



## UNDERSTANDING AND IMPROVING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE ON WASHINGTON'S COAST

### 2015 Coastal Connections Series Event

**Sponsored and Convened by:**  
Coastal States Organization  
US Representative Derek Kilmer  
Washington State Coastal Zone Management Program

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### Action Report

#### Background

Washington has over 3,300 miles of diverse marine and estuarine coastline. Our region, particularly on the coast, is defined by its relationship to the Pacific Ocean and its identity as a coastal area. The ocean provides economic and recreational opportunities. It provides beautiful scenic vistas. But we also know there are threats related to existing and future impacts of chronic and episodic flooding, landslides, erosion, and tsunami and seismic hazards. Resilience is a community's ability to rebound quickly from shocks and stressors while at the same time reducing future risk. We've recognized the need for smarter planning and stronger community partnerships in order to holistically become more resilient. This is why the 2015 Coastal Connections Series Event, held in Grays Harbor, brought together local elected officials, stakeholders, and emergency responders to talk about increasing resiliency along our coastline and better preparing our communities for severe weather.

Washington's Coastal Zone Management Program (at the Department of Ecology) has been working with the [Coastal States Organization](#) and Congressman Derek Kilmer on addressing coastal hazards along Washington's coast. This collaboration has led to a co-sponsored Coastal Connections Series event focused on Grays Harbor through which participants could learn about existing efforts to increase resilience and identify opportunities to enhance existing programs to better support community preparedness for natural hazard impacts and ensure long-term economic prosperity. To achieve this mission, the Coastal Connections Event organizers worked hard to gather key state and local partners to tackle three main objectives:

1. Understand the impacts of existing and potential natural hazards that communities face on the Washington coast;
2. Highlight successful management efforts to address coastal hazards and opportunities for future work; and
3. Identify local challenges and ways for state and federal programs to better support community needs.

*"These conversations ... really matter because it tries to figure out how, collectively, we can bring resources at the local level and at the federal level and coordination at the local level and the federal level to try to keep communities safe and to try to reduce the amount of damage associated with these challenges,"*

- Rep. Derek Kilmer  
[Thedailyworld.com](http://Thedailyworld.com)

#### Event Summary

The morning began with an opening panel featuring Paula Akerlund (Ocosta School District), Grant Williams (Coastal States Organization), Brian Lynn (Washington's Coastal Zone Management Program) and Nicholas Carr (Congressman Kilmer's office). Panelists provided an introduction to the importance of preparing for coastal hazards, the ongoing work to address hazards within Grays Harbor, and the roles played by their respective offices in these efforts thus far. A key message from Paul Akerlund set the tone for the event, acknowledging

the community's success in developing the first tsunami-engineered vertical evacuation school in the country and placing that success in perspective, reminding everyone that beyond the school, the County has no natural high ground, and remains extremely vulnerable to a variety of hazards.



*Brian Lynn (Coastal Zone Management Program Manager) highlights the importance of partnerships in addressing the range of planning needed to prepare, respond, and recover from coastal hazard events.*

Technical experts from the Department of Ecology and Department of Natural Resources then gave presentations covering what we know about existing and future conditions on the coast in a panel chaired by Kevin Decker

(Washington Sea Grant). A fundamental part of understanding and evaluating risk is generating, providing, and communicating better data and information about hazards. Reliable and defensible information is the basis for design and community planning decision making. These presentations helped to summarize hazard impacts on communities and the ongoing research and outreach necessary to inform effective decision-making. Jerry Franklin, (Flood Mapping Coordinator and Analyst at the Department of Ecology), overviewed the FEMA Risk Map process, providing insight into the way this process is used to develop community-specific multi-hazard data and action steps to improve resilience. George Kaminsky (Coastal Engineer at the Department of Ecology) discussed the coastal erosion issues in Grays Harbor, the research he has conducted to improve localized erosion projections, and the role state agencies have played helping to develop a long-term response strategy. One important point made by Kaminsky is that key pieces of scientific knowledge about shoreline change are not being utilized by communities because his monitoring program does not have the resources to analyze and apply the collected data outside of specific project funds. Tim Walsh (Chief Hazards Geologist at the Department of Natural Resources) ended the science panel with Washington's history of landslides, earthquakes, and tsunamis, and the steps we can take to prepare for these inevitable hazards.

