

Summary of Public Engagement for the Lake Whatcom Forest Management Plan

Overview

Whatcom County and the City of Bellingham worked together with ecological forestry consultants Northwest Natural Resource Group (NNRG) to create a long-term plan that will protect water quality, improve forest health, and support responsible recreational access (where applicable) in the Lake Whatcom watershed by guiding forest management across more than 13,000 acres of forests.

Development of a Lake Whatcom Forest Management Plan began in April 2025, building on decades of community interest and involvement in protecting the watershed of this vital drinking water source. From the outset, public engagement has played a central role in shaping the Plan. The decision to create a dedicated Forest Management Plan for the Lake Whatcom watershed was driven by long-standing support for lake protection from community members, staff, and elected officials.

Land preservation – and more recently, forest management – have consistently been identified as priorities in the [five-year work plans of the Lake Whatcom Management Program](#). These plans are guided by monitoring, data and research, which are driven by community input and aligned with the priorities of local elected leaders. Creating the Forest Management Plan was identified as a goal in the 2025-2029 work plan.

Public input was collected through two phases – in the early stages of plan development and on the draft plan.

Phase 1 Community Engagement: Defining Objectives (April-July 2025)

The first phase of community engagement took place between April and July 2025 and helped inform the Plan's goals and recommendations. During this time, community feedback was received through:

- [Engage Bellingham](#), an online platform for collecting public input (April – July 2025)
- A community meeting at Silver Beach Elementary School (May 2025)
- Two community forest tours in the Lake Whatcom watershed (June and July 2025)
- Staff meetings with Tribal partners, Lake Whatcom stakeholders, recreation stakeholders, and representatives of relevant County advisory committees (April – May 2025)

- Discussions with individuals from agencies with knowledge of historical forest management in the watershed (April – July 2025)

On Engage Bellingham, participants could submit general comments on the Plan or provide feedback specific to County-managed park properties or City-managed protected properties.

During this phase, 56 comments were submitted via Engage Bellingham and the community meeting. While comments from the forest tours and stakeholder meetings were not formally recorded, similar themes emerged across all engagement activities.

Community input, along with feedback from partners and stakeholders, shaped the Plan's goals and recommendations.

Public Comment Themes

This section highlights the themes that were most prevalent throughout the 56 comments. There were five key themes mentioned most frequently:

1. Prioritize ecological health (25 comments)
 - a. Emphasis on limiting development, protecting water quality, and promoting long-term forest resilience.
2. Support recreational access (25 comments)
 - a. Calls for continued or expanded access to trails and natural areas, with an emphasis on balancing recreation with forest health.
3. Reduce and prepare for wildfire risk (11 comments)
 - a. Interest in improved wildfire access and planning in the watershed.
4. Seek community partnerships (6 comments)
 - a. Suggestions to collaborate with local organizations, including recreation groups.
5. Limit recreational access (6 comments)
 - a. Concerns about overuse, added infrastructure, and lake impacts.

Northwest Natural Resource Group (NNRG) used the themes collected through the first phase of community engagement, along with data from their summer 2025 field assessments, to help determine the objectives in the draft Lake Whatcom Forest Management Plan.

Phase 2 Community Engagement: Draft Plan (November 2025)

The draft Plan was published in November 2025 on the Engage Bellingham project webpage. Community members were invited to complete a survey designed to assess how

well the plan's objectives and other elements align with community values. The survey was available for anyone to take and provided enough context for people to participate without reading the full plan.

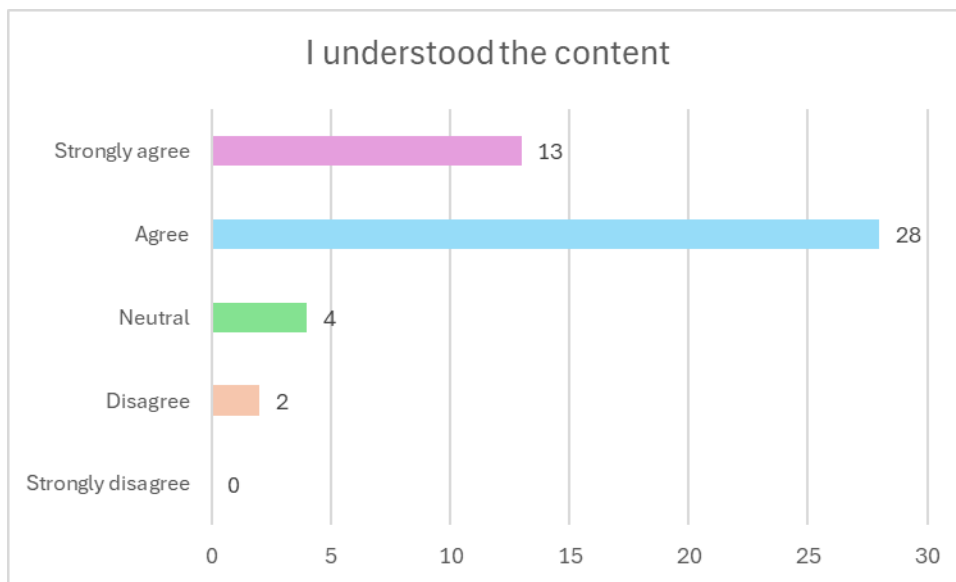
The 11-question survey asked about:

