

# Walla Walla County Conservation District

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## Locally Led Conservation – How the Local Work Group Process Works

Larry L. Hooker, Agricultural Project Coordinator

Your voice is important! The long-term success of “locally led” conservation efforts was recognized and incorporated into the last Farm Bill. Many programs offered by federal agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Services Agency (FSA) are highly competitive. There aren’t enough dollars available to meet all the demands. So the agencies develop rules to “rank” project applications in an effort to get the most “bang from the buck.” For NRCS programs, this is done through recommendations from the Local Work Group (LWG) process – locally led conservation at its best. The Snake River LWG represents our area and consists of members from Asotin, Columbia, Franklin, Garfield, and Walla Walla Counties. Voting members represent federal agencies, elected or appointed representatives of units of government, or a recognized Native American tribe. The LWG decides which State agencies may participate and assign voting privileges. So by law (Federal Advisory Committee Act), the membership of your LWG includes representatives from each of the five conservation districts, each of the five county commissions, each of the five FSA county committees, each of the three FSA County Executive Directors, and the NRCS Snake River Team District Conservationist. Should they decide to participate, WSU Extension, WDFW, WA-DNR, WA-DOE, the Nez Perce Tribe and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation each get one vote. When there is full participation, there are 25 voting members. It is these folks who bring the needs of their stakeholders to the table when the ranking process is developed. Unfortunately, the conservation districts, NRCS, and the state agencies are the only consistent participants in this process.

You can have your voice heard by making your needs and desires known to your LWG representative(s). The WWCCD and WSU Cooperative Extension – Walla Walla will be hosting a meeting to solicit stakeholder input for the next Snake River LWG meeting. We will meet in the Extension conference room, 328 W. Poplar, Walla Walla on Wednesday, May 10<sup>th</sup>, at 7:00 p.m.

## Food Security Act (FSA) Conservation Compliance

Jim Loiland Soil Conservationist NRCS WW

It was not too many years ago that the NRCS staff in Walla Walla County, along with staff from other offices, conducted 100- 125 conservation compliance status reviews annually. While the required number of reviews has been reduced substantially in the past couple of years; Conservation Compliance is no less important.

I realize that the forms, developed in 1985 and 1990, (and revised many times) are not right on the top of your desk. I would hazard a guess that most of you will have to rummage deep into your files to even find them. Nevertheless, those requirements are still valid and are still the basis upon which randomly selected tract reviews are conducted.

In the last round of reviews, it appears some of your memories are getting a little foggy when it comes to remembering what conservation compliance requirements are for each tract you are farming. This past fall we had a couple of violations for failure to maintain adequate cover. Driving around the county this fall, I saw quite a few fields with fall tillage that would not meet the residue or roughness (clod) requirements of the Food Security Act. If you feel you must burn in order to establish your crops, remember that there are still some requirements for residue after the burn. Also, if burning is not part of your normal plan and you have an occasion where you feel you must burn, NRCS must be notified prior to the burn and NRCS must approve the exception to your FSA plan. Now is the time to review your FSA compliance plans, and familiarize yourself and your employees with the requirements. Our goal is to have everyone in compliance and not in trouble.

## ***Burning Issues***

Several open meetings have been held at the request of concerned growers after the District Annual meeting. During the burn session of the meeting, all agreed that compromise is needed to balance the concerns for fire safety during the fall, and growers' need to get fields burned in time for fall planting. Two public meetings have been held and participants addressed five issues.

The first is a request to change burn zones so they coincide with fire district boundaries. The burn zones were initially laid out by Ecology to reflect easily identified landmarks (such as Highway 12), communities, and normal wind patterns. The meeting participants suggested that Ecology redraw the burn zones to match fire district boundaries. This way, a fire safety decision on the part of a fire district will only affect operations within its boundaries. The main concern here is making sure growers are fully aware of fire district boundaries, as these boundaries are not set by physical landmarks such as roads.

The second issue addressed by the group involves burn bans. **Burn bans** may be imposed by Ecology for air quality reasons, or by fire districts or the County for burn safety reasons. A fire safety burn ban may affect a specific area within a burn zone, an entire zone, or the entire county. The group discussed modifying "burn bans" to reflect varying levels of fire safety. At the March meeting, the group identified three condition classes for agricultural burning. **General Ag burning** may be defined as any burn conducted during the year under normal conditions. **Restricted burning** may be defined as those times during the year when conditions warrant additional fire safety measures (see below). The decision to allow **restricted burning** would rest with fire districts and the county, as this is a fire safety concern. The third class is the total **Burn Ban**.

