

Walla Walla County Conservation District

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Walla Walla Watershed – A Candidate for CSP

Larry Hooker, District Conservationist
Snake River Team, NRCS

This summer, Washington successfully funded its first Conservation Security Program (CSP) watershed. Authorized by the 2002 Farm Bill, CSP is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance to promote the conservation and improvement of natural resources on tribal and private working lands. Judging by the questions that have been coming through the local NRCS office, CSP is a program eagerly awaited by area farmers.

Recently, the Washington State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) identified a number of watersheds across the state that were felt to have potential for funding. Among them was the Walla Walla Watershed, which is located in two states and three counties. To assist in future selections, the local NRCS office was asked to provide broad resource information regarding the watershed.

It is unlikely that every watershed identified by STAC will be funded due to budget limitations. Perhaps our watershed may get funding in 2005, maybe not until 2006 or 2007. *But producers need to be ready if they want to participate and there are a couple of “trip wires” that will prevent you from even getting though the door!*

If you are a dry cropland operator, the first question is “Do you test your soil on a regular basis?” If you soil test, have the records to show it, and fertilize accordingly, you have made it past one of the trip-wires. If you are an irrigator, you will be asked, “Do you do soil-moisture testing and schedule irrigations?” If you follow an irrigation scheduling system, you have passed another of the trip-wires. Failing to pass a trip-wire means you are not even eligible to apply.

There is much more to the program—far more than can be described herein. But the key here is to be prepared. Don’t get hung up on one of the trip-wires!



Walla Walla County Conservation District

2004 Wildlife Farmers of the Year

The Strohmaiers

The late Gary “Stroh” Strohmaier and his wife Sherry have been named as the district’s Wildlife Farmers of the Year for implementing agricultural practices that nurture wildlife. The Strohmaiers have demonstrated that farmers can and do give something back to nature.

Over the past 35 years, the Strohmaiers applied several conservation practices to reduce soil erosion, improve water quality, and enhance habitat for wildlife. Early on, they gave wildlife a place to thrive by planting 200 poplar, cottonwood, and locust trees. These were hand watered and the now mature trees provide shelter for a wide variety of birds and perches for raptors. The Strohmaiers enrolled a significant portion of their farm in the Conservation Reserve Program, planting shrubs and installing wildlife guzzlers. The restored acreage closely resembles the native shrub-steppe of the Columbia Plateau. They were one of the first producers along the Touchet River to enroll in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. The 23-acre project is planted to native trees, shrubs, and grasses, providing a buffer between cropland and the waterway. When the buffer plants are established, the buffer will help protect water quality to benefit endangered fish species and provide shelter to many threatened and endangered land animals.

Sherry Strohmaier takes great pride in the abundance of resident and neo-tropical birds that depend on the Strohmaier farm for food and shelter. “We have a 60 acre pasture that is not sprayed, which helps the nesting birds. We have some old trees used by falcons, hawks, owls and all kinds of critters. For the first time ever we have a nesting pair of eagles on the farm.”

Gary “Stroh” Strohmaier dedicated his life to agriculture and stewardship. His legacy is the living, thriving wildlife refuge he and his wife created on their farm.



Mature trees, left, provide habitat.



Right, CREP project along the Touchet.

A Conservation Compliance Reminder

Larry Hooker, District Conservationist
Snake River Team, NRCS

Several issues have arisen this fall as producers work fields in preparation for planting the next crop. As work is being done, it is important to remember (and remind your tenant, lessee, tractor driver, etc.) that the fields designated as “Highly Erodible” have after-planting and /or over-winter cover requirements that must be met in order to maintain farm program benefits. This is true for both dryland and irrigated operations.

As I travel through the traditional pea/bean growing part of Walla Walla County, it appears that some folks have forgotten what the after-planting cover requirements are for winter wheat after peas or garbanzo beans. There are several options and none are extremely restrictive. A two-pass system of shanking in fertilizer and seeding is acceptable; so is no-till seeding (a one-pass treatment). Another option is relying on residue (500 lbs per acre or a 28% cover). Other options are using clods only (30% 3-5” clods) or a combination of clods and cover (250 lbs/acre and 15% 1.5” clods). Some of the fields I’ve seen appear to have been disced and would probably not meet any of these requirements.

Fall plowing is another issue that needs discussion. Quite a few operators fall-plow stubble to prepare fields for spring crops such as peas or garbs. Remember, the over-winter cover requirements after plowing prior to spring crops is 1000 lbs/acre (48% cover) or 30% 5-8” clods. In other words, plowing should be rough and trashy to meet requirements.