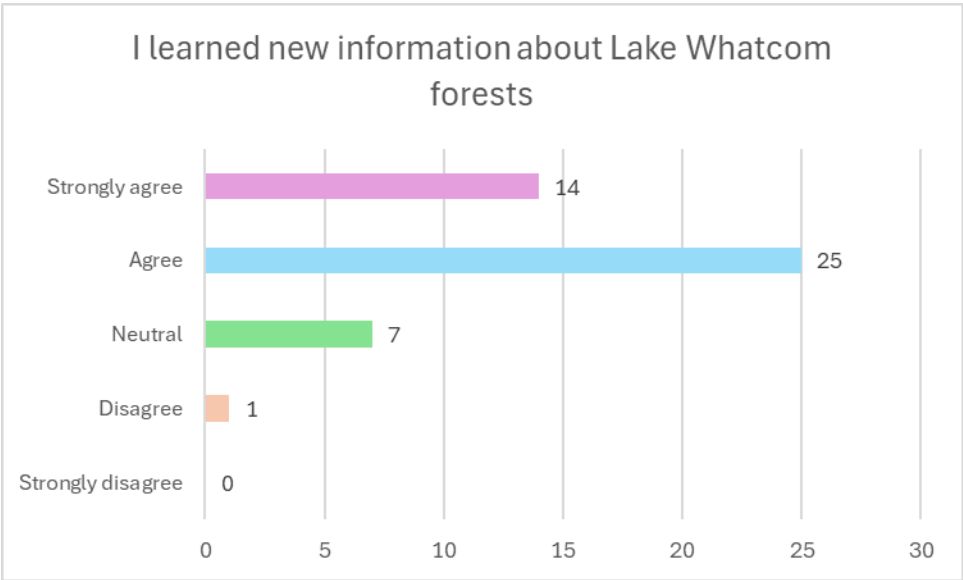
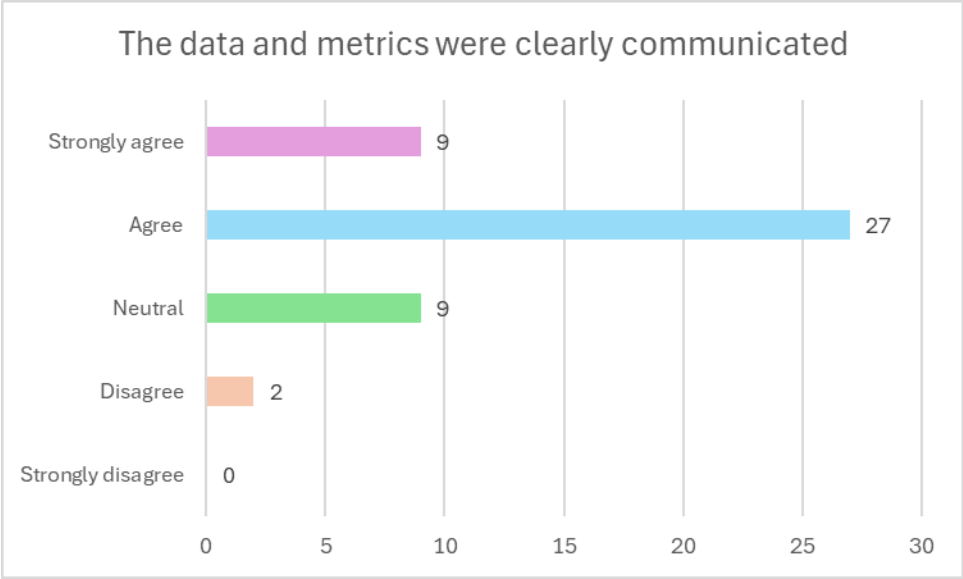
- Clarity of the plan's content
- Support for the plan's objectives
- Agreement with the plan's vision and key elements
- How participants interact with the watershed
- Additional feedback or suggestions

