Clallam County MARINE RESOURCES COMMITTEE

September 2026 Meeting Minutes

Date: Monday, September 21st, 2026
Time: 5:31-7:24pm
Location: Hybrid meeting, Zoom and Clallam County Board of Commissioners' Meeting Room
Minutes: prepared by Chase O'Neil

Member Roll

	Member	Present?	Alternate	Present?
Academic Community	Ed Bowlby	excused	Ioana Bociu	
At Large	Alan Clark (*NWSC Rep, Vice Chair*)	X	Mary Sue Brancato	
At Large	Tim Cochnauer		Bev Burton	X
Conservation & Environmental Interests	Nancy Stephanz	X	*[vacant seat]*	---
Development Community	Brian Hilderman	X	*[vacant seat]*	---
District I	Jeff Ward	X	*[vacant seat]*	---
District II	Ann Soule	X	Lyn Muench	
District III	Howard Sprouse		Dann May	X
Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe	Jenna Ziogas	X	Robert Knapp	
Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe	Allyce Miller	X	Chelsea Korbulic	X
Makah Tribe	*[vacant seat]*	---	*[vacant seat]*	---
Marine Related Recreation & Tourism	Rob Casey	X	*[vacant seat]*	---
Port Angeles City Council	LaTrisha Suggs (*Chair*)	X	Jon Hamilton	X
Port of Port Angeles Commission	Jesse Waknitz		Katharine Frazier	
Sequim City Council	Meggan Uecker		Kelly Burger	

Staff and Others Present
Chase O'Neil (Clallam County Habitat Biologist and MRC Project Coordinator), Rebecca Mahan (Clallam County Habitat Manager and MRC Coordinator), Mark Ozias (Clallam County Commissioner, District I), Sasha Horst (Operations Manager at Northwest Straits Commission), Amy Olsen (Research Scientist at Seattle Aquarium).

Welcome / Call to Order / Introductions
Chair LaTrisha Suggs called the meeting to order at 5:31pm. LaTrisha welcomed Howard Sprouse, a new MRC member representing District III, but Howard was not present. Committee members and others attending the meeting introduced themselves. Nancy Stephanz also introduced Laura Garrard who will be appointed as her alternate (Conservation and Environmental Interests) at the next meeting. A quorum was present at the beginning of the meeting.

Public Comment

- John Worthington spoke on previous concerns he has shared with the Clallam MRC about the Meadowbrook restoration site, the project's history, the involvement of the Duck Club, and active federal investigations.

Approval of Minutes

- ***Nancy Stephanz moved to approve the August 2026 minutes, Alan Clark seconded. Jon Hamilton added that he had some minor edits (a misspelled name and a corrected job title.) Nancy Stephanz amended her motion to approve the minutes with those added changes. The motion passed with unanimous consent and the minutes were approved.***

Presentation

- *Amy Olsen – Research Scientist at Seattle Aquarium, Sea Otters (Enhydra lutris) in Clallam Bay:*

  Last year, Amy Olsen gave a presentation on sea otters in Clallam Bay for the MRC and she returned this year to give an update. Sea otters are a small mammal that evolved to withstand the cold waters of the Pacific Ocean and Strait of Juan de Fuca. They are voracious predators, although in kelp forest habitats they have been found to increase the number of small fishes, small crabs, small grazers and perennial kelps. Sea otters range from parts of California, Washington (WA), Canada, Alaska, over to Japan and Russia. In WA, Canada and parts of Alaska, otters were translocated and "brought back" after they were hunted to extinction. Washington's last native sea otter was hunted in 1910 near Willapa Bay. About 60 years later, sea otters were reintroduced in WA. About ten animals survived the translocation and founded the population today. Translocation

protocols have changed since this effort to make sure that animals are “happy and healthy and survive” when translocated into different areas.

The Seattle Aquarium has been participating in an annual population survey (multi-day event) organized by US Fish and Wildlife and WA Department of Fish and Wildlife since 2001. This count includes aerial survey methods via a small plane using photography as well as volunteers who count on-the-ground throughout the otter range. The results from the annual population surveys show that sea otter populations have been increasing by about 10% each year. This means there is enough food supply for these animals as their population grows. The last few years of the survey, the counts show some fluctuations. This was because of various challenges, including weather and plane survey changes that caused high and low numbers to be recorded, not necessarily from actual changes in populations.

The sea otters in WA have expanded their range after the translocated population reached equilibrium levels in the central area in the mid-1990s. They first expanded north and east, then in the mid-2000s they expanded southward. In 2022, otters were moving offshore and, in 2024, a group of otters were discovered in Clallam Bay.