Walla Walla dry cropland operators are fortunate to have some flexibility in the approved “Alternative Conservation Systems.” An example is the Moldboard Plow option, which, if included in a conservation compliance plan, allows clean plowing in the WW-SF rotation once every 6-8 years on a case-by-case basis. There are strings attached. ***Fields must be designated by NRCS in advance and pre-approved.*** And a 20% increasing in over-winter cover is required in subsequent summer fallow years. Plowing HEL ground without prior approval could result in non-compliance and a reduction in benefits.

Finally, irrigators must be aware of rotational and cover crop requirements. Low residue crops such as potatoes in most cases must be followed by a cereal grain cover crop planted by October 20th and maintained until 10 days before spring planting. This is the requirement that has resulted in a number of non-compliance calls in recent years. For late dug spuds, broadcast grain on prior to digging and leave the ground undisturbed until spring.

Conservation Security Program Information Available On-line

Many common questions about CSP are answered at the NRCS website at the following link: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp/index.html>. There are fact sheets and general information on CSP, plus a self-assessment workbook. The following information is taken directly from the website:

- Participants in CSP are eligible to receive a payment and technical assistance for enhancing natural resources on working agricultural lands.
- CSP is open to producers who have practiced good stewardship on their agricultural lands and additionally provides incentives for those who want to do more.
- A staged, watershed-based implementation of CSP will be used to implement the program. Only those producers who have a majority of their land in a selected watershed are eligible to apply for CSP in that sign-up.



WALLA WALLA COUNTY READIES FOR EQIP SIGN UP

by Jim Loiland, Soil Conservationist, Snake River Team

The Snake River Local Working Group (LWG) has nearly completed the criteria for the next round of EQIP. The criteria for the 2005 EQIP are very similar to those in last year's sign-up. The LWG has identified wind and water erosion as a primary resource concern with surface and ground waters as close competitors. EQIP sign-ups are taken continuously, and the next ranking period is set for October 1, 2004 thru January 15, 2005. Producers with an active EQIP program in place will have a leg up on the scoring for the Conservation Security Program (CSP) (see page 2).

Walla Walla County producers wishing to apply *new and different* practices and technologies to their resource concerns should contact their local NRCS office. Cost share and incentive payments are offered on management, structural, and technical changes in a producer's operation.

Application procedures are easy. Just come into the office, fill out a short resource concern inventory, discuss how you will deal with the concern (management or practice change), identify the tract or field you wish to treat the concern on, and you're done for a while. The NRCS staff will then convert your resource concern inventory to a ranking system and determine what can be treated with the available funding. If you have signed up in the past, NRCS is requesting that you come in and reapply; if you have never signed up, come in and let's get started. EQIP is a relatively painless way to make changes in your operation that address your resource concerns. If you currently have or have had an EQIP contract in the past, you may be eligible to have another contract. If you address different resource concerns or have a distinctly different set of resource concerns which need to be addressed, EQIP may help. Contract obligations run from two to ten years, with most practices being eligible for a 50% to 75% cost share.

Funding last year in Walla Walla County went to Direct Seeding, Irrigation Conversions, and Irrigation Water Management. In other counties served by the Snake River LWG, funding was also used to move livestock feeding and confinement areas, fence riparian areas, develop springs and other livestock water sources, and improve range conditions. USDA/NRCS last year assisted Walla Walla County operators with over \$ 426,500 for changes in their operations.



Irrigation Efficiency Project Under Construction

Construction is underway on the Schwenke-Stiller Irrigation Efficiency Project, which will convert a gravity flow ditch, storage reservoir and hand-lines to a pump and pipeline pivot irrigation system. Construction involves converting over 1.5 miles of open ditch to an enclosed pipeline and outdated hand-lines to center pivot sprinklers. The completed project will save more than one cubic foot per second which will be put into trust to increase flows in Mill Creek. As with all Irrigation Efficiency projects, the landowners are putting the saved water in trust to benefit endangered fish species while maintaining their full water rights. The fourth Irrigation Efficiency project is scheduled for construction next spring.