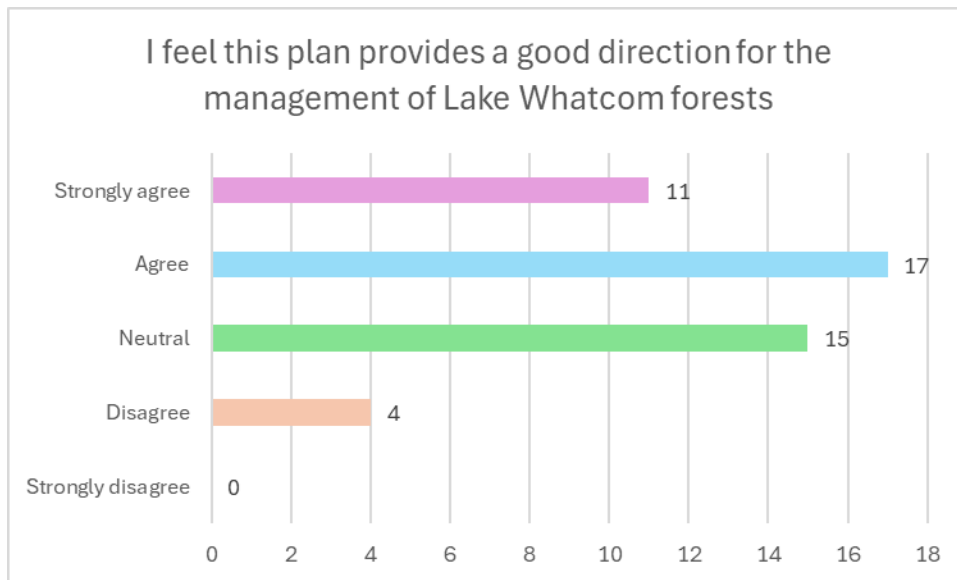
A total of 88 participants completed the survey. Through ranking questions, the majority of respondents expressed support for the plan's direction.

Clarity of the Plan's Content

Respondents who indicated that they had read the full plan were asked questions about how well they understood the content, how clearly the data and metrics were communicated, whether they learned new information, and if they felt the plan provides a good direction for management of Lake Whatcom's forests.

