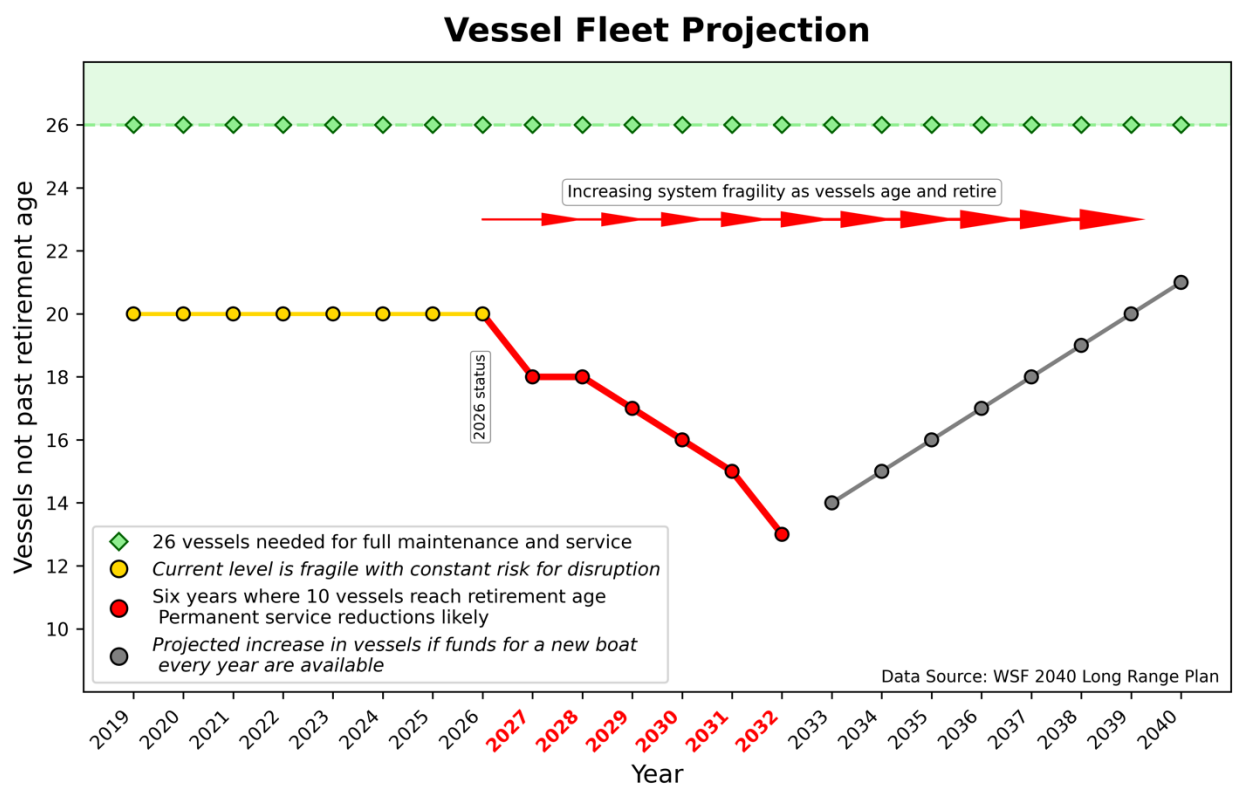


A Certain Crisis- by Ken Burtness, Lopez Island, San Juan County (Mar. 2026)

Testimony to the State House and Senate Transportation Committees in Dec. 2025 and Jan. 2026 has focused attention on Washington State Ferries with its critical shortage of vessels and perilous reliance on 11 vessels that are past or very near retirement age. Testimony rated the health of WSF to be fragile with current levels of service at high risk for disruption. By 2032, even with 3 new vessels, WSF will only have 13 vessels not past retirement age out of the 26 vessels needed to provide robust service levels and adequate maintenance for the fleet. In coming years, the additional needed vessel capacity will be inadequately filled by an ever-decreasing number of ever-aging and ever more unreliable vessels. WSF is heading towards collapse with permanent reductions in service.



Evidence of the mounting problems that WSF faced in the 20 years following the passage of Initiative 695 in 1999 was there for all to see but not acted upon. Today evidence of a future WSF crippled by a shortage of vessels is sounding an alarm, with a response that is far from adequate. A proposal from Gov. Ferguson to fund an additional three ferries was rejected in Feb. 2026 by both Transportation Committees, with one chair stating that “it is just too soon.” In fact, it is too late. With this decision the Rubicon has been crossed. The last five years have been very difficult for WSF. The coming ten years will see current service levels ever more impossible to maintain.

Washington State Ferries (WSF) is heading toward a preventable crisis. If we stay on the current path, the system will not have enough ferries to provide current service levels by the mid-2030s. The only way to avoid that outcome is to dramatically accelerate vessel construction, and to do it now.

From Golden Age to Structural Crisis

For decades, WSF was a robust system with a healthy fleet and strong public support. That changed after Initiative 695 in 1999, which triggered more than 20 years of inadequate funding. During that period, the fleet aged, maintenance was deferred, and new vessel construction slowed to a crawl.

