Walla Walla County VSP
Jan. Work Group Meeting Minutes

Date: January 3, 2017 Time: 1:00 p.m. Place: Conservation District Conference Room

Board Members Present:
Robert Riley, Ag. Community
David Haire, CTUIR
Judith Johnson, Kooskooskie Commons
Jonathan Hellburg-Wilson, Ag. Community
Jason Bulay, Blue Mtn. Land Trust
Mark Klicker, Ag. Community
Tom Schirm, WDFW
Brian Maiden, Ag. Community

Board Members Absent: Brian Burns, Tri-State Steelheaders

Representatives of Other Agencies: Perry Beale, WA Dept. of Ag., Tom Glover, WW County
Also present:
Joanna Cowles, Lisa Stearns, Audrey Ahmann, Jeff Klundt, Renee Hadley, WWCCD:
Kevin Scribner, Brian Mahoney, Brandy Pettit, all of Anderson Perry

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

Minutes: The minutes were reviewed by those present. Jonathan Hellburg-Wilson moved to approve the minutes with the following amendment: that the reference to highly erodible critical areas as HEL be removed (because HEL is an acronym used by NRCS). Judith Johnson seconded and the minutes were approved as amended.

1. **Definition of agriculture viability:** Three definition were presented for consideration. In general discussion it was agreed to add *and ranching* as follows: *The ability of farmers and ranchers to maintain an economically viable agricultural business, keep the land in agriculture long-term, and sustain the land so it will remain productive into the future.* The work group adopted this definition without a formal motion.

2. **Discussion: Work Plan development:** Renee Hadley reviewed the 5 Critical Areas; at this meeting the work group discussed Critical Area 4 (aquifer recharge areas) and Critical Area 3 (frequently flooded areas). The purpose of the discussion was again to determine 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?

Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas (CARA): Renee Hadley defined the critical aquifer recharge areas as generally limited to a gravel layer above the basalt topped with soil. The shallow gravel aquifer area mapped by WW Co. is primarily in the area extending out from the Walla Walla River to the Touchet and is also in Oregon. County maps show the critical aquifer recharge areas as including most of the year-round streams and adjoining lands. The primary concern for this critical area is the decline in the aquifer water level of 3 to 8 feet per year.

Members discussed the following *obstacles to maintaining agriculture viability* in the critical aquifer recharge areas:

- Improving irrigation efficiency further is costly as most producers have already adopted many efficiencies as have irrigation districts
- Cost of moving from surface diversion to wells
- Water rights restrictions on moving from surface diversions to well sources
- Shallow Aquifer Recharge (SAR) projects require an irrigator to apply for a change to the *purpose of use*. This involves a lot of Ecology scrutiny and can result in a modification of the water right which does not benefit the irrigator.

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

- Support SAR projects.
- Improve irrigation efficiency and programs to support irrigation from wells instead of surface diversions.
- Support instream habitat restoration projects that slow flow to allow recharge and river meandering that is at an acceptable rate of change.
- Develop watershed plans that promote changing surface diversion rights to well-water rights.

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

- Judith Johnson pointed out that SAR projects have prohibitive monitoring costs that run in the tens of thousands per year just for testing.
- Water quality concerns remain, even with testing.
- Single family homes are exempt and draw from the aquifer.

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

- Beaver analog dams: Tom Schirm described these as small structures that function like beaver dams, using natural materials that do not block the water flow but tend to slow it and back it up somewhat, allowing more time for infiltration and increasing water availability for riparian plantings. These are very labor intensive.
- Local water plans should have recharge components.
- Advocate for more flexible water quality testing on SAR projects allowing for less costly testing if site conditions warrant it.
- Aquifer recharge through sharing of benefit: use SAR project to recharge area with winter flows, and later, allow producer to withdraw 40% of the amount pumped to recharge area from the associated wells.

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

- Most of the aquifer recharge is actually taking place in Oregon (which has less stringent water quality testing and permitting).
- Seasonal snowpack can vary dramatically.

Frequently Flooded Areas: Renee Hadley defined these as areas that allow discharge of river energy during floods protecting vulnerable areas downstream. The stream channel itself is generally sufficient for 2-5 year flood events. CREP plantings are on these critical areas. Some farms and ranches are almost completely within a flood plain; the example given was 9-Mile Ranch which was entirely flooded during the 1996 flood, an 80-year flood event. The frequency of 80 year flood events is about every 30 years. There are problems with quantifying or measuring frequently flooded areas.

The concerns of frequently flooded areas are very much the same as those for critical aquifer recharge.

Obstacles to *maintaining ag. viability* in frequently flooded areas:

- The areas most prone to flooding are not within prioritized reaches for funding of improvements such as instream habitat improvements that help diffuse river energy and increase infiltration.
- Buffers and filter strips that help hold flood waters and diffuse river energy often take productive farm ground out of production.
- Much of these areas are productive farm ground; flooding can be detrimental to crops.

Actions to *maintain ag. viability* in frequently flooded areas:

- Increase CREP eligible streams as many intermittent streams are currently ineligible.
- Support programs to install ground cover (residue, cover crops, permanent grass cover such as grassed water ways) and include rental rates for ground taken out of production.

Obstacles to *protecting frequently flooded areas* include those that maintain ag. viability:

- Land is often productive farm ground; agriculture practices have the potential to disrupt the holding capacity of flooded areas.

Actions to *protect frequently flooded areas* are the same as those that maintain ag. viability:

- Increase CREP eligible streams as many intermittent streams are currently ineligible.
- Support programs to install ground cover (residue, cover crops, permanent grass cover) and include rental rates for ground taken out of production
- Sharing information about new and/or improved practices and/or crops that are compatible with frequent flooding.

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

- Actions occurring upstream by political entities (e.g., Mill Creek Channel)
- The best plans and programs can be overwhelmed by modest 30 to 50-year flood events.
- River meandering

3. **Consultants**: Brian Mahoney announced he has taken another position and is leaving Anderson Perry but Kevin Scribner will be assuming responsibility for fulfilling the contract with Anderson Perry.

Public Comments: There were no members of the general public in attendance.
With no further business on the agenda, the meeting adjourned at 2:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted

Audrey Ahmann
WWCCD

Mark Klicker
Chairman

Next meeting: February 7, 1:00