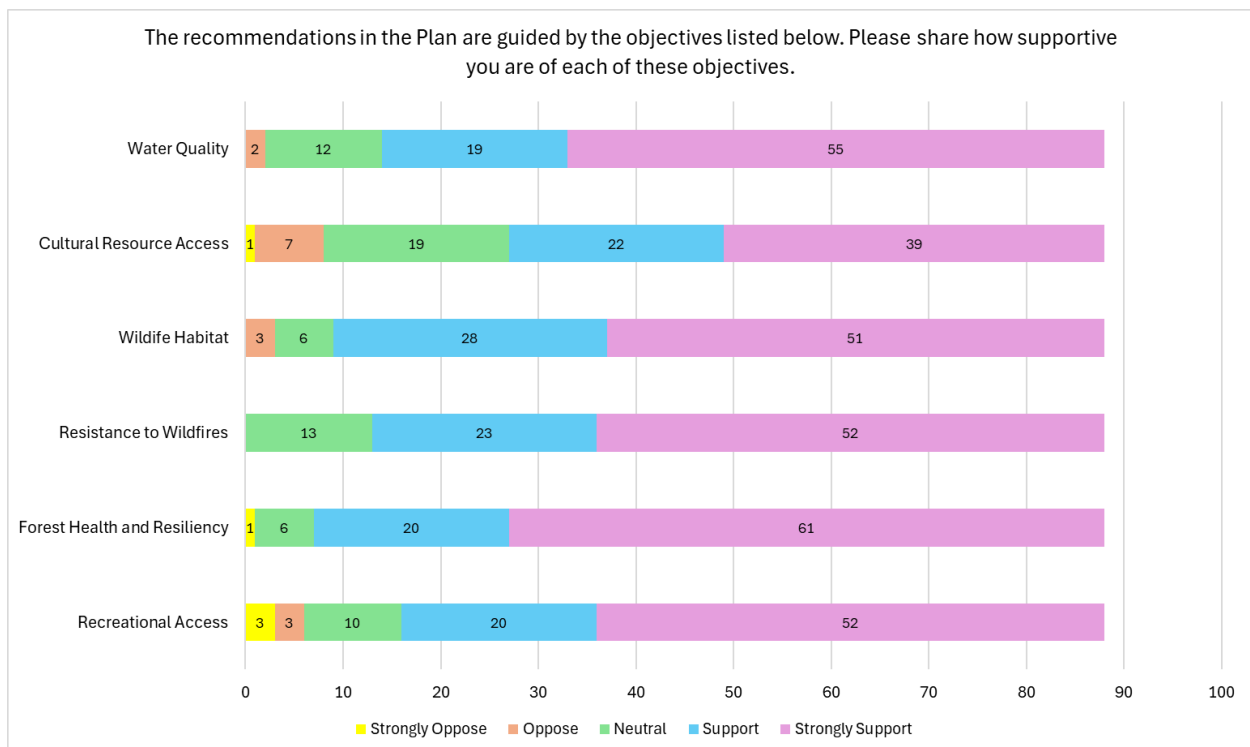






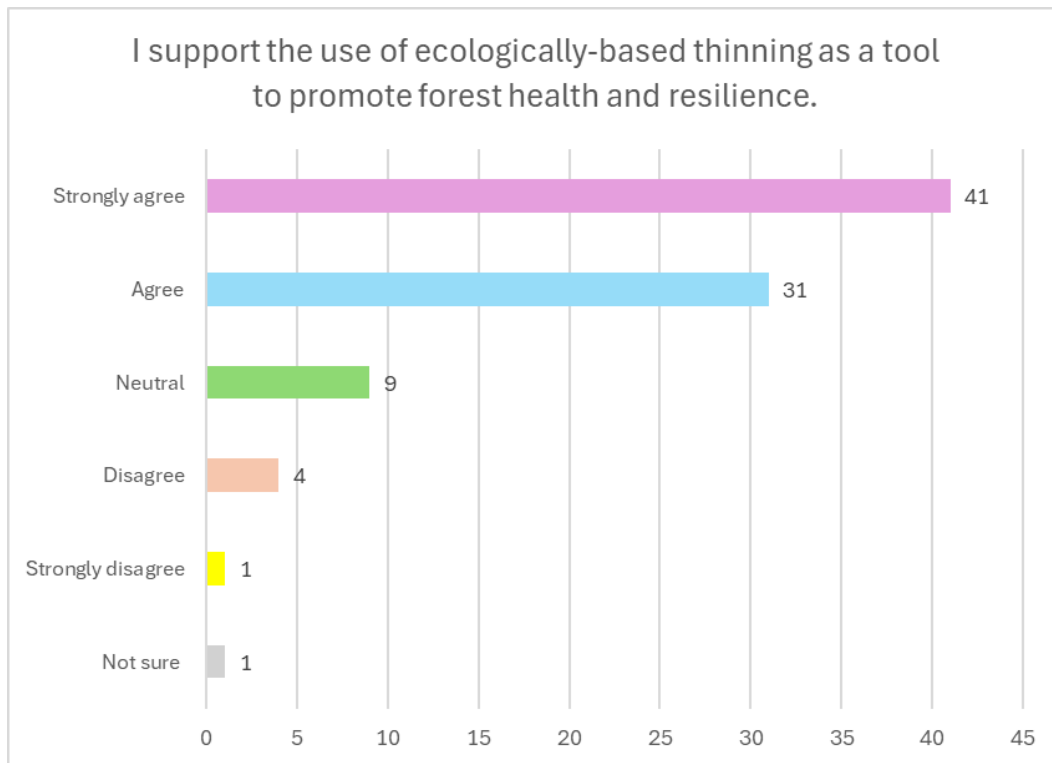
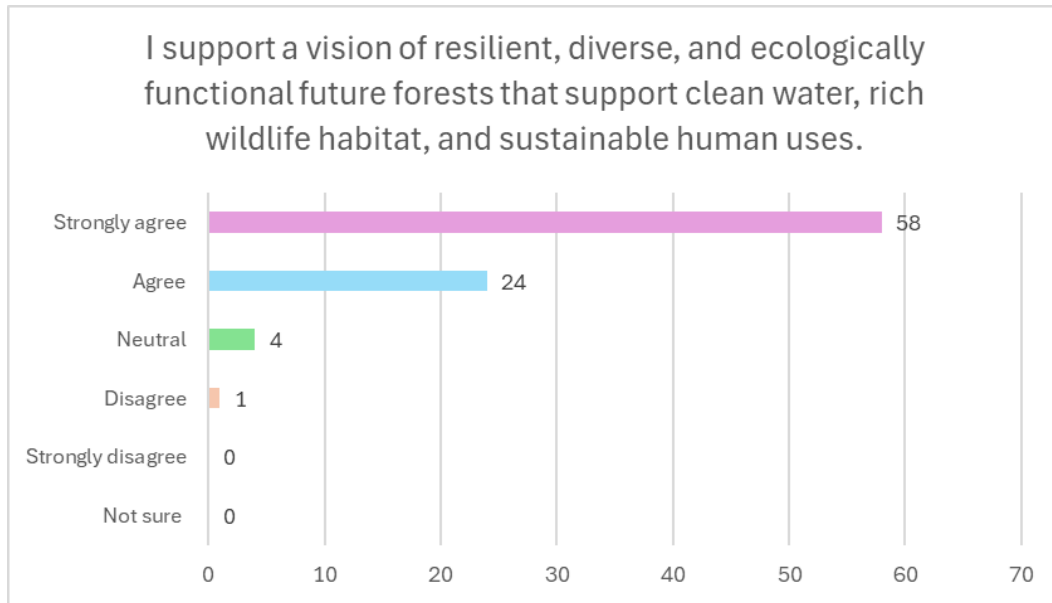
Support for the Plan's Objectives

On average, 84% of respondents expressed support across the plan's objectives, while 13% were neutral and only 3% expressed opposition. The figure below shows the level of support expressed for the plan's objectives.