In 2009, the legislature made a pivotal decision. Instead of funding new ferries to meet growing demand, it directed WSF to “look at demand management versus an asset management solution.” In plain terms, WSF was told to manage lines and reservations, and that no new boats would be built. The result is stark. By 2030, WSF will have built only seven new ferries in 30 years, when a marine industry standard of 30 years or less for the lifetime of a vessel and WSF’s own needs would have mandated 26.

This is not a normal backlog. It is a structural deficit in the fleet that now threatens the entire system.

Recent Progress Is Real – And Not Enough

Since 2020, state leaders have done a great deal to begin rebuilding WSF. Governors Inslee and Ferguson have both made ferries a priority and supported new funding. The legislature has committed significant money to new boats and for workforce recovery. Under Assistant Secretary Capt. Steve Nevey, WSF has built one of the strongest management teams in its history.

One major success is the workforce. Five years ago, WSF was short of qualified mariners, and staffing instability was a constant threat to service. Today, with new hiring and training programs funded by the legislature, staffing levels and training pipelines are in much better health.

These gains matter. They show that when the state decides to fix a problem in WSF, it can. But they do not change the central fact: WSF is running out of boats. No amount of good management, goodwill, or workforce strength can overcome a missing fleet.

The Core Threat: Not Enough Vessels

Five years into the rebuild, the greatest danger to WSF is the size and condition of its fleet. To keep routes operating, WSF has prioritized service over preservation for many years, which means vessels have not received the maintenance needed to reach their intended lifespan. The 2040 Long Range Plan states plainly that WSF has not met its preservation needs because of inadequate funding, a lack of relief vessels, and the constant pressure to keep boats in service.

Industry practice is clear. Ferries should be retired at under 30 years of age to ensure reliability and safety. Instead, WSF depends on vessels that are 40, 50, and soon over 60 years old. This is not sustainable.

The system now faces a pair of stark choices:

- Build roughly two new boats a year for eight years, or
- Continue on the current procurement path and accept a permanent reduction in service and an increasingly crippled ferry system as we progress through the 2030's.

The first option looks politically and logistically daunting. The second option is guaranteed failure.

The Issaquah Class: A Hard Limit

The Issaquah Class ferries sit at the heart of this crisis. They are already about 40 years old, a decade past the typical industry lifespan. The 2040 Long Range Plan notes that these vessels have not had enough out-of-service time or funding to complete required preservation work. As a result, they are already experiencing reliability problems and steel degradation that will shorten their service life.

The Plan recommends retiring the Issaquah Class early at about 50 years of age. The Ferries 2022 Capital Asset Management Plan goes further, saying WSF will need to retire them around 50 years because they lack both the maintenance history and structural condition to last longer.

The Issaquah Class also began with serious quality issues. Contemporaneous accounts describe poor-quality materials and labor, and weak oversight during construction. Mariners who worked on them saw clear signs of non-marine-grade construction. They were referred to throughout the fleet as the “Citrus Class” because they were all lemons. By contrast, older boats like the Hyak and Elwha, which were better built, still had to be retired at 52 years due to the same kinds of structural and reliability problems.

If we assume the Issaquah Class gets the same maximum lifespan as the Hyak and Elwha—52 years—the first will have to retire in 2031 and the last in 2034. That is a loss of six vessels in just a few years.

Projections indicate that WSF will receive only three new vessels by that time. That would leave a fleet of 18 boats. Five of those will be over 60 years old and on the cusp of being forced out of service. This is a realistic, conservative assessment, not a worst-case exaggeration. Any planning that assumes the Issaquah Class can run past 50 years is a gamble with the entire system. Eleven out of the 21 vessels that WSF has now will be at or past retirement age in 2032. Any planning that assumes these 11 old vessels can carry WSF through the 2030's given the current outlook for new vessel procurement is not tenable.

Where Current Plans Lead

In Feb. 2026 the House and Senate Transportation Committees rejected Governor Ferguson's proposal to fund three additional ferries. This signals a certain crisis ahead for WSF with no solution in sight even if projected out to the end of the current WSF Long Range Plan in 2040.

With this decision to further delay building necessary boats, WSF procurement history and a realistic assessment of future procurement point to at most eight new vessels built between now and 2040. With 11 of WSF's oldest boats being retired by then, WSF would

have a fleet of 18 boats in 2040. The 21 boats currently in the fleet are not enough to provide the level of service Washington needs, especially considering maintenance requirements and the need for relief vessels.

Recent testimony to the House and Senate Transportation Committees in December 2025 and January 2026 do show an important shift in tone. There is growing recognition that WSF needs more vessels and needs them soon. Governor Ferguson has publicly acknowledged that the state has under-invested in new ferries for decades and has pledged to make ferries a high priority.

But traces of “magical thinking” remain. In a January 6, 2026, article, a WSF spokesperson likened new investments to building a “deep bench” of ferries. The reality is harsher. At best, current and proposed investments may allow WSF to avoid forfeiting the game—to replace enough old, failing vessels that the system does not collapse outright.

