


Fall 2024

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Recommended Citation

Moscato, Derek, "Sport and Sustainability: Perspectives from Cascadia & FIFA 2026" (2024). *Border Policy Research Institute Publications*. 142.

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Sport and Sustainability: Perspectives from Cascadia & FIFA 2026

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SUMMARY

This border brief, part of a larger study focused on FIFA 2026 in Seattle and Vancouver, and the larger domain of cross-border sport in Cascadia, **examines sport and sustainability in the borderlands region.** It connects global sports such as the FIFA World Cup as well as professional teams in Seattle and Vancouver to many of the themes driving sustainability practice in 2024, including building standards, transportation planning, emissions benchmarks, and community programming. To this end, it draws from semi-structured in-depth interviews with leading sport executives from FIFA organizers in Cascadia to determine prominent areas of attention, and to assess how the intersection of sport and sustainability emerges within regional and cross-border contexts.

INTRODUCTION

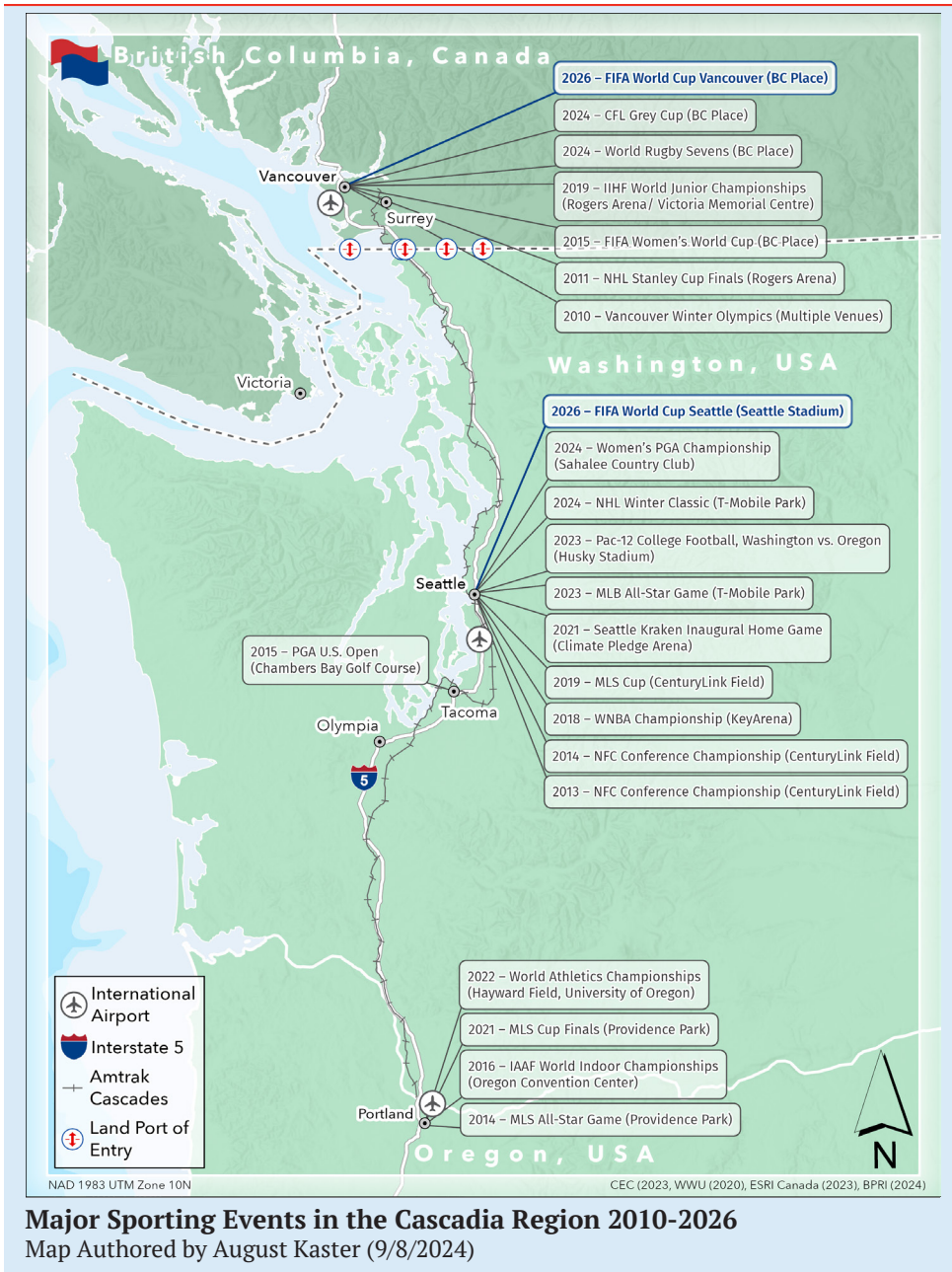
North America's hosting of the FIFA World Cup in 2026 promises a global showcase for the highest level of international soccer as well as the 16 host cities in Canada, Mexico, and the United States. For the metropolitan regions tasked with staging soccer's signature event, FIFA offers new opportunities but also challenges, including tourism, economic development, and the oversight of security and transportation. Yet sustainability has emerged as a growing focus for FIFA organizers, just as it has for senior leaders of other professional and international sporting programs. This is especially true in the cross-border Cascadia region, where the FIFA host cities of Seattle and Vancouver have forged a longstanding leadership role in the sustainability sphere, including areas such as environmental monitoring, urban planning, transportation, and architecture.