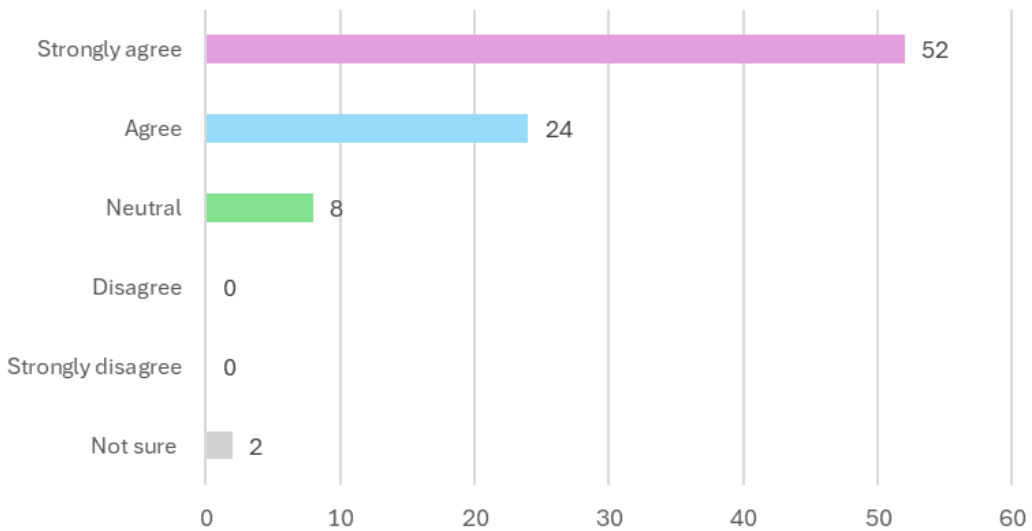


Agreement with the Plan's Vision and Key Elements

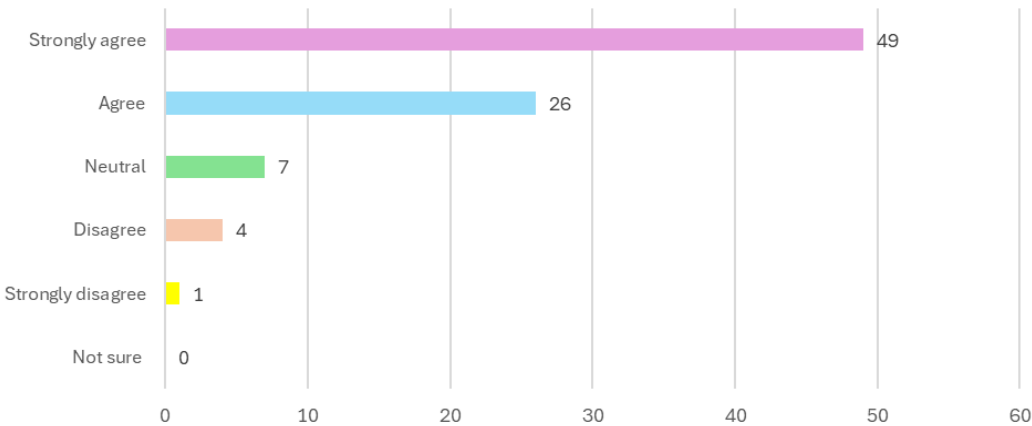
The majority of respondents expressed support for key elements of the plan through a series of questions that asked them to share how much they agreed with various statements. The most disagreement was seen around the concept of using management practices that allow the forest to generate sufficient revenue to cover management costs.