Left, pipeline being installed

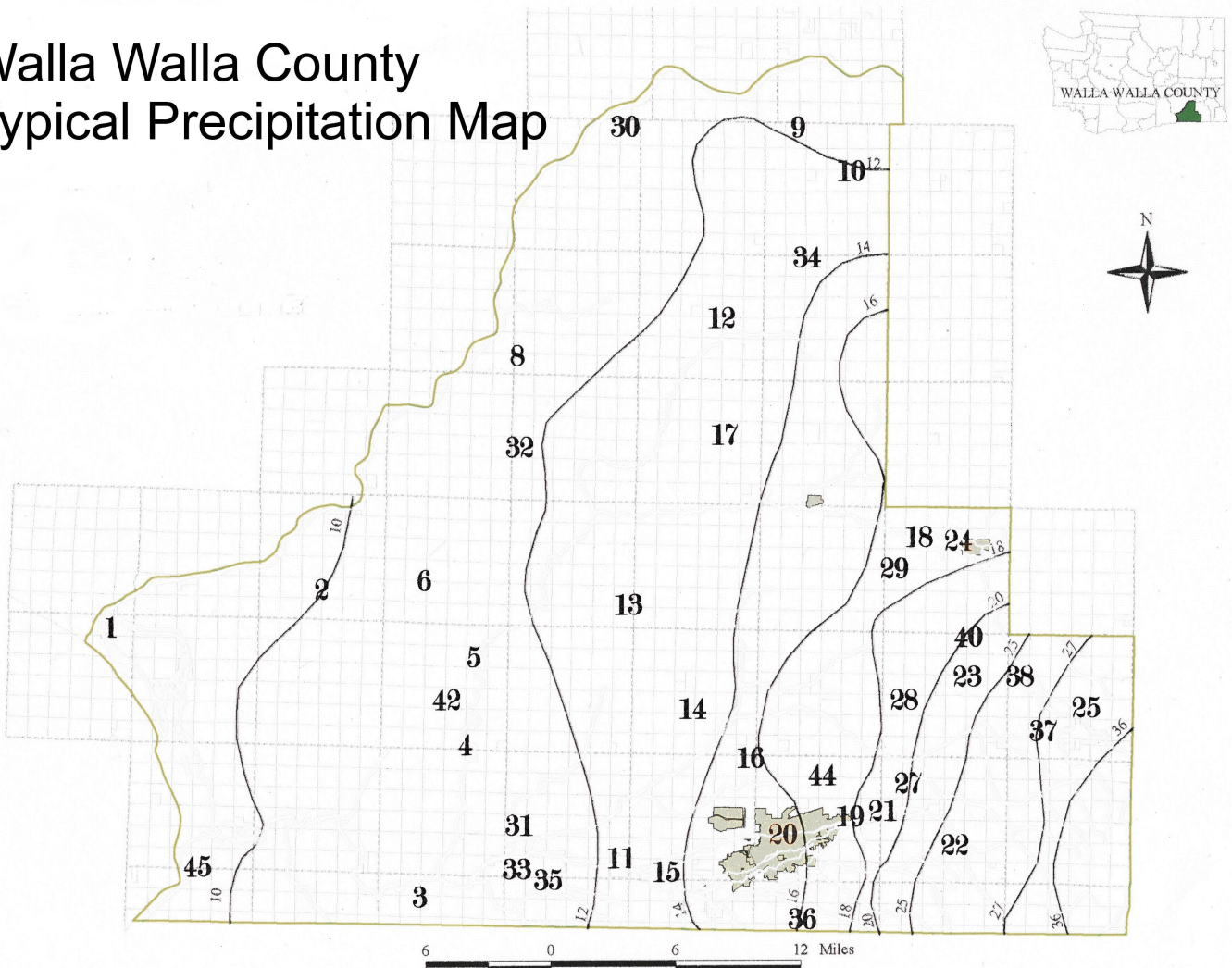
Rainfall Data for Walla Walla County



The rainfall data for the county has been compiled and the results are in the table below. The data reflects rainfall from July 2003 to June 2004.

#	Name	inches	#	Name	inches	#	Name	inches
1	Mike Roberts	10.28	16	Robert Lux Jr.	17.33	31	Robert Bauman	11.91
2	Van Walkley	11.85	17	Joe Thomas	13.36	32	Tad Cowell	14.35
3	Richard Garbe	12.91	18	Jack McCaw	19.98	33	L.L. Dodd	12.06
4	N/A		19	Nat. Weather Serv	20.63	34	Brent Tompkins	14.46
5	Steve Plucker	12.25	20	City Landfill	10.72	35	N/A	
6	Bart Owsley	10.13	21	Mill Creek Lake	19.19	36	N/A	
7	George Struthers	11.49	22	Pat Meiners	25.79	37	N/A	
8	Albert Chabre	9.97	23	N/A		38	N/A	
9	N/A		24	Terry Jacoy	19.67	39	N/A	
10	N/A		25	James Hansen	33.73	40	N/A	
11	Les Clark	11.81	26	N/A		41	N/A	
12	N/A		27	N/A		42	N/A	
13	Darrell Walters	14.93	28	N/A		43	N/A	
14	Kelly Farms	16.76	29	Howard Smith	20.83	44	Del White	22.18
15	Whitman Mission	16.33	30	N/A		45	N/A	

Walla Walla County Typical Precipitation Map



Thoughts and notes on Direct Seeding in Walla Walla County

by Jim Loiland, Soil Conservationist, Walla Walla Field Office

We are seeing lots of Direct Seeding and high residue conservation tillage in the county this fall. This will go a long way in protecting our precious soil resource.

