



GRANT COUNTY VOLUNTARY STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

VSP Workgroup Meeting Minutes

October 24, 2016 – 3:30-5:30 PM

Washington State Potato Commission, 108 S Interlake Road, Moses Lake, WA 98837

Attendance:

Daniel Dormaier (Hartline Producer), Chris Edwards (Hartline Producer), Sam Krautscheid (Quincy Producer), Craig Simpson (East Columbia Basin Irrigation District), Damien Hooper (Grant County Planning Department), Matt Harris (Washington State Potato Commission), Eric Pentico (Washington State Department of Fish & Wildlife), Harold Crose (Grant County Conservation District-Coordinator), Marie Lotz (Grant County Conservation District-Recorder), John Small (Anchor QEA-Consultant), Vivian Erickson-Consultant via phone)

Welcome and Introductions:

Harold called the meeting to order at 3:30 PM. The minutes were presented from the September 26, 2016 Work Group meeting and approved by the Work Group as presented.

Follow-up and Re-cap from Prior Work Group Meeting:

Harold stated that we have concentrated on information and education and now will concentrate on plan development and specifics and strategies. At our Last meeting a binder containing pertinent VSP progress to date was given to planning group members containing pertinent information on materials presented to date. This will be updated with new material throughout the planning process to be used by members as a quick reference.

Discussion on conservation practice data which focuses on 2011-16 NRCS conservation practices that have been implemented with federal dollars. This does not include conservation practices applied through other federal and state conservation programs, or private sector conservation activities that could and should be used throughout the implementation phase.

Harold and Marie met with Lamb Weston environmental staff leader to discuss the possible role of the Ag processors. He will work with us to gather data from their field consultants on Nutrient and Water management. Dave Stadelman arranged to have us present at the the Cenex Annual Grower meeting November 18th. If there are other opportunities like this to get the word out please help get us on the agenda.

Eric asked when we will start work of the VSP Plan. John stated we will start getting into the planning details at the next meeting. There are three audiences, the producers, state technical board and the implementers. They are organizing around these three and will present each one individually.

Sam asked how the Supreme Court ruling that there must be a plan in place before digging a well will affect the VSP process under this ruling. Damien stated he did not know of anyone that conducts agriculture business with the exception of the marijuana growers with an exempt well, VSP only applies to agriculture. Damien also stated this was on closed Water Resource Inventory Areas (WRIA) and Grant County does not have any closed WRIA's or watersheds.

Harold presented the VSP Communities Power Point presentation for feedback. The presentation included the Work Group members, VSP history, Growth Management Area (GMA) and VSP differences, what are Critical Areas, the VSP Plan elements and approval process, maps, planning progress to date, and talking points centered around questions on VSP process, procedures, and impacts present and future.

One question is, will there be anonymity if they work with a technical service provider to develop a resource plan for VSP? Harold stated that when VSP was created it stated that if there is not anonymity it will most likely fail, so until otherwise directed, confidentiality and anonymity is how the program will be developed. The question is



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being reviewed by the Office of Financial Management and once the question is answered the WA State Conservation Commission will report their finding.

Eric stated to add to the questions “who would be monitoring the work that producers are doing to maintain or improve baseline”. Harold stated the approach would be to monitor the conservation practices being maintained and implemented through conservation programs and the private sector and by developing and implementing resource plans with producers who volunteer to participate in the program. Harold stated he does not see anyone coming out to establish a new monitoring program for non-source pollution for water quality. John stated Department of Ecology is currently doing this and would be a duplicate of efforts. Harold stated this program is about capturing the conservation practices being applied that protect, and in many cases, enhance critical areas. John stated there are two differences, anonymity and tracking. The tracking part who is implementing conservation practices on their land and the requirement of measurable standards by tracking what is being done on the ground. Producer enrollment is tracking and monitoring conditions on the ground by using existing programs. Harold stated that the monitoring part fits into the Rapid Watershed Assessment that shows by practice a quality criteria rating that has been done for each community. The criteria uses the NRCS rating system for each practice negative five to a plus five with zero being critical area protected. Matt stated that we need to emphasize this at community meetings. It is important that producers know the process and meaning of why and how we are capturing baseline information and that we will capture the good work producers are currently doing. This does not mean that the plan will not also focus on areas where more work might need to be done. The data being generated through the VSP process will very helpful in directing conservation program resources in a more focused and efficient manner.