To assess this crossroads of sport and sustainability, this report looked to two domains: *1) the organization of the FIFA World Cup, which will take place in 2026 in both Seattle and Vancouver; and 2) examining best practices of cross-border sport from existing professional enterprises in the Cascadia region. This includes teams from the National Hockey League, the Canadian Football League, the Western Hockey League, and other high-profile sporting organizations from the Cascadia region. It also includes lessons learned from Vancouver's hosting of the 2010 Winter Olympics.*

The Cascadia region is increasingly a hub for national, cross-border, and global sport. During 2023 and 2024, the region will have hosted major events such as the NHL Winter Classic, the MLB All-Star Game, the CFL Grey Cup, the Women's PGA Championship, and the World Rugby Sevens. The nexus of athletics, fan experience, media coverage, and event planning that these events represent is increasingly viewed through lenses of sustainability and legacy-building for the region. This larger trend is likely to experience further momentum with the arrival of FIFA to Cascadia's largest metropolitan regions of Seattle and Vancouver in 2026.

SPORT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability embedded in sport provides a lens for understanding an emergent green ethos that permeates international events like the World Cup and Olympics, connecting sport to sustainability through event logistics and through team- and league-based advocacy. This echoes the view from sustainability researchers that two prominent potential roles for sporting entities are to reduce their ecological footprint and to raise environmental awareness.¹ Sport management scholars Brian McCullough, Michael Pfahl, and Sheila N. Nguyen refer to this marriage of ecology and athletics as "the green waves of environmental sustainability in sport".²



METHODOLOGY

In order to better understand this phenomenon of sustainability embedded within Cascadia's realm of sport, the author conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with senior executives and administrators in Seattle and Vancouver who lead major professional sports organizations or international sports events. These entities include FIFA Seattle, the City of Vancouver (which is organizing FIFA Vancouver), the National Hockey League/Seattle Kraken, the Canadian Football League/BC Lions, and the WHL/ Everett Silvertips. The following key themes were identified:

- **Sustainability in international (FIFA/Olympics) vs. North American sport**

FIFA's arrival to North America in 2026, and its presence in the Seattle-Vancouver corridor, underscores the importance of global athletics at the regional and inter-regional levels. It also demonstrates the commonalities but also the differences between the presence of sustainability objectives in North American sport versus other continents. In Europe, for example, professional sport has taken its cues in this domain from national objectives, such as emissions targets. In Asia, it is commonplace to see events or teams looking to international benchmarks established by global organizations such as the United Nations. A case in point comes from the 2022 World Cup held in Qatar, where the host nation set an objective of carbon neutrality for the duration of the event, and an extensive arsenal of sustainability tactics to support this effort. This aligned with FIFA's commitment to the United Nations' Sports for Climate Action Framework, which advocates for principles of environmental responsibility, climate action, and sustainability. The presence of FIFA across multiple North America's cities in 2026 is expected to foster a larger message of sustainability that aligns with efforts taking place at the international level.