Seattle Aquarium has been monitoring otter foraging success and intensity since 2010. The goal is to create a large database and provide information on the status of populations and relative abundance of prey. They use spotting scopes to record diving behavior, type of prey, pup feeding, etc. They have three range designated groups (North, Core, South) with 5,901 observations, and 37 distinct prey items (including an unidentified category). Looking at Clallam Bay, the highest otter count was 39 individuals, and the most common food sources are clams and tubeworms (also called feather duster worms). While the tubeworm numbers are surprising, it may be because the group is comprised of young males, who are exploring the new environment. Seattle Aquarium has found that across the entire range, crabs are the highest consumed biomass, however prey composition is different across the three ranges. Other analyses show that WA sea otters have not hit carrying capacity and therefore there is enough food and area for the otters to expand their ranges.

The Seattle Aquarium has started to use a small drone to do aerial surveys (called OTIS). It has a thermal camera which makes it easier to identify the otters from videos and photos. This has increased their ability to find and count otters they normally would not be able to see with just binoculars. This will help give more accurate numbers of individuals at certain sites, such as Clallam Bay.

Amy Olsen answered several questions from the MRC. She talked about tracking individual otters, otter activities when on land, how to collect data from the public

seeing otters (via Googleforms, MyCoast, iNaturalist, apps, etc.), otter group demographics (all males or all females), kelp, urchin and otter interactions, how to identify sea otters versus river otters, how the MRC can help, etc. There was also some discussion on the use of drones, specifically logistics, protocols, and regulations.

New or special business

- *River and Ocean Film Festival 2026: Tabling opportunity:* Chase O'Neil asked if anyone on the MRC would be interested in tabling and handing out materials for this evening film festival on October 2nd, in Forks. Chelsea Korbulic plans to attend and can hand out materials. Anyone who is interested can reach out to Chase.

Announcements

- *SoundToxins: WA Department of Fish and Wildlife's Organization of the Year for 2026:* LaTrisha Suggs extended a congratulations to the program for winning Organization of the Year. Nancy Stephanz shared background on the program. Sea Grant and University of Washington run SoundToxins, which is an early warning system for harmful algal blooms. They have about 34 sampling sites. When the volunteers see the toxin-producing phytoplankton increase at a local site's waters, they send the data to the Department of Health, who then disseminates that information to aquaculturists and recreational harvesters. Nancy mentioned it's a very fun program for volunteers and it feels different each week.
- *Annual Project Reports are due September 30th:* This item was just a reminder that annual reports are due at the end of the month. Chase O'Neil is working with project leads to get these reports done and turned in.
- *WA Department of Ecology is proposing amendments to the Shoreline Management Act: public hearing October 15th:* Jon Hamilton suggested this item. The MRC does not plan to make a comment as a group, but LaTrisha Suggs encouraged individuals to make their own comments. Alan Clark mentioned that Northwest Straits Commission has made comments, specifically on kelp forests and creating restrictions to protect kelp. Alan will send those comments to Chase O'Neil who will distribute them to the group.
- *Northwest Straits Commission update – Alan Clark:* The Northwest Straits Commission had a meeting in August and Alan will be going to a in-person meeting this Friday. At the August meeting, there was a presentation about harmful algal blooms that focused on the economic side of the issue.

Committee and Project Reports

- *Project leads report only if an update is needed:*
    - No updates.
- *Education and Outreach subcommittee:*

- Fall Festivals 2026: Nancy Stephanz gave a reminder to make sure that there are always two MRC members signed up for each festival shift as it can cause problems when someone gets sick and can't come. Overall, it seems StreamFest went well.

- *Advisory subcommittee:*
  - Clallam County Comprehensive Plan edits: LaTrisha Suggs explained that the advisory subcommittee created a draft letter, which was attached to the meeting agenda, to address Commissioner Ozias' request for MRC comment on the current County Comprehensive Plan draft. The subcommittee wanted to share the letter with the whole MRC to seek comments/changes as well as approve the letter.