The third issue addressed by the group was a request that Ecology extend burn times so that growers could conduct back-burns prior to burning permitted acreage. Ecology agreed that this was a good idea, though growers would have to understand that initial burn times would be limited to back-burns. Ecology doesn't want large scale burning to occur until after morning inversions lift. While allowing small scale burning prior to that time may be feasible, it might also lead to smoky conditions if a grower misunderstands the burn call and sets off a large burn too early. It is to everyone's advantage to keep smoke complaints at a minimum, so any change to the burn hours will have to be carefully implemented.

The fourth issue discussed by the group concerns the number of acres allowed per grower. Some growers are requesting that rather than allow a large number of farmers to burn a smaller number of permitted acres, Ecology should allow fewer farmers and greater acreages. This request should be easier to implement, provided all agree that this is the preference of a majority of area growers.

Finally, for burn safety reasons the group agreed that a plowed burn barrier is more effective at stopping a fire than a disked burn barrier. Should the County Commissioners agree, this will be a requirement starting with the Fall 2006 burn season. These changes are tentatively scheduled to be reviewed and discussed by the County Commissioners on May 15 in an open forum. If unable to attend, call the district, and Frank Lane will make sure your concerns are brought to the attention of the Commissioners. You may also call John Fouts of the Ag Extension office who is interested in facilitating these discussions in any way possible.

### **General Ag. Burning:**

1. Bare earth or other natural barrier of 20' during spring burns, 30' during fall burns, with 95% of burnable material removed.
2. Tractor with disc on site prior to igniting burn
3. At least one person on site designated to patrol the perimeter for breakouts, and have the capability to extinguish fires that have escaped barriers.
4. Mobile water supply tank on site (small slip tank will meet the intent of this item.)

### **Restricted Ag. Burning**

#### **(Ag. Burning exception during burn ban):**

1. Bare earth or other natural barrier shall be 45' wide with 95% of combustible material removed.
2. At least two tractors with discs on site prior to igniting burn; grower responsible for bringing additional equipment for larger burns.
3. Adequate personnel on site to maintain visual contact with the entire perimeter at all times; these personnel shall have the capability to extinguish fires that have escaped the barrier.
4. All on-site personnel shall be able to communicate with each other via radio or cell phones.
5. Local fire district chief has to be contacted prior to each burn.

## Who decides?

The **Department of Ecology** is mandated by law and state statute to ensure air quality meets the standards of the State and Federal Clean Air Act and does not negatively affect the health of local residents. The state legislature gave Ecology the authority to restrict ag burning when such burning may impact air quality. Ecology has broad latitude to set burn times and regulate the number of acres burned per day based on air quality standards. They are also empowered to set the burn zone boundaries as needed.

The **County Commissioners** have the authority to further restrict burning based on public health and fire safety issues. For example, they may determine what the fire safety guidelines will be for our county at any time.

**Fire Districts** are staffed with volunteers who know their districts better than anyone else. They have local authority to ban open burning when necessary to protect public safety.

**Growers** and county representatives are attending local meetings and letting their opinions be heard. The safety guidelines described above were developed by them. Everyone will be abiding by the regulations developed at these meetings, so if concerned, contact the county Commissioner's office.

**Remember- the final decision to burn always remains with the individual lighting the match. The grower assumes all liability for the burn regardless of the decision posted by Ecology, the County or the fire department.**

## Next Meeting

To help the Commissioners make an informed decision on the burning rules, the County has scheduled an informational workshop on May 15<sup>th</sup> (date and time subject to change). The meeting will be open to the public; call the district for more information.



## “What Were All Those Little Orange Dots About?”

During the District's Annual Meeting and Election held January 31<sup>st</sup>, Blue Mountain Resource Conservation and Development Council coordinator, Lisa Naylor, engaged the audience with a set of orange dots and a long list of projects. The goal was to help the RC&D identify where the local non-profit organization should focus its efforts for the next five years.

