



Walla Walla County VSP

Feb. Work Group Meeting Minutes

Date: February 7, 2017

Time: 1:00 p.m.

Place: Conservation District
Conference Room

Board Members Present:

Jason Bulay, Blue Mtn. Land Trust
David Haire, CTUIR
Judith Johnson, Kooskooskie Commons

Jonathan Hellburg-Wilson, Ag. Community
Mark Klicker, Ag. Community
Tom Schirm, WDFW

Board Members Absent: Brian Burns, Tri-State Steelheaders, Robert Riley, Ag. Community, Brian Maiden, Ag. Community

Representatives of Other Agencies: Perry Beale, WA Dept. of Ag., Lauren Prentice WW County, Todd Kimball, County Commissioner

Also present:

Joanna Cowles, Lisa Stearns, Audrey Ahmann, Jeff Klundt, Renee Hadley, WWCCD:
Kevin Scribner, Laurie Parry, Eleanor Schroeder all of Anderson Perry

The meeting was called to order at 1:00 p.m. by Chairman Mark Klicker

Introductions: Mark Klicker asked all to reintroduce themselves: new to this meeting were Lauren Prentice, Laurie Parry, and Eleanor Schroeder

Minutes: The minutes were reviewed by those present. Judith Johnson moved and Jonathan Hellburg-Wilson seconded to approve the minutes, motion passed.

1. **VSP Regional Meeting:** Lisa Stearns attended the January 24th Ellensburg meeting. Chelan and Grant provided an update of their Work Plans. Of note:
 - a. Grant's outreach plan was detailed including lists of all the grower groups and other ag. organizations to be contacted
 - b. Chelan's plan includes how VSP benefits producers, which Hadley suggested be included in the Walla Walla plan
 - c. Chelan enumerated the pool of participants
 - d. Chelan's summary (a table) looked to be a good model to show goals and benchmarks.

The group discussed the general decline in participation for all grower groups and ag. organizations. Mark Klicker suggested the outreach plan include contacting past presidents of these organizations to set up meetings. Judith Johnson mentioned farmers' suppliers such as the Farmers Co-op and irrigation districts as good contacts for VSP outreach meetings.

2. Discussion: Work Plan development:

Hadley presented a table compiling work done since 2011. Another sheet shows the sources of the data. Much of the information comes from NRCS and the table is not complete; it is missing some work from other conservation groups.

The table included statistics from WSDA. The average farm size for the county was shown as 42 acres. Farms are defined as any place that sells more than \$1,000 worth of ag. products. Farms are also defined by ownership, so land managed by a single producer could be counted as many small "farms." Perry Beale mentioned that the governor wants to preserve and increase agriculture. Statewide, grazing acres are declining while cropland acres are increasing.

Renee Hadley explained that NRCS data is by county; NRCS does not release the location of acres in programs. NRCS will release the number of acres in any given program, but not where they are.

3. Critical Area: Wetlands.

Renee Hadley explained that wetlands must include hydrological soils and wetland plants. A “subby” patch of ground may have surface water but without hydrologic soil, it is not considered a wetland. Because of the overlap between wetlands and other critical areas (fish/wildlife habitat, aquifer recharge), protection of these benefit multiple areas. The map developed for VSP is based on the county maps and exaggerates the size of known wetlands because if drawn to scale, the wetlands would not be visible on a county map. Lauren Prentice said the number of actual wetlands in the county far exceeds the ones the county has listed. Wetlands account for 8.5% of the county but the majority of these are in McNary and Burbank areas. Approximately 1640 acres of known wetlands are on ag. ground. If a farmer has a wet area that might be developed as a wetland but is currently farmed, the VSP process allows the farming practice to continue.

Wetlands were described as important habitat and aquifer recharge sites. They also reduce and contain flooding. The group then discussed the following:

- What are the obstacles to *maintaining agriculture viability* when farming these critical areas?
- What actions can be taken to mitigate those obstacles?
- What are the obstacles to *protecting these critical areas*?
- What actions can be taken to promote protection of these?
- What factors are out of the control of the producer in these critical areas?

Members discussed the following *obstacles to maintaining agriculture viability* in the wetland areas:

- Irrigation efficiency protects wetlands from runoff but is costly
- Wetlands can be sources of weed encroachment, approved wetland herbicides are costly and require a special license
- Wetlands are difficult to farm
- NRCS programs to set aside and buffer wetlands are subject to caps and eligibility limits

Actions described by the members to *maintain ag. viability* in wetlands included:

- Develop local water plans, allowing a producer to move water rights from a wetland area to another area (no net loss of irrigated ground)
- Improve irrigation efficiency and programs
- Provide financial incentives to buffer and set aside the wetland
- Include the farming history in the Stewardship plan to verify historical use
- Provide updated information, education and technical assistance about the benefits of wetlands

Obstacles to *protection of these critical areas* are similar to those that affect maintaining ag. viability.

- Invasive reed canary grass chokes wetlands but is difficult to remove (Judith Johnson stated that some areas of dense reed canary grass appear to be wetlands but are in fact creeks.)
- Increasing native plants is difficult due to weed competition and off-target herbicide
- Local wetland inventory base is not complete. NRCS-delineated wetlands become part of the county database but these were developed decades ago based on topography maps and were not ground-truthed.

Actions to protect these critical areas also mirror those that maintain ag. viability

- Various conservation groups can provide incentives to set aside wetland areas: Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Ducks Unlimited, etc.
- NRCS (CREP) and other programs can provide incentives to protect and restore wetlands
- State occasionally has mitigation funds for wetland protection incentive programs
- Improve the local wetland inventory

Factors out of the control of the landowner/ag. producer:

- Wetlands cross property boundaries; the source of run-off that can impact a wetland can easily be a neighbor's farm or county road
- Soil type
- Location of the wetland

4. General discussion:

It was estimated that some 10-15,000 acres of forest land are privately owned. It was suggested that thinning and improving these privately-held lands be included in the VSP Work Plan.¹

It was suggested that CRP lands be examined for habitat quality; some are monocultures of crested wheat grass. Joanna Cowles said new contracts and renewals will include new seed mixes and evaluating past experience with a goal of improving habitat quality.

Judith Johnson said the Nature Conservancy has done a lot of mapping and also habitat improvements such as osprey and kestrel boxes; Renee Hadley will contact them.

Comments on previous meeting/minutes:

David Haire said our discussion on Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas didn't include the Basalt Aquifer and we should consider adding this to the Work Plan. Judith Johnson said that the broad statement that "single family homes are exempt" in terms of new well permitting is not accurate. To be more precise, homes are not uniformly exempt. Existing water rights, whether it is a high-density development, water banking, and other factors are considered when issuing a new well permit for new construction.

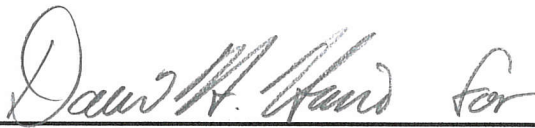
Public Comments: There were no members of the general public in attendance.

With no further business on the agenda, the meeting adjourned at 2:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted



Audrey Ahmann
WWCCD



Mark Klicker
Chairman

Next meeting: March 7, 1:00

¹ As per Hadley after the meeting, the Critical Areas impacted by forested ground include Shallow Aquifer Recharge and Fish/Wildlife Habitat. Forests are thinned to reduce fire danger.