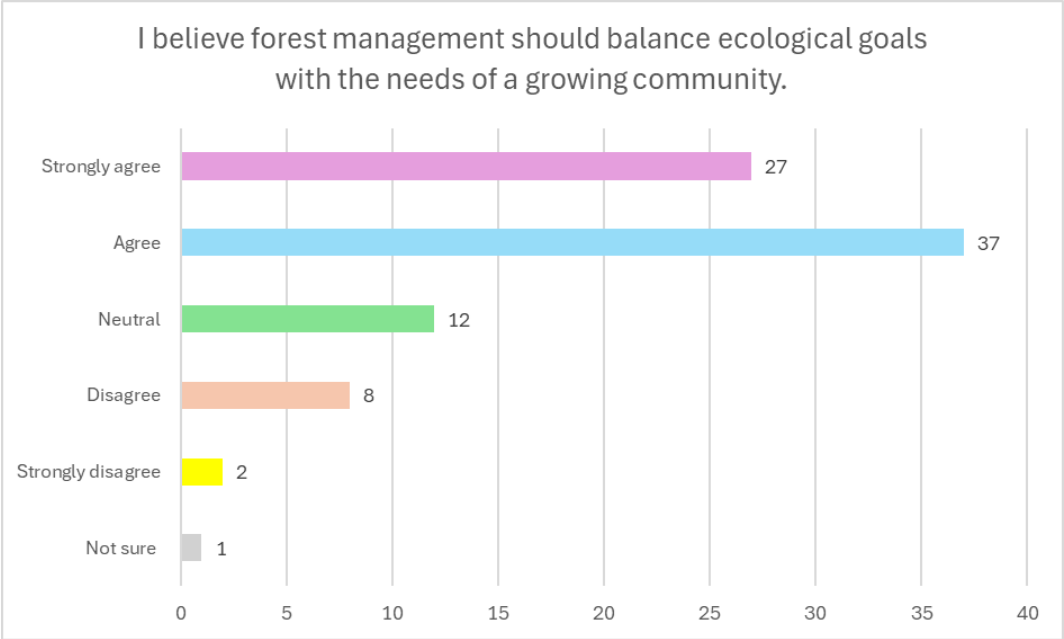
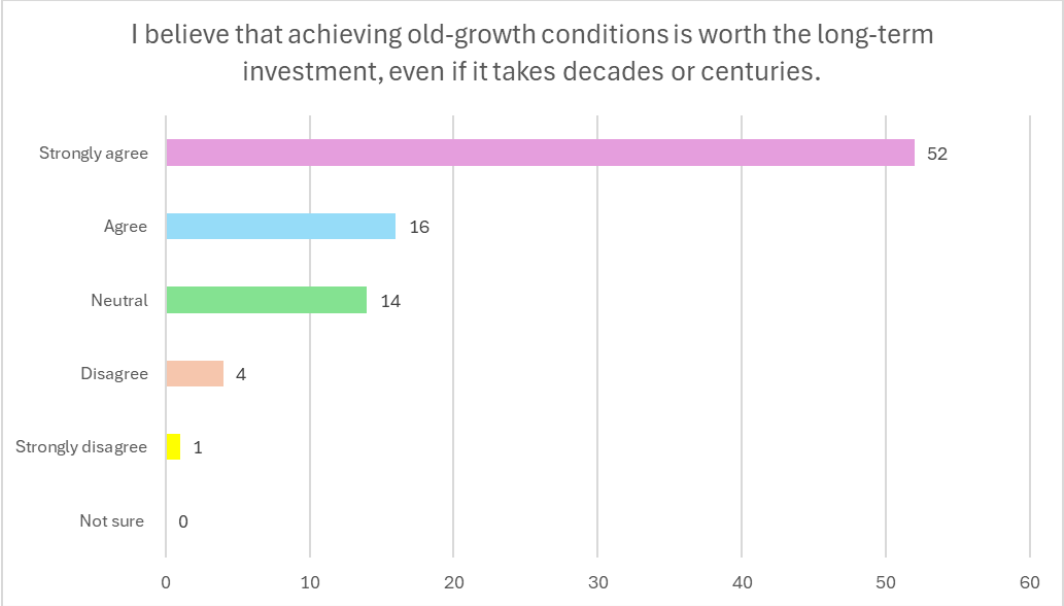