The audience helped prioritize a list of issues that were generated from numerous public presentations and meetings. Large flip charts were prepared and posted around the meeting room. Each person was given six orange dots and asked to place them next to issues they felt were important. Sorting out the dots came later, but the results are interesting! Over 260 dots were cast. The resulting priorities for the participants at the annual meeting are as follows:

Topic	Issue	Percent
Community Development	<i>Employment Opportunities</i>	6%
Water Management	<i>Water Quality</i>	7%
	<i>Feed Lots (Confined Animal Feeding Operations)</i>	6%
Land Management	<i>Support value-added crops, locally grown crops</i>	11%
Fish and Wildlife	<i>Control noxious weeds</i>	11%
<b>Energy</b>	<b><i>Alternative crops, oilseed and biodiesel</i></b>	<b>17%</b>

The RC&D conducted similar sticker surveys with other regional groups, including those from Pomeroy, Asotin, Clarkston, and Columbia counties. Overall, the region is in agreement that the top priority for the RDC&D is Alternative crops. The region also prioritized the same five issues identified at the district annual meeting, in much the same order. There were some differences between Walla Walla County and others. For example, Fire Protection is in the top 10 for the region, but received no votes at the annual meeting.

The results of these polls will be used in developing the final five-year Area Plan for the RC&D which is expected to be completed by April 30. The Conservation District, Walla Walla County Commissioners, and the Port of Walla Walla will have final copies available. If you have additional comments or ideas, your feedback is encouraged! You may contact Lisa Naylor, Coordinator at [lisa.naylor@wa.usda.gov](mailto:lisa.naylor@wa.usda.gov), or call (509) 382-8969.

## COWS – BUT NOT IN THE CREEK

Larry Hooker, Ag Project Coordinator

If you are a livestock producer operating adjacent to a creek or river, you may soon be under closer scrutiny by federal and state agencies charged with monitoring water quality. If you have installed and maintain practices that keep livestock access to streams at a minimum (fenced buffers with hardened water gaps, filter strips, etc.), you probably have little to worry about. However, if your livestock have unrestricted access to riparian areas and streambeds, it may be time to look at your options.

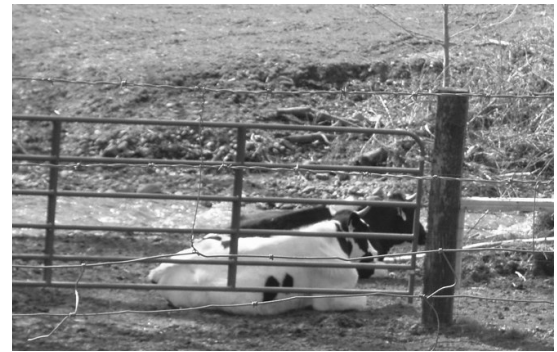
I expect it is common knowledge in the Blue Mountain area that representatives of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and WA–Department of Ecology have been visiting our neighboring counties. Generally, they offer some strong suggestions. In other cases, what they saw was severe enough to elicit a letter requiring corrective action. Such letters are backed by possible monetary fines. For the livestock operator, this results in a dilemma. Putting in buffers, fencing, and developing alternative water is expensive. Moving feeding areas and corrals is even more so. Who is going to pay for these actions? Do you dig in your heels and fight change? Do you get out of the livestock business? Or do you take the high road?

Some of the counties east of Walla Walla have taken the latter approach. Many livestock operators in Asotin and Garfield Counties have decided it is better to be proactive and do what is right by the impacted resources. To help pay for improvements, they have availed themselves of financial and technical assistance offered through their local conservation districts, NRCS, and FSA. These programs may include but are not limited to the following:

- Conservation Districts – water quality grants; implementation grants.
- NRCS – Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP); Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP); Conservation Security Program (CSP) where funded.
- FSA – Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP); Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CCRP).

To sit back and do nothing is not recommended. Let's follow the lead of some of our neighbors and take the proactive approach. The mutual cooperation between private irrigators in our basin and federal and state regulators over the last five years is a great example of what can be accomplished. Take the high road and be proactive.

But remember, there is a lot of competition for grant funds and federal dollars. All the NRCS programs are competitive. The FSA programs also have some restrictions. The word from here is – stay informed. Find out when the program sign-up dates open and close. Plan ahead and position yourself to be successful.



### Walla Walla County Conservation District Personnel

Guy McCaw, Chair  
Pat McConnell, Vice Chair  
Merrill Camp, Secretary  
Ed Chvatal, Treasurer  
Todd Kimball, Member  
Allan Ford, Associate

Rick Jones, District Manager  
Marguerite Daltoso, Admin. Asst  
Alison Bower, CREP Coordinator.  
Audrey Ahmann, Grants Admin  
Greg Kinsinger, Restoration Technician  
Frank Lane, Burn Program  
Kay Mead, Engineer Technician  
Larry Hooker, Ag. Project Coordinator

NRCS:  
Toots Ekholm, Soil Con. Tech, NRCS  
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