

# The Climate Crisis and San Juan County's Comprehensive Plan Update

## How does San Juan County's Comprehensive Plan Update address the climate crisis?

*Known as the "Comp Plan," the County's Comprehensive Plan includes goals and policies to guide how our community will look in the future. This includes policies to protect our remaining forests, agricultural lands, and healthy shorelines; a blueprint for our community's transportation needs; goals for developing housing to serve everyone in our community; and much more. Energy use, solid waste, the protection of habitats, sea-level rise, carbon sequestration, forest-fire risk, and adaptation to global warming are all topics that are touched upon in various sections, or "Elements," of the Comp Plan. With this Comp Plan Update, the County is making decisions now that will guide its actions through 2036 — this offers an opportunity to respond to the climate crisis with goals and policies that minimize greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the new reality of rising seas, summer droughts, and frigid cold snaps. As community members in San Juan County, the opportunity to advocate for strong goals and policies for climate action in the Comp Plan is right now.*

## Is there a specific section in the Comp Plan about climate change?

Rather than having a specific section that addresses the climate crisis, the County has incorporated climate action and climate resiliency into every Element of the Comp Plan. The [Land Use Element](#) of the Comp Plan is especially relevant to mitigating and adapting to the local impacts of climate change, and consequently there is a standalone, land-use-specific climate section within that Element. You can see Friends' suggestions for improving that section [here](#).

## Is the County taking the climate crisis seriously, within the context of the Comp Plan?

It's worth noting that many of the County's staff, Planning Commissioners, and Council Members do share your concerns about the climate crisis. These concerns show up in the Comp Plan's language: For instance, the [Transportation Element](#) now includes a newly proposed County-wide goal to "Support the electrification of all transportation modes and provide recharge stations at key destinations throughout the County." At *Friends of the San Juans*, we are pushing for the most aggressive approaches possible, with respect to San Juan County's climate readiness and long-term environmental health and sustainability.

## How does the Comp Plan address the loss of forests and farms to development?

Compared to houses, sport courts, paved lots, and commercial development, forests and farms are "green" landscapes that can have profound climate benefits, including carbon sequestration and aquifer recharge. For this reason, and to help protect our County's rural character, Friends is advocating for the County to zone more lands for farming and forestry. Agricultural Resource Lands and Forest Resource Lands, known together as Natural Resource Lands, have restrictions on what can be done and built on them, so in addition to having climate benefits, designating more of these lands protects our Islands from getting overdeveloped. Please see Friends' FAQ sheets about [Agricultural](#) and [Forest Resource Lands](#) for more information.

Unfortunately, the Comp Plan Update process also allows Natural Resource Lands to be "de-designated" and developed for other uses. Right now, the Planning Commission has recommended to the County Council the de-designation of 127 acres of Forest Resource Lands, spread across multiple islands — *Friends strongly opposes removing protections from these forested areas*. You can read our legal argument [here](#).

## Does the Comp Plan address the need to transition away from fossil fuels?

Yes, though more is needed. Renewable energy and energy efficiency appear in several different Elements of the Comp Plan. In the [Utilities Element](#) of the Comp Plan, the County has set goals and policies to

incentivize energy conservation and the adoption of renewable energy. For instance, a newly proposed goal is to support more home solar installations. Energy use also appears in the [Housing Element](#) of the Comp Plan; the County has established goals for incentivizing low-impact development and high energy efficiency in new construction projects. The Comp Plan prioritizes channeling new development into Friday Harbor, Eastsound, and Lopez Village, and this will save energy by increasing efficiency of service delivery and by reducing travel times for our working population. In addition, in the [Land Use Element](#), the County sets policies for what types of land can be compatible with renewable energy projects like solar farms. All of this is a good start, but more advocacy is needed to encourage the County to make these various sections stronger. For example, in the [Transportation Element](#), more aggressive language should be included to discourage the use of gas-powered vehicles over the coming decades and to provide more structural options for bicycles and mass transit.



Photo courtesy of the San Juan Islands Visitors Bureau / Robert S. Harrison Photography

### **What about increased wildfire risks and more frequent summer droughts?**

Newly proposed language in the [Land Use Element](#) does incentivize practices that reduce wildfire risks, such as thinning overgrown forests and removing “ladder fuels.” Having less forest biomass can also help lessen the drawdown of local water tables during summer droughts. However, the language in the Comp Plan focuses on incentives and encouragement — given the catastrophic risks involved, it would be more sensible to *mandate* risk-mitigation measures whenever possible. Additional wildfire-prevention efforts in our community are urgently needed, beyond the scope of the Comp Plan.

### **Does the Comp Plan address solid waste, recycling, and composting?**

In the San Juan Islands, most waste has to be shipped off-island and transported to landfills or recycling facilities. This increased energy use for transportation increases our carbon footprint, and underscores an even greater need for waste and plastics reduction and local recycling and composting, compared to other communities. While the Comp Plan does address these issues somewhat, such as by suggesting incentives for composting and biochar facilities in the [Land Use Element](#), more emphasis on these issues is needed.

### **What can I do?**

Let the County Council know that you support climate resiliency and strong environmental stewardship in San Juan County! Encourage them to designate more lands as highly protected Natural Resource Lands, incentivize transitions away from fossil fuels, protect rural areas from overdevelopment, and help reduce solid waste and energy use County-wide. To keep tabs on opportunities to engage in this process, send an email to the Friends of the San Juans Executive Director, Brent Lyles, at [brent@sanjuans.org](mailto:brent@sanjuans.org).

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To learn more about San Juan County’s Comp Plan Update, including how to get involved, visit: [https://sanjuans.org/sjc\\_comp\\_plan/](https://sanjuans.org/sjc_comp_plan/)