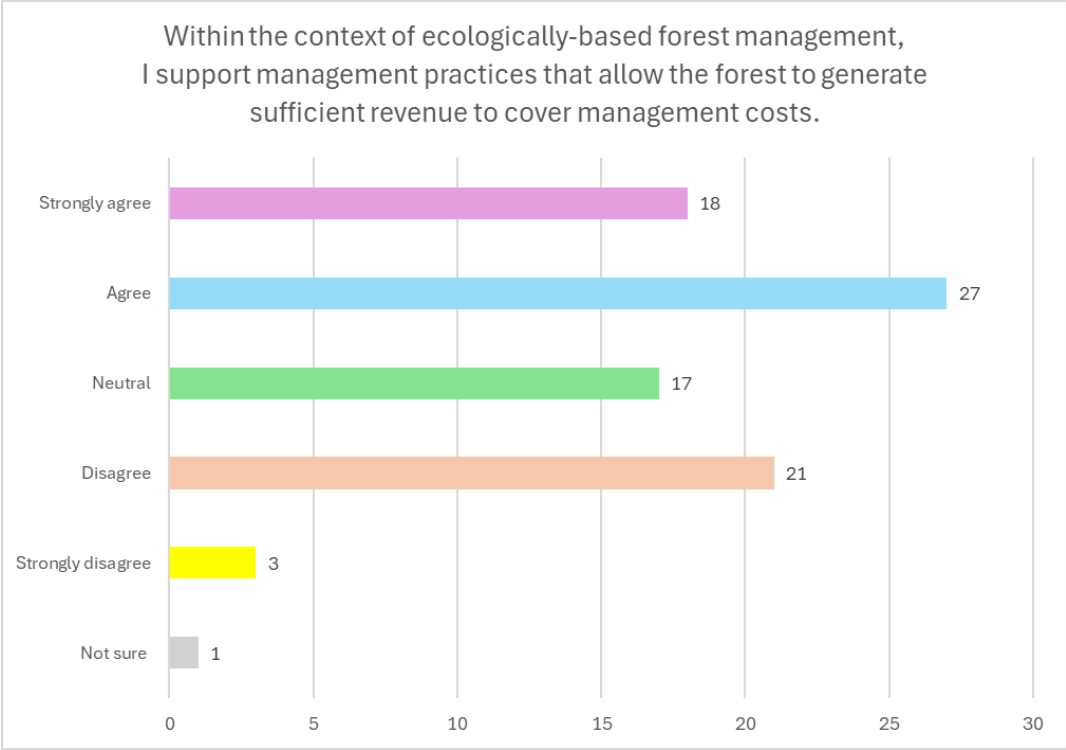
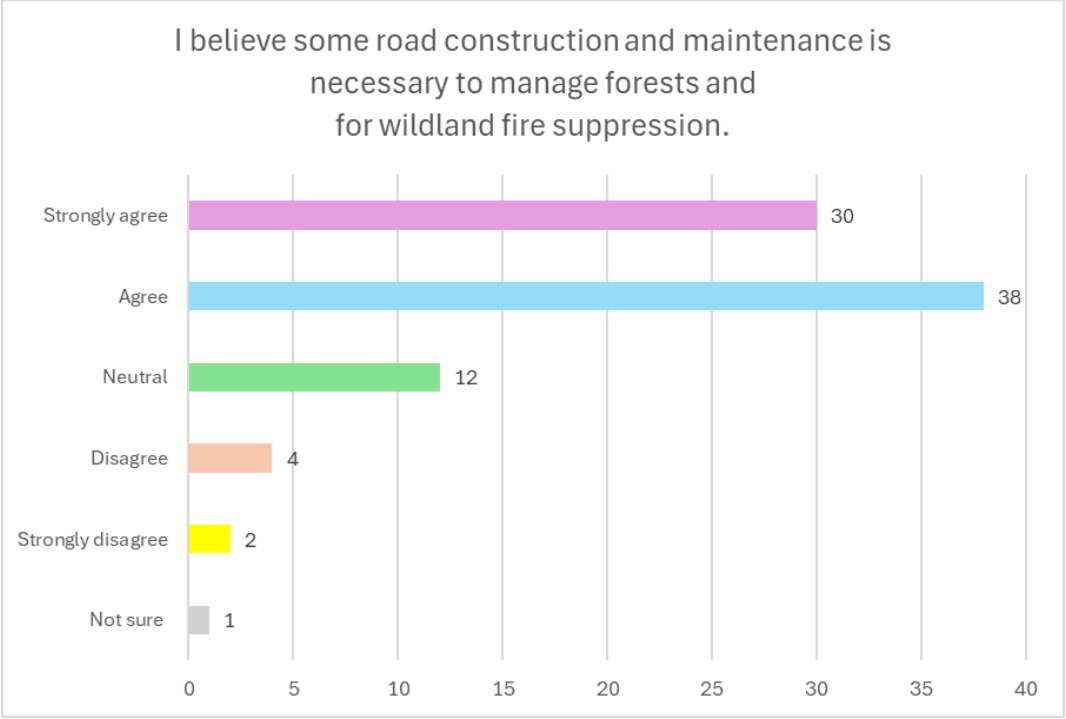
I support riparian restoration to improve water quality and aquatic habitat.



I support long-term protection of forested areas to allow natural processes to shape the landscape.