The cross-border Cascadia region has a rich history in convening, and innovating, in this area. For example, the Green Sports Alliance was founded by the late philanthropist and high-technology leader Paul G. Allen's Vulcan Inc. in conjunction with the Natural Resources Defense Council. The inaugural members of the alliance included Seattle's Seahawks, Mariners, Storm, and Sounders franchises, along with the Portland Trailblazers and the Vancouver Canucks.⁵

While the arrival of FIFA 2026 to Seattle and Vancouver represents the largest global sport event in Cascadia since the 2010 Winter Olympics, the professional sporting landscape has provided a number of milestones in between, including the establishment of new franchises for the region in the National Hockey League and Women's Major League Soccer, the growth of interest in regional teams at the professional, collegiate, and amateur level, and the hosting of signature championship games for various leagues, including the NFL, NHL, MLS, and WNBA. The critical mass of fan attendance, travel, stadium infrastructure, and international media attention associated with such events has fostered more widespread thinking about their sustainability ramifications, and the opportunities for associated legacy building.

- **Regional collaborations in transportation, architecture, and event management**

In anticipation of the FIFA 2026 events, sporting entities and teams are collaborating with each other, along with public and private agencies, to discuss and plan short- and long-term sustainability goals. For example, in June of 2024, FIFA Seattle’s organizing team convened a group of civic, environmental, and climate leaders at host venue Lumen Field to collaborate on an overarching sustainability agenda for the six World Cup matches that will be played in Seattle, but also to enact a larger legacy of environmental responsibility in the Puget Sound region. For example, leaders and planners discussed clean transportation solutions such as light rail and electric buses, minimizing the events’ collective carbon output, as well as waste-reducing efforts at the matches in areas such as food packaging and composting.⁴

Teams such as the Seattle Kraken play an especially salient role in this regard. The team’s sustainability leadership has engaged regularly with other sporting franchises in Seattle (such as the MLB Mariners and NFL Seahawks) but also teams to the south and north, notably the NBA’s Portland Trailblazers and the NHL’s Vancouver Canucks. The Kraken and Trailblazers in particular have shared best practices about stadium/arena operations, local transportation, and related event-day impacts. Thus, existing sporting franchises might be likely to collaborate intra-regionally based on facility type (i.e., indoor arenas geared for hockey, basketball, and concerts; or larger stadiums for football and soccer that host over 50,000 fans).

- **A regional history of global sporting events**

Senior executives and leaders of Cascadia sport look to the region’s rich history of hosting major sporting events, from the very recent (the NHL Winter Classic, the MLB All-Star Game, the CFL Grey Cup, the World Rugby Sevens) to sporting milestones from the past two decades (including, notably, the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympic Games but also NFL, NHL, MLS, and WNBA championship games). However, organizers are also cognizant of the legacy of non-sporting events that have left critical civic legacies. For example, FIFA organizers highlighted the larger metropolitan and regional impacts of events such as the 1962 Seattle World’s Fair, and Vancouver’s Expo 86. Like FIFA and the Olympics, these events drew significant numbers of tourists and visitors, and provided unprecedented media coverage and civic-building opportunities for the host cities, including cultural and recreational amenities. Like the World Fairs and Olympics, the 2026 FIFA events are seen as a potential catalyst for civic renewal in a variety of capacities, including sustainability.

- **Sustainability embedded in cross-border issues**

The sustainability theme is paramount not only on location at specific events. It permeates the regional and cross-border sports event economy. Sporting executives and leaders pointed to the environmental ramifications of sustainable regional travel such as rail, with several pointing to the long-term potential and renewal of the Amtrak Cascades service (which connects British Columbia to Oregon and beyond); as well as the important place of aviation, including regional and national airlines, but also key airports such as Seattle-Tacoma International Airport and Vancouver International Airport.