    The letter prompted much discussion. Brian Hilderman asked a follow-up question about what the term "Best Available Science" means. LaTrisha and Rebecca Mahan explained that this information usually comes from state agencies' (such as WA Department of Ecology and Department of Fish and Wildlife) guidance documents. It was decided that a definition for this term would be added to the letter. Brian also asked where sea-level rise had been observed along the coast, clarifying that he has seen erosion, but not sea-level rise. Ann Soule explained that there are studies showing sea-level rise occurring, but Brian said he is concerned with work that involves predictions. LaTrisha mentioned that sea-level rise studies are produced from models, where scientists input data (such as temperatures, glacier melting). Chelsea Korbulic offered to share a link to a good mapping tool from the NOAA Coastal Hazards office that shows past, present, and future sea-level changes. Rebecca mentioned that FEMA also has these. Brian then asked what policies are being made by Clallam County to mitigate climate change and sea-level rise? For example, adding a geologist or biologist review on development projects such as home building. Rebecca mentioned that Chase O'Neil and herself (County biologist staff) do look over these documents already. Rebecca also said that LIDAR can help give information about sea-level rise, and that these models contain a variety of data to make these predictions. Brian mentioned that he has not observed sea-level rise at his own home, and Rebecca said that not all areas are experiencing the same level. Brian mentioned that he believes erosion is occurring based on his observations in his neighborhood. Dann May explained that uplift is exceeding sea-level rise in some areas, however in other areas sea-level rise is greater. Ann Soule mentioned that sea-level rise is occurring in some areas and that many landowners would benefit from being informed about this before they build, which is what the letter emphasizes. Ann further explained that the point of the letter was to reinforce what the County was saying in the Comprehensive Plan

because the lifespan of the document is 20 years, a timescale in which sea level is predicted to rise, storm intensities will increase and glacial mass will decrease. Brian then asked if these policy changes could impact the cost of building a house. Alan Clark mentioned that there are locations where homes should probably not be built (and shouldn't have been built historically) due to the various hazards that exist. Alan lamented that the County is in a tricky situation because people will not be satisfied either way, e.g., they can't build and these predictions are not true or they can build, but then homes are destroyed because the predications are true. He cited an example in California where homeowners may sue the County after hurricanes destroyed their homes. LaTrisha mentioned these ideas are already laid out in the County Comprehensive Plan, the letter is just emphasizing these points and that it is up to the elected leaders to develop and pass code. Commissioner Mark Ozias mentioned that he appreciated this conversation. He said that there is a lot input from various advisory boards, members of the public, and professionals in different fields. Additionally, there are multiple levels of review. He explained that the Planning Commission spent months going over the Comprehensive Plan. The plan will next go to the County Commissioners, who look at the various inputs broadly with input from the Director of the Community Development Department. He mentioned that the County Commissioners value the advice from all the advisory boards and realize that it comes from a specific perspective. For example, while the cost of building a home may not be within the purview of this committee, there are other groups and members of the public engaging in the Comprehensive Plan editing process who can speak to that perspective.

At this point the meeting had gone over the allotted meeting time and LaTrisha asked for a motion to extend the meeting time. Ann moved to extend the meeting time to 7:20pm, Alan seconded. ***The motion passed with unanimous consent and the meeting was extended.***

LaTrisha asked if there were any additional questions on the letter. She mentioned that the final section is unfinished and would include an attachment from a previous document submitted. There were no more questions, so LaTrisha called for a motion to approve the letter. Ann made a motion to approve the letter with the changes discussed during the meeting. Jeff Ward seconded. LaTrisha asked for further discussion and comments, but there were no further comments. Members voted by raising hands. All voting members present voted to approve the motion except for Brian Hilderman who abstained from voting but later clarified (in an email) that he voted against the motion. ***The motion passed with eight votes in favor and one opposed. The letter will be signed by Chair LaTrisha Suggs and sent to Commissioner Mark Ozias.***

Discussion of next meeting date and agenda

- *Next meeting:* The next meeting will take place on Monday, October 19th.
- *Call for new agenda items:* Please reach out to executive team and Chase O'Neil for any suggestions.
    - Allyce Miller suggested inviting Dr. Ian Miller, a Coastal Hazard Specialist from WA Sea Grant, to speak at a monthly MRC meeting on coastal trends.

Public Comment

- John Worthington gave a public comment on salmon restoration work related to North Olympic Peninsula Lead Entity as well as the success of the Jimmycomelately project.
- Joe Schmitt, previous Chairman of the Clallam County MRC and representative for the Northwest Straits Commission, said he enjoyed the robust discussion about the letter but believes the committee has moved away from its mission statement. He recalled the successes from projects on forage fish, Olympia oysters, pinto abalone, and more. He does not believe there should be a focus on climate change and modeling results.

Good of the Order

- No items discussed.

Adjourn

Chair LaTrisha Suggs adjourned the meeting at 7:24pm.