA became a **voice for the idea that Whidbey's water must be managed as one interconnected system.**

WIWSA: Core Problems and Limitations

WIWSA is respected and valuable — but it faces structural constraints that limit its ability to solve island-wide water challenges.

Here are the key issues.

1. No authority — only influence

WIWSA cannot:

- Set policy
- Enforce standards
- Require data sharing
- Coordinate pumping

- Manage the aquifer
- Control growth decisions

It can **advise**, **educate**, and **convene**, but it cannot **govern**.

Strategic implication:

WIWSA is essential but insufficient for long-term aquifer stewardship.

2. Fragmented membership with uneven capacity

WIWSA serves:

- Municipal systems
- Special districts
- HOAs
- Mobile home parks
- Private well clusters
- Volunteer-run systems

These systems vary dramatically in:

- Technical sophistication
- Financial resources
- Governance quality
- Long-term planning ability

Strategic implication:

WIWSA must support the weakest systems, which often need the most help but have the least capacity to act.

3. Limited funding and volunteer dependence

WIWSA operates on:

- Modest dues
- Occasional grants
- Volunteer board leadership

This limits:

- Staff capacity

- Data projects
- Island-wide planning
- Public outreach
- Long-term initiatives

Strategic implication:

WIWSA cannot scale to meet the complexity of Whidbey's water challenges without new resources or structural support.

4. No mandate for island-wide water planning

WIWSA is not empowered to:

- Create a unified water budget
- Coordinate pumping across systems
- Integrate land-use and water availability
- Develop island-wide infrastructure plans
- Manage drought response at scale

Strategic implication:

Whidbey lacks a single entity responsible for managing the aquifer as a shared resource.

5. Increasing complexity of water issues

WIWSA is being asked to help systems navigate:

- PFAS contamination
- Saltwater intrusion
- Climate-driven recharge decline
- Regulatory tightening
- Infrastructure aging
- Growth pressures

These are **island-scale problems**, not system-scale problems.

Strategic implication:

WIWSA is being stretched beyond its original purpose.

WIWSA's Strategic Role Going Forward

WIWSA is not the solution to Whidbey's water governance challenges — but it is **essential to building the solution**.

Here's how:

1. WIWSA is the trusted convener

Any conversation about unified water management must run through WIWSA.

2. WIWSA can surface system-wide problems

It sees patterns no single district can see.

3. WIWSA can build the coalition

Operators, commissioners, and agencies already trust WIWSA.

4. WIWSA can support a transition

If Whidbey moves toward a PUD or coordinating authority, WIWSA can:

- Provide data
- Host discussions
- Educate members
- Reduce fear and misinformation

5. WIWSA can remain the technical and training hub

Even under a new governance structure, WIWSA could continue as:

- A professional development center
 - A technical assistance provider
 - A community engagement partner
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