Another important dimension to this theme is the proposed high speed rail line, supported by the Cascadia Innovation Corridor, connecting Vancouver to Seattle and Portland. Some regional sports entities, such as the Seattle Kraken, have already provided formal endorsement for the rail line, while other sporting executives agreed that the network provides another means for Cascadia sports fans to follow their teams and engage culturally and economically with the region. Improved rail infrastructure is seen as benefitting the major urban centers of Seattle, Vancouver, and Portland, but would also enhance tourism, transportation, and environmental prospects for other large cities in the region such as Everett, Tacoma, and Spokane in Washington State; and Surrey, Victoria, and Kelowna in British Columbia.

- **Existing regional leadership in areas of sustainability and social impact**

The establishment of the Seattle Kraken expansion team in the National Hockey League serves as a prominent case in point for the cross-border region. The Kraken have provided Puget Sound with economic stimulus through the construction of the billion-dollar Climate Pledge Arena in downtown Seattle; and the staging of more than 50 largescale sporting events annually in Seattle Center. The team’s green ethos and social impact, marked by programs such as the One Roof Foundation, have been recognized by the National Hockey League and the larger sporting industry for leadership in key sustainability areas such as water conservation and energy efficiency. The Kraken’s home arena is named after The Climate Pledge, which represents a commitment from over 500 companies globally to meet net zero carbon targets by 2040. The arena’s goal is to be “the most progressive, responsible and sustainable arena in the world”.⁵

The Green Sports Alliance points to teams regionally and nationally embracing other benchmarks or certifications, including LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) and TRUE (Total Resource Use and Efficiency). The Green Sports Alliance has also developed its own standard for sports organizations called Play to Zero, which focuses on net-zero objectives for energy, water, and waste, and a broader theme of climate action.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Buoyed by the arrival of FIFA 2026 to Cascadia, this study analyzed interviews with a cross-border network of senior executives and event leaders to assess the broader regional, cross-border implications of staging a massive undertaking such as the FIFA World Cup. Within this realm of international and professional sport, sustainability emerges as a key point of focus. This is underscored by not only public messaging and statements about a commitment by teams and leagues to the tenets of sustainability, but also by specific actions such as FIFA Seattle's sustainability conference at Lumen Field, and also the growing integration of professional sports teams into regional sustainability efforts. Thus, while it still plays a role in community engagement and public relations, the practice of sustainability is firmly embedded within the larger domain of event operations and logistics, and it is increasingly seen as integral to an event or organization's legacy building. **A growing interest in the green waves of sustainability within sport, and the imminent arrival of FIFA to Vancouver and Seattle, points to the possibilities of Cascadia-wide sustainability initiatives such as cross-border environmental benchmarking and transportation initiatives.**

Major Cascadia-hosted events past and present—including the World Cup, the Winter Olympics, MLB All-Star Game, NHL Winter Classic, and CFL Grey Cup—are looked to as especially salient in that they present a critical intersection of sustainability efforts with fan experience, media interest, transportation coordination, technological innovation, and community impact. They also present a vehicle for showcasing best practices of sustainability, as such events are attended by thousands of fans, and are consumed through broadcast and social media by millions of fans nationally and around the world.

One paradox for local organizers is that, while Cascadia has been an innovator in sustainability within North America, both the U.S. and Canada have sometimes lagged behind other nations in adopting core sustainability principles. Yet sporting leaders from Cascadia recognize this gap, and view their role as not only embedding sustainability into major sporting events, but also modelling such efforts for other events and leagues across the continent.

The author wishes to thank the following research participants for their generosity of time and knowledge for this study: Michelle Collens with the City of Vancouver, Rob Johnson and Kendall Tyson from the Seattle Kraken, Roger McClendon of the Green Sports Alliance, April Putney from Seattle FIFA World Cup 2026, Zoran Rajcic from the Everett Silvertips, and Duane Vienneau of the BC Lions.

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