Harold had the group go to the binder under Practices and viewed the list of core practices. Implementation strategy is focusing on management practices. NRCS Section IV technical guide lists over 400 practices, in the Columbia Basin there are probably 25 being utilized but we are narrowing it down to around 10. John stated the NRCS codes and specifications in the handbook do not need to be used. Harold stated the CSP program is a really good example that asks questions based on observations. Harold also stated that it is not difficult to show how you implementation using existing practices and standards have positive impacts on ag viability, sustainability, as well as protecting critical areas. Harold stated he does not call them conservation practices he calls them farming practices.

Critical Areas Functions and Values:

John reviewed practices listed by land use - irrigation, dryland, range land and the number of applied since 2011. Practices or systems that were in place July 2011 will be considered when developing the baseline conditions. VSP does not apply to all lands - publicly owned land and non-agriculture land uses, irrigation and drainage districts are exempt. John stated that Grant County must protect critical areas functions and values in place starting July 2011. This does not mean that all acreage must meet that standard but a composite which indicates that the trajectory is moving in a positive direction.

John went over the landuse map showing that 74% of Grant County is in agriculture land. Irrigated and dry cropland account for approximately 50% with Rangeland at 50%. Another map showed wildlife conservation areas with priority habitat areas. 28% of dryland, 8% irrigated and 51% range land intersect with wildlife priority habitat. Department of Natural Resource map overlay of streams that include shoreline, fish bearing streams, and other streams. A lot of the map streams in arid parts of the state have never been verified. In this area, there is no streams in areas that are shown on the map. Agriculture has intersect of large streams which are Columbia, Crab Creek, Lind Coulee, Rocky Ford and Sandhollow. They did analysis on riparian vegetation, mostly shrubs, that intersect with streams in agriculture which a bulk is in the dryland and range land. Agriculture intersect with critical areas is very minimal especially with fish bearing streams. The way water is managed by producers and the Columbia Basin Project, such as the Upper Crab Feeder Route, is a positive change to take credit for. VSP will address runoff and water quality.





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Wetlands were mapped and National Wetlands Inventory developed in the 1970's. The inventory shows the impact the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project has had on the creation of wetlands. Currently less than 1% agriculture intersects with wetlands. Since the 1970's, changes in irrigation systems has had an affect on the location and size of wetlands in the county.

Frequently flooded areas map shows 2.1% of agricultural land located with floodplains. John stated this may have an affect on Ag viability.

Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas on irrigated lands with soils that have high infiltration rates and low water holding capacity are identified as having potential of impacting ground water under certain irrigation and cropping systems.

Wind erosion susceptibility map shows up to 10% of Ag land are on soils with high wind erodability. Sam asked why is most of the land use part of the map shows up in white or on rangelands. John stated there is 10 categories and this map only shows the most susceptible and the white is the least susceptible. Sam stated on the map where there are high wind/erosion issues along the highways that can close throughout the year, why it is in white. Dan asked if it is tied to farming practices. Harold stated it can be tied to certain farming practices that occur on soils susceptible to wind erosion. Harold stated some areas will be affected much more and the key is to consider the affects on long term productivity and that there are practices being used to address wind erosion.

John went over RCW that states the Workgroup must develop goals, benchmarks and measurable standards to show success of VSP. John is trying to understand what they may be. The goals are the broadest scale of what the objective is. For the 5 critical areas, the focus is on the functions and values. He believes the most time will be spent on streams and wetlands and priority habitat species areas. Equally important is standard for flood plains, aquifer recharge and geological hazards areas. John suggest to have 5 goals, one of each to either protect or enhance. John stated such as stream habitat, we have measurable standards, protection benchmark have similar condition to July 2011, as long as we met the goals we are succeeding. He states it is important to set enhancement benchmark to make sure we are making progress above baseline. The reason is to look over a period of time, the conservation practice tracking that we see progress but weather, market condition, crop pricing, etc. we will see dips in progress but can still show a positive trajectory. This is not a snapshot in time but a long term process.

