

Orcas Power and Light (Foster Hildreth)

PUBLIC COMMENT — Clean Energy Siting Council 2026 Annual Report Draft
Recommendations

Submitted by: Orcas Power & Light Cooperative (OPALCO)

OPALCO — the member-owned rural electric cooperative serving approximately 16,000 electric meters across six inhabited San Juan Islands — submits the following comments in strong support of the Council's 2026 draft recommendations, with specific requests for refinement of Recommendations 8 and 3 to address island rural cooperative conditions that are not addressed in the current draft language.

We are submitting these comments in the context of an active, jointly funded Best Fit Renewable and Resilience Energy Siting Initiative — an OPALCO/San Juan County partnership to identify and designate lands for utility-scale solar, battery storage, and island microgrids. This study directly implements the Council's 2024 recommendation to "integrate clean energy development into local government planning and zoning" and the 2025 recommendation to "support local governments in clean energy planning." We welcome the Council's continued support as we implement these prior recommendations on the ground.

STRONG SUPPORT: Recommendation 8 — Agrivoltaics on Agricultural Land

We strongly support allowing agrivoltaic solar as an accessory use on GMA Agricultural Resource Lands. This is the single most important barrier to clean energy development in San Juan County.

Context: OPALCO's electricity demand is projected to grow 59% by 2045 — from ~220 million kWh/year to ~350 million kWh/year — driven by EV adoption, heat pump conversion, electric ferry charging, and desalination. Our BPA long-term power contract expires in 2027. Our submarine transmission cables are approaching capacity. There is no new hydroelectric capacity on the Columbia. Local utility-scale solar and storage is not optional — it is a reliability obligation under CETA.

San Juan County has ~13,897 acres of GMA Agricultural Resource Land. Of our 7,928 total cropland acres, 4,315 acres (54.4%) are in hay and forage at only \$185/acre — the lowest-value crop in the county and below the \$200/acre current-use tax threshold. These lands are farmed by operators with a median age of 63; 49% are 65 or older; average net farm income is -\$3,755/year. No successor generation can purchase this land at \$1.5–2M/parcel against negative operating margins. The succession crisis is structural, not cyclical.

Agrivoltaics on marginal hay and forage ground would simultaneously: provide \$800–\$1,200/acre/year in stable solar lease income (4–6x current hay returns); restore compacted, nitrogen-depleted soils; reduce evapotranspiration losses by 30–40% (critical as snow drought is projected in 7 of 10 PNW winters by 2050); and enable Agricultural Community Land Trust structures that permanently protect farmland while

funding affordable farmer access for the next generation.

SPECIFIC REQUESTS for the final Recommendation 8 language:

1. Island rural cooperative conditions: GMA's agricultural protections were designed for contiguous mainland farming regions. Island communities with no mainland grid backup and finite land area face compounded reliability and succession pressures that warrant tailored statutory treatment.
2. Cooperative-sponsored agrisolar: Explicitly recognize rural electric cooperatives as qualified agrisolar project sponsors on member-owned land, consistent with their Essential Public Facility status under RCW 36.70A.200.
3. Soil-class differentiation: Protect Class I–II prime farmland while allowing agrisolar on Class III–VII marginal land — consistent with New Jersey's model (2.5% statewide / 5% county cap on prime farmland) and Germany's DIN SPEC 91434 standard (66% yield retention required; already-marginal soils prioritized).
4. Agricultural Community Land Trust (ACLT) pathway: Enable ACLT entities and existing county land banks to serve as agrisolar project sponsors with streamlined provisional permits when solar lease revenue is structured to cross-subsidize affordable long-term farmer access — removing land from speculation permanently while generating clean energy.

STRONG SUPPORT: Recommendation 3 — BESS Programmatic EIS

We strongly support the BESS Programmatic EIS and request that its scope explicitly include:

- Island microgrid configurations: BESS systems designed for full islanding capability in communities served exclusively by submarine cable, where the BESS must sustain entire island load during mainland outage events (which can last 50–100+ hours per the April 2026 E3 regional grid study).
- Co-located solar + storage: Integrated agrisolar+BESS systems, not only stand-alone BESS — the most common island microgrid configuration.
- Ferry-dependent emergency response: First responder standards must account for communities where emergency services are constrained by ferry schedules.

SUPPORT: Recommendations 7 and 11

We support Recommendation 7 (Community Benefit Agreements) and request that CBA guidance explicitly recognize ACLT covenants and solar lease cross-subsidy arrangements as qualifying CBA structures for agrisolar on agricultural lands.

We support Recommendation 11 (Reducing Litigation Delays). Island communities are especially vulnerable to delay-as-strategy appeals given limited permitting capacity, small project site pools, and time-critical reliability gaps. We encourage expedited review pathways for projects on pre-designated Essential Public Facility sites (RCW 36.70A.200).

REQUEST FOR PRIORITY TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

San Juan County and OPALCO are already doing the work the Council's prior recommendations called for. We respectfully request that Commerce and Ecology designate SJC as a priority technical assistance recipient for resources flowing from these recommendations — particularly for the BESS PEIS scope development and any GMA agrisolar amendment implementation guidance.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

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