That is not the same as restoring a healthy, resilient fleet.

The Maintenance Death Spiral

The 2040 Long Range Plan makes the underlying pattern clear. WSF is stuck in a cycle where:

- Preservation and major repairs are underfunded.
- There are too few relief vessels, so boats stay in service when they should be in the yard.
- Maintenance time is limited to eight weeks per year per vessel, when 12 weeks are needed to achieve a 60-year life.
- Even those eight weeks are hard to provide because the fleet is too small to cover all routes while boats are out of service.

Eagle Harbor maintenance facility is constrained by space, workforce, and neighborhood limits. Commercial shipyards in Puget Sound are also limited, and WSF must compete with other customers for capacity. State law that requires use of shipyards with approved apprenticeship programs further narrows options.

Because a maintenance backlog has built up over decades, even large new maintenance investments cannot instantly restore the fleet. There is too much work and not enough time and space to do it. The Plan includes a graphic showing how backlog, risk, unplanned events, lack of relief vessels, shipyard constraints, and budget limits all feed each other. It is, in effect, a death spiral for the fleet.

When the 2040 Plan was written in 2019, it assumed that by 2032 WSF would have acquired eleven new vessels and retired six of its oldest boats. That scenario is already a forgotten fantasy. Instead, by 2032 WSF will have only three new ferries, none of those six old vessels retired, and all 21 current vessels pushed through another 13 years of hard service without adequate preservation.

Warnings that were once theoretical have become immediate alarms. The spiral has tightened. The system is closer to failure.

What Doing Nothing Really Means

If WSF continues its current vessel procurement path, the consequences are clear and severe.

- The Bremerton–Seattle route will have to be reduced to one boat permanently to reduce strain on the aging fleet.
- The Triangle Route will be permanently cut to two boats.
- The Anacortes–Sidney route will not return.
- The San Juan Islands and Vashon Island will continue to bear heavy social and economic costs from inadequate ferry service.
- As the 2030's progress it will become ever more impossible for WSF to provide reliable service even at this reduced level.

In effect, the state will have chosen to accept a crippled ferry system as the new normal. The ultimate bill will still be paid—through lost economic activity, disrupted communities, and daily hardship for residents and businesses who depend on ferries.

The Only Viable Path: Create a New Reality

WSF did not pay its “bill” for 20 years. The cost of that neglect, with interest, is now due. We can pay for it in two very different ways.

One way is to do the minimum, fund a slow trickle of new boats, and try to hold the system together with emergency repairs and service cuts. That leads directly to a smaller, unreliable system that cannot support the state's needs.

The other way is to create a new reality. That means:

- Committing the billions of dollars needed to build new ferries at a pace that matches retirements and restores a margin of safety.
- Targeting something close to two new vessels per year for at least eight years.
- Expanding maintenance and shipyard capacity or buying time for the existing fleet by bringing new vessels online sooner.

This will not be easy. The economic, political, and logistical barriers are real. But they are not as catastrophic as allowing the state's marine highway system to fail.

The evidence is there in the 2040 Long Range Plan, in capital and maintenance reports, and in testimony to the legislature. It is reinforced by the lived experience of mariners who have served WSF for decades. Anyone who reads these documents, looks at the timelines, and does the math will come to the same conclusion.

For the last 26 years funding for new vessels necessary for WSF to maintain a healthy system has not been available. With the Feb. 2026 rejection of Gov. Ferguson's proposal to fund an additional three vessels that pattern continues. The current state of WSF is rated as fragile with current levels of service at high risk of disruption. That will worsen as vessels age. WSF has maintained current levels of service only by extending the lifespan of its vessels past the industry standard of 30 years to 40, 50 and now nearing 60 years. This cannot continue. In the 2030's WSF will break.

The choice is not between spending a lot or spending a little. The choice is between paying now to rebuild the fleet or paying later with a broken ferry system and the damage it will inflict on communities, workers, and the state economy.

The time to decide is not in the 2030s. The time is now.

Ken Burtness Background

The family of Ken Burtness has been in San Juan County since 1888 when his ancestors Cynthia and Louis Hix purchased property around what is now known as Hix Bay on Shaw Island. Ken has lived on Lopez Island for 48 years. The San Juan Islands and its people are beloved by him and are an intrinsic part of who he is.

Ken's connection with Washington State Ferries started the day he was born as his grandfather, Capt. Earl Fowler, was one of WSF's original captains in 1951. Ken started work with WSF in 1970 at the age of 16, working for several summers before starting a full-time career in 1978, working mostly in the San Juan Islands, retiring in 2008 with his last 15 years as Captain. His career at WSF defines who he is in much the same manner as his connection to the San Juan Islands.

Ken has been active to this day advocating for both the San Juan Islands and WSF through membership on the San Juan County Ferry Advisory Committee for the past 10 years and the FAC Executive Committee for the past two years. His knowledge of the San Juan Islands and WSF is both historical and up to date. It is both broad based and detailed. He has great concern that both the San Juan Islands and WSF will be crippled in coming years by a fleet that is not adequate to provide necessary ferry service.