



Walla Walla County VSP

March Work Group Meeting Minutes

Date: March 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

Robert Riley, Ag. Community

Jonathan Hellburg-Wilson, Ag. Community

Brian Maiden, Ag. Community

Tom Schirm, WDFW

Brian Burns, Tri-State Steelheaders

Board Members Absent: Mark Klicker, Ag. Community

Also present:

Joanna Cowles, Lisa Stearns, Audrey Ahmann, Renee Hadley, of WWCCD

Kevin Scribner, Eleanor Schroeder, John Wells of Anderson Perry

The meeting was called to order at 1:00 p.m. by Vice-Chair David Haire

Introductions: David Haire asked all to reintroduce themselves.

Minutes: The minutes were reviewed by those present. Judith Johnson moved and Jason Bulay seconded to approve the minutes, motion passed.

1. Discussion: Work Plan Development: Wetlands

The group reviewed briefly the work done on the plan regarding wetlands as discussed at the last meeting. It was noted again that current ag. use of critical areas is allowed under VSP. Hadley also stated that most of the forested land in Walla Walla County is privately owned. Much of the forested lands in the region are managed by DNR, but are in Columbia County and Oregon, not Walla Walla.

2. Critical Area: Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas. (for brevity's sake, will refer to as Habitat Conservation Areas in these minutes)

Hadley explained that most of the terrestrial wildlife habitat is related to avian habitat, for both raptors and migratory songbirds. It appears from the county maps that few areas are designated as Habitat Conservation Areas. Waterways (rivers, streams) are designated as wildlife corridors, not critical habitat. (See footnote¹) Historically much of the county featured shrub-steppe habitat but only a very few spots (if any) remain. Some CRP plantings included sage but sage has been hard to establish and maintain.

Judith Johnson said the county Shoreline Management Plan calls for a 100 ft. buffer on Walla Walla, 75 ft. on Yellowhawk, and smaller streams require a 50 ft. buffer, and that these are the buffer widths Ecology requires in order to qualify for any riparian buffer cost share funds.

It was also noted that upland work that benefits multiple critical areas (e.g., converting to low-disturbance tillage that reduces sediment transfer to frequently flooded areas or habitat conservation areas) can

¹ After the meeting, Hadley spoke to the county: Areas marked as Wildlife Corridors are not defined as Fish and Wildlife Critical Habitat. Fish Habitat areas are not mapped county wide. WW Co. staff will identify fish habitat areas according to the maps they have including select areas of an urban riparian buffer map, 18.08.650 Table 8, and the text of the code (18.08.600) for a comprehensive view of potential Fish habitat.

qualify as enhancement to these areas under VSP and other programs; that is, the acres treated are not the only ones benefiting. The group then discussed the following:

- What are the obstacles to maintaining agriculture viability when farming these critical areas?
- 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 *maintaining agriculture viability*:

- Some of the ground is difficult to access with the usual farming equipment
- Wildlife can damage crops (Elk, turkeys)
- Specific to fish: conflict between maintaining flows and water rights

Obstacles to *protection of these areas* include:

- Most of the shrub-steppe is gone
- Shrub-steppe is difficult to establish and there is some reluctance to plant sage
- Care must be taken to consider all species: actions to benefit hawks can be detrimental to nesting birds
- Weed management: difficulty of establishing broadleaf plants in areas with heavy weed competition
- It is prohibitively expensive to restore these areas
- Small producers may not have enough land to set aside areas and generally do not qualify for farm bill programs like CREP and CRP

Actions described by the members to *maintain ag. viability* while protecting these critical areas included:

- Provide incentives for farm practices that benefit wildlife such as leaving out-ground undisturbed or improving it, managing residue to benefit wildlife, etc.
- Education/Outreach: identify barriers or limiting factors for wildlife and seek ways to mitigate these
- Increase CREP in irrigated ground to reduce water use (but need improved rental rates to offset lost revenue)
- Moving point of diversion downstream where possible, change season of use, lease water, etc.
- Conservation Easements, CSP and other incentive programs
- Seek incentive and cost-share opportunities for small ag producers

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

- Urbanization and county planning
- Invasive species (starlings, possums)
- Previous work in channelizing waterways leading to rapid bank erosion downstream and loss of riparian areas, areas ineligible for restoration due to same

3. WW County VSP Goal Summary Table, other excerpts:

The group looked at the goal summary table. Items in yellow were added after the meeting materials were sent out. One question was on the inclusion of converting from surface water use to wells; this is costly to producers and may improve a critical area but at the expense of the aquifer.

The overall goal shown for Habitat Conservation Areas was modified as shown: "Recognize the importance of fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas while at the same time working toward a balance between ~~preservation~~ protection of these lands and the continuation of agriculture, forestry, ~~mining~~ and managed growth."²

4. General discussion:

Mapping: WDFW has designated some areas as priority habitat which would of course also be fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas; when decisions are made as to how an area should be designated, these maps are considered Best Available Science.

Work Plan should acknowledge that most work on any critical area benefits all of them.

Next month: Review of parts 1-4 and the monitoring section of Work Plan.

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



David Haire,
Vice-Chairman

Next meeting: April 4, 1:00

² The Work Group should consider striking "forestry, mining and managed growth" from this goal because the VSP process is only authorized to protect the viability of agriculture: mining, forestry, and managed growth are under the GMA.