The final morning panel provided an overview of state and federal program efforts to support community hazards planning and response. Bobbak Talebi (Washington's Zone Management Program) began with a presentation connecting the local, state, and federal efforts to address hazards and the partnerships used to coordinate work between experts from all different levels of government. He also discussed the key challenges faced by agencies striving to make communities more resilient, and additional steps that should be taken moving forward. George Crawford (Earthquake Program Manager at the Emergency Management Division) also focused on the management theme,

through a presentation of the Washington State Tsunami Hazard Mitigation Program and community-based preparedness efforts to increase the State's overall resilience to Tsunamis. Nicholas Carr concluded the panel with a summary of Congressman Kilmer's efforts at the federal level to improve coastal resilience. This included the Tribal Coastal Resilience Bill, working to expand the FEMA pre-disaster mitigation funding, and pushing Congress to fund the early warning detection system.



*The group tours North America's first tsunami-engineered vertical evacuation facility*

Lunch was used to highlight the new Ocosta Elementary School, which doubles as North America's first tsunami-engineered vertical evacuation facility, capable of holding 1000 students, faculty and community members 50 feet above sea level. Paula Akerlund and Bob Freitag (University of Washington - Director of the Institute for Hazards Mitigation Planning and Research) discussed the process that went into determining the need for a vertical evacuation structure, working with community members to select a location and design the facility, obtaining funding through a ballot initiative construction bond, and lessons learned throughout the process. After lunch, Paula led a tour of the under-construction building, pointing out various safety features and answering questions from attendees.

The culmination of the day was the afternoon session focused on taking steps to become more resilient. This included five presentations and an extended Q & A. The panel began Rick Scott (Grays Harbor Sheriff - Director of Emergency Management), who provided insight into the focus of local emergency management efforts to prepare for severe flooding, landslides, heat, drought, fire-related dangers, earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanoes. Jack Durney (Mayor, City of Hoquiam) presented on the major flooding that occurred in the area early in January, 2015. Mayor Durney



*Sheriff Rick Scott opens a local panel by describing the challenges in emergency response in Grays Harbor*

discussed the role of various agencies, non-profits, and volunteer groups in responding and cleaning up after the flooding, the obstacles the community faces to overcoming hazards, and takeaways from his experience responding to the major flood event. Crystal Dingler (Mayor, Ocean Shores) focused on the impacts of flooding and erosion on her community, the steps they have taken in collaboration with the Coastal Zone Management Program to develop both short- and long-term response strategies to extreme coastal erosion, and the remaining gaps that need to be addressed to further improve Ocean Shores' resiliency. Bob Parnell (Westport City Council) followed Mayor Dingler with a presentation about Westport's efforts to reduce local vulnerability. Mr. Parnell explained the connection between Westport's limited connectivity to surrounding communities and its high vulnerability to hazards, and discussed opportunities to improving preparedness through increased collaboration and assistance from state and federal agencies. The final presenter was Randy Lewis (Port of Grays Harbor – former Westport City Administrator). Mr. Lewis provided an overview of his experience planning for and responding to hazards, and discussed possible improvements in coordination between all levels of government.

At the conclusion of the Q & A, each panelist offered their highest priority recommendation for improving the effectiveness state and federal assistance to improve resilience. Suggestions included helping local government staff identify grant opportunities and complete grant applications, assigning specific agency staff representatives for following up with local governments throughout permit applications processes, making surplus equipment available for search and rescue, focusing on long-term planning, increasing program flexibility, and providing onboarding and education to new mayors about the role of different agencies and points of contact.

In closing, Grant Williams of the Coastal States Organization outlined this organization's efforts to continue working to advance local and state coastal management priorities in Congress and with federal agencies. The Washington Coastal Zone Management Program and Congressman Kilmer staff described their continued commitment to follow up on actions identified throughout the day and work with Grays Harbor communities to take steps to reduce their risks.

## **Next Steps**

Following up on the event to address obstacles and implement identified priorities is key to maintaining momentum to continue improving resilience. These next steps include:

- Creating inter-local agreements to facilitate the development of collaborative response strategies;
- Increase communication between agencies and local Emergency Manager to shape and disseminate new hazards information;
- Developing plans and securing funding for long-term recovery;
- Designing and holding train-the-trainer workshops on hazards;
- Providing additional hazards technical information sessions to all elected officials in Grays Harbor;
- Raising awareness throughout the community about locally-relevant hazards and methods for improving household-level preparedness; and
- Seeking opportunities to leverage students to assist local governments for planning purposes.