



**STATE ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT  
DETERMINATION OF SIGNIFICANCE (DS) and  
Request for Comments on Scope of Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)  
for the Periodic Update to the Benton County Comprehensive Plan**

**Date:** March 21, 2025

**Lead agency:** Benton County Community Development Department, Planning Division

**Agency Contact:** Michelle Mercer, Planning Manager

**Agency File Number:** EA 2025-006

**Description of Proposal:**

Benton County is undertaking a periodic update to its Comprehensive Plan (“Plan”) to cover the 20-year period through 2046, which per RCW 36.70A.130(5)(c) must be completed by June 30, 2026. The Plan is the County’s primary policy and planning document for guiding growth and development in unincorporated Benton County. The current Plan consists of goals, policies, and analyses of the following elements and sub-elements: land use, natural resources (water, resource lands, critical areas and shorelines), economics, housing, transportation, parks and recreation, capital facilities and utilities. Each of these elements will be updated along with the addition of a new element – climate change/climate resiliency.

As part of the periodic update, the County must evaluate how it can achieve its 20-year (2046) growth targets for population, housing units and employment. These growth targets are based on guidance from the Washington State Department of Commerce and developed following a collaborative process with the cities. The updated document will contain vision, goals and policies; analyses of future growth for residential, commercial, industrial, and new energy facilities; and updates to the elements described above to comply with the GMA. The Plan is also required to be consistent with the Countywide Planning Policies.

**Location of Proposal:** Not applicable; non-project

**Applicant/Proponent:**

Benton County Community Development  
Planning Division  
102206 E Wisser Parkway  
Kennewick, WA 99338

**Programmatic EIS Required:** Benton County has determined that this proposal is likely to have a significant adverse impact on the environment. A programmatic environmental impact statement (EIS) is required under RCW 43.21C.030 (2)(c) and will be prepared. A programmatic EIS is different from a project-specific EIS. In a programmatic EIS for the Plan, there is not a specific development proposal being evaluated in detail; rather, different alternatives that represent potential future development patterns are qualitatively evaluated based on several different factors to determine which alternatives have more or less impact on the affected environment. More detailed environmental evaluation of development projects would build off the Plan programmatic evaluation and occur at the time of application.

**Preliminary Draft Alternatives:**

The County has formulated three preliminary draft alternatives for evaluation based on future growth expectations.

*Alternative 1, No Action/No Change in Current Growth Patterns:* This alternative would maintain the County’s existing Comprehensive Plan without modifications. This means growth would be expected based on past trends, but no land use changes (densities, designations, etc.) or regulation changes (e.g., zoning) would occur to accommodate this growth. Additional affordable housing would not be provided in the unincorporated County. Alternative 1 plans for approximately half of the renewable energy projects approved or under review by the Energy Facility Siting Evaluation Council (EFSEC) for Benton County. Limited policy changes may be needed to maintain consistency with the GMA and the Countywide Planning Policies.

*Alternative 2, Aggressive Growth Target with Emphasis on Affordable Housing, Industry and Energy:* This alternative would allow for changes in the Plan to accommodate the 20-year (2046) population growth projection for Benton County, based on Washington State Office of Financial Management (OFM) projections as refined in coordination with the cities. In this alternative, growth would occur based on past trends plus additional multi-family housing/more affordable housing in higher density designated areas and UGAs to meet housing requirements, and the designation of several additional industrial areas. This Alternative would plan for robust renewable energy growth and designate an Energy Overlay Zone. All the renewable energy projects planned for Benton County through the EFSEC review and approval process would be planned for and included in this alternative, along with smaller-scale energy projects permitted outside the EFSEC process. This alternative will consider land use, policy and regulatory changes to maintain consistency with the GMA and the Countywide Planning Policies and to accommodate growth.

*Alternative 3, Moderate Growth Target with More Limited Emphasis on Industry and Energy:* This alternative would allow for changes in the Plan to accommodate the 20-year (2046) population growth projection for Benton County, based on Washington State Office of Financial Management (OFM) projections as refined in coordination with the cities. This alternative would capitalize on other development opportunities for smaller renewable energy projects and the addition of some industrial designated lands (but less than in Alternative 2). Additional affordable housing would not be provided in the unincorporated County under this alternative. Approximately half of the renewable energy projects planned for Benton County and approved or going through the Energy Facility Siting Evaluation Council (EFSEC) approval process, but not yet under construction would be included in this alternative. This alternative will include a shrubsteppe mitigation program to preserve shrubsteppe habitat and other priority habitats in the County. It will also address other land use and policy changes to maintain consistency with the GMA and the Countywide Planning Policies and to accommodate growth.

Topics and potentially significant impacts that will be addressed related to these alternatives are anticipated to include Earth; Surface Water; Plants and Animals; Land Use; Shoreline Use; Population, Housing, and Employment; Parks and Recreation; Transportation; Public Services and Utilities; Climate, Air Quality/GHG, and Heritage Conservation (cultural and historic resources).

Benton County will determine the full scope of the EIS, including the range of alternatives to be analyzed, at the end of the scoping period after comments are received and reviewed. Elements of the environment are listed in the SEPA rules (WAC 197-11-444). Not all elements of the environment outlined in WAC 197-11-444 are expected to be included in the study.

This scoping period, beginning on the publish date of March 26, 2025, provides an opportunity for the public to help shape the topics that are covered and the alternatives that are evaluated in the EIS.

**Scoping:** Agencies, affected tribes, and members of the public are invited to comment on the scope of the EIS. You may comment on alternatives, mitigation measures, probable significant adverse impacts, and licenses or other approvals that may be required. The method and deadline for giving us your comments is:

<b>Deadline for Comments:</b>	Comments will be accepted through April 25, 2025. Mailed comments must be postmarked on or before April 25, 2025.
<b>Mailing address:</b>	Benton County Planning Division 102206 East Wiser Parkway Kennewick, WA 99338
<b>Email address for comments:</b>	<a href="mailto:Planning.Department@co.benton.wa.us">Planning.Department@co.benton.wa.us</a>

The county will be holding a public scoping meeting on April 8, 2025, at 6 PM in Prosser, WA at 620 Market Street (first floor of the Benton County Courthouse) to solicit comments on the alternatives and scope of the EIS. The county also anticipates holding additional public meetings following the development of the EIS alternatives in the fall of 2025/early 2026. Dates, times and locations will be available at <http://tinyurl.com/BCpublicnotice>.

Appeals: You may appeal this determination to the Benton County Planning Division no later than April 11, 2025, by written notice to 102206 E Wiser Parkway, Kennewick WA 99338. The fee for a threshold determination appeal is \$800.00. An appeal of the determination must be made in writing to the Benton County Planning Division and a public hearing will be scheduled and the appellant will be notified of the date, time, and place of said hearing. You should be prepared to make specific factual objections. Contact the Planning Division to read or ask about the procedures for SEPA appeals.

Michelle Mercer, Benton County Planning Manager  
102206 E Wiser Parkway  
Kennewick WA 99338  
(509) 786-5612  
[planning.department@co.benton.wa.us](mailto:planning.department@co.benton.wa.us)

Signature: Michelle Mercer

Date: 3/26/2025