However, we are also seeing an increase in errors of applying direct seeding that raises concerns. Just because you are direct seeding does not mean that you can abandon those practices that have proven themselves over the years. Remember that water will still flow down drill tracks regardless of the amount of residue or lack of soil disturbance. Therefore, do not abandon the practice of looping the corners. You still need to avoid running corners up and down the hill; they will erode. In addition, stay on or near the contour.

Generally speaking, all of the direct seed drills seem to be working as they were designed, however, with the mellow soil conditions this fall, most of the shank type drills are disturbing more soil than the prediction tool indicated. To achieve the practice standard for EQIP applications the disturbance cannot be greater than 66%. Several of our measurements are near that level. Slower speeds will help this.

As of this date, the direct seeded wheat really looks good. Grain is up and growing and stands are uniformly emerged. As always, a good wet fall will make things even better.



Doan Creek Restoration Project

In cooperation with the National Park Service Whitman Mission, the District has been assisting in an ambitious restoration of Doan Creek. Originally, this shaded meandering creek offered migrating fish spawning habitat and another route to reach Mill Creek. Decades ago, the creek's water was diverted from its natural course and sent to a straight irrigation ditch. Even as a straight, shallow irrigation ditch, steelhead have been attracted to this water source. Steelhead have been found in the ditch, apparently seeking habitat.

In 2000 Whitman Mission and the District began planning the restoration of the creek. This fall a "new" channel was excavated with meanders that are as close to the original creek route as possible. The site will be planted to native riparian species. The goal is to restore the creek to a healthy, natural state, enabling it to be better habitat for fish and wildlife. This fall's work is a major step towards that direction.

Walla Walla County Scoreboard

NRCS, FSA, and WWCCD

As of October, 2004

	Installed	Estimated Remaining	Sign-up status
Irrigation Diversion Fish-Screens	217	200	Funding Available
Flowmeters	49	700	Funding Available
Riparian buffers	112 miles 2223 acres	Open sign-up	Funding Available
Instream/Bank Stabilization	323	2,000	Taking Sign-ups
Fish Passage Barriers	3	5	Taking Sign-ups
Irrigation Efficiency On-Farm Projects: Pipelines:	487 acres 4.5 miles	1,000 acres 50 miles	Funding Available
Upland Soil Stabilization (FSA)	157,000 acres	closed	closed

District Programs and Progress

Priority Projects and In-stream Work: Many landowners have concerns about stream bank stability and erosion problems. Projects that address these concerns may be eligible for water quality improvement funding. If you have an eroding bank or any other situation that is detrimental to water quality, call the District. With enough projects, the District stands a good chance of getting funding to help landowners improve water quality and protect their soil resources.

CREP Program: The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program continues its steady growth in the county. Last spring's moratorium on new contracts has been lifted and new applicants are encouraged to apply. Over the past year, landowners used CREP cost-share to plant more than 217,000 trees and shrubs along area waterways in Walla Walla County.

Fish Screens: Funding is still available for screening irrigation diversions; however, this program is winding down. We have no new information regarding when the regulatory agencies will begin issuing citations.

Meters: All irrigators, large and small, are required to measure their water usage, even those who irrigate from shallow wells. If you do not have a flow meter or fish screen, you may want to take advantage of these programs while there is still funding available.

New Projects:

Lowden II Irrigation District: The district is working on the design for a project that will convert 5.4 miles of open ditch to a closed pipeline. It appears that the funding has been approved, though we do not yet have funds in hand.

Gose Street and Hofer Dam: The district applied for funds through the Salmon Recovery Funding Board to begin work on fish barrier removal at these sites, and the prospects look good for both projects.



Burn Program Blue Cards

At the Department of Ecology in Spokane, the burn team examines meteorological data every morning to determine whether conditions are favorable for burning. These forecasts take into account current air quality, wind speed and direction, and a host of other factors that influence whether smoke will rise and dissipate or hang low. The final consideration is *the number of acres left to burn*, and these are displayed on a large map at DOE. If there are too many acres left “on the board,” then DOE will meter the burning, contacting growers one by one to give permission to burn. As producers call in their burn reports, the board gets cleared, and DOE can issue more open burn days. The long and short of it is, submit those blue burn cards as soon as possible, at least within the 7 days required by the law. Your neighbors will appreciate it, as will the folks at DOE.



Inland Empire Natural Resources Youth Camp

Thanks to generous donations from past sponsors and the Tri-State Steelheaders, four area middle school students received scholarships to attend the Inland Empire Natural Resources Youth Camp. Every summer local students attend this weeklong camp held near Lake Coeur d'Alene and learn about conserving natural resources. If you know a student who would be interested in attending next year, contact Marguerite Daltoso at the district office.

Walla Walla County Conservation District Personnel

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