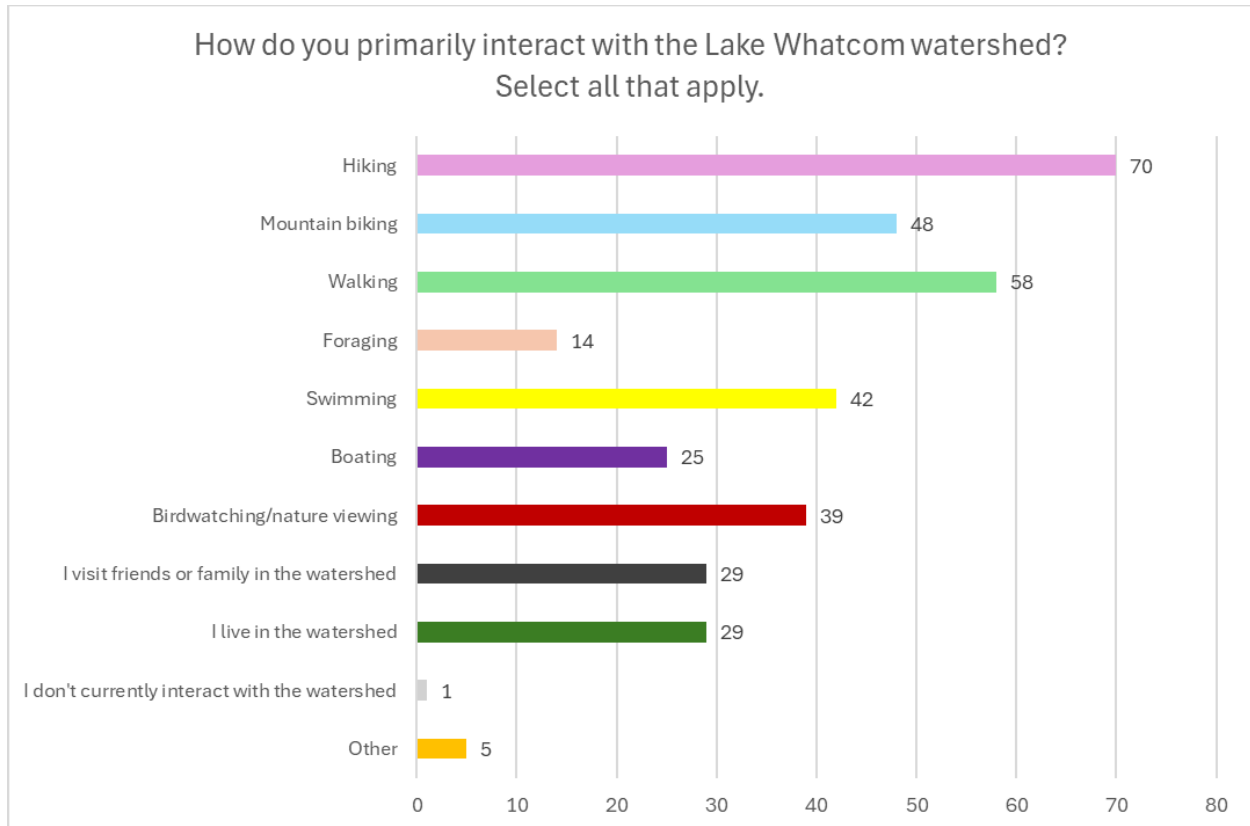






Interactions with the Lake Whatcom Watershed

One of the survey questions asked respondents how they interact with the watershed to better understand their interest in the watershed and Forest Management Plan.



Written Comments

Written comments provided through the survey also led to several revisions in the final plan around the following topics:

- **Landslides:** Clarified terminology to distinguish between general references that the Plan uses and definitions used by the Washington Geological Survey.
- **Adaptive management:** Strengthened language about adaptive management in the Management Planning Process and Management Sequence sections.
- **Thinning:** Added text to the Thinning Considerations section to clarify that professional foresters will mark timber prior to any thinning operations to ensure alignment with management goals.
- **Glossary:** Added new technical terms to the glossary at the end of the Plan.
- **Species selection:** Revised the Planting Considerations section to emphasize species diversity and referenced a species tolerance table throughout the Plan.

- Recreation: Added clarifying language around the Plan’s scope as it relates to recreation – managing recreational access and developing trails or other amenities is not within the scope of this planning effort. Also added language clarifying the impacts that poorly designed or maintained recreational trails can have on water quality.

Feedback on the draft plan was also collected from City and County staff and representatives from the Lake Whatcom Policy Group, Whatcom County Parks Advisory Commission, and other stakeholder groups.

Comments Outside of the Plan’s Scope

Throughout the community engagement process, valuable comments were shared that address concerns outside of the scope of this planning effort. For example, many comments about recreation access and trail expansion were shared. While the plan considers how recreation and forest health can coexist, its primary focus is long-term stewardship – not the development of new trails or recreation infrastructure. Therefore, the recreation-related comments received through this process have been documented by staff to inform future recreation or property management planning by the County or City. There were also comments provided that address broader Lake Whatcom protection topics, such as pesticide use on private property or boating on the lake, which will help inform future Lake Whatcom Management Program five-year work plans, as appropriate.

Next Steps

Whatcom County and the City of Bellingham submitted the draft Plan to the Washington State Department of Ecology for [SEPA review](#) in December 2025. Once this process is complete, the final Plan will be presented to Whatcom County Council and Bellingham City Council.