With enhancement we are making progress but we are still doing much better than the benchmark. Dan asked if at the end of 10 years, if we have enhanced the benchmark, will the benchmark change to the new enhancement level. John stated the legislature would be the only ones to change the July 2011 benchmark. John's thoughts on enhancement of the benchmark would be to show we are making an effort to address and make improvements to wetlands, such as habitat, and water quality and by focusing or targeting specific areas. Also there is a risk such as storms on the ecosystem. The Workgroup needs to think about building on enhancement as a cushion in the right places. Harold stated this is why the Conservation District is working on Farmed Smart, to have this plan in place so that once the benchmark is met, you have certainty that if you achieve a specified level of treatment and that is approved the standard will not change. (safe harbor is achieved)

Sam asked, do we know from the County how much permanent cropland has changed from 2011 to 2016. Damien stated as long as it was reported to them they can pull the information together and see the land use designation change from agriculture to another designation. Sam also stated that if there is data on permanent crops, such as fruit trees established on steep slopes. John stated the Dept of Agriculture has good data and have the known crops on the ground from last year but can pull data from 2011 to present to compare. John stated also the expansion of the Columbia Basin Project can potentially cause conversion into agriculture land use. There will need to be guidance by the state on how to handle conversions of land use. Harold stated most, if not all, of the



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land is already designated agriculture just converting from dryland to irrigated. Producers will have many more cropping options but will also have more flexibility in adopting conservation practices. Craig stated some water rights associated with lands that were in CRP, are now requesting ag water for ground water replacement for CRP that will be taken out. Craig also stated that in 10 years there should be very few land use designation changes as related to VSP if the land use is agriculture. Harold stated whatever happens will be a voluntary approach. John stated we have to measure them by a quantifiable standard. He showed fish bearing streams to look at total amount of streams with riparian buffers. In Grant County we can look at different metric and compare to the 2011 standards for each function and value. He also stated to do a County wide average, if we see more water in one area that impacts fish or riparian habitats we can capture the cost and benefits and have one standard County wide.

John went over the meaning or definition of critical area functions and values. He narrowed it down to water quality, hydrology, soil health and habitat. Water quality is tied to fish, wetlands, aquifer recharge, flood plains are all tied to hydrology. Soil health is protection and health which is important to wetlands and flood plains. Habitat functions are streams, wetlands, upland habitats, and flood plains. He stated this understanding will help develop benchmarks and measurable standards. One example: Hydrology as it applies to streams and wetlands. The protection benchmark might be no net loss in stream and wetland habitat, it is a quantity measurement. What we can map in remote sensing and other data from agencies can be the hydrology function measure. If there is gains due to expansion of the Columbia Basin Project, that can be an enhancement for VSP. Maintaining existing levels of recharge might be a protection benchmark for aquifer recharge. Not increasing recharge would be the enhancement benchmark. For frequently flooded areas no net rising floodplains elevations. If opportunity to increase but not necessary under agriculture practice standards.

Measurable standards might be water quality (wetlands, aquifer recharge, temperature, nutrients, pesticides) for clean water look at it at a finer scale. Might need to correct issues in the environment. Some 303 listings, like nitrates in ground water, is county wide or pesticide issues more in one area than another from residual but may be making progress over time. There may be an opportunity to address things such as temperature by looking at specific waterways to allow the plan to be focused and successful to meet the benchmark and have some enhancement. Chris asked if water quantity would fall under water quality? John stated that would fall under hydrology, which is to maintain wetland areas and low flows in streams in the summer, accommodate high flows and then recharge. Chris stated that if a producer has pasture that has a stream that runs through the property and in existence in the spring but when irrigation is turned on it dries up. From a producer standpoint you can go out there and if you can drill a well to provide water for the cows but it will also affect wildlife, not sure if this fell under this. John stated it would fall under protection benchmark of no net loss of the stream due to a seasonal/intermittent stream. John stated how to handle this with monitoring that may be able to be in VSP but trying to stay away from monitoring and to work with producers on the implementation. Harold stated we need to be mindful to not overlook and get into existing laws such as water rights. Harold also stated that aquifers are depleting, not only for livestock but for domestic use also. Harold stated the importance is the task of defining and finding out how critical areas relate to agriculture and VSP by asking if the farming practices are affecting or not affecting and the baseline is being maintained and in other cases being enhanced. Dan asked if within the 10 years the economy takes a dip or a natural disaster happens, how will it affect VSP baseline. Harold stated there is only one place in VSP that will be affected, it would be changes of agricultural land to another designation in which it states in VSP to protect agriculture land. John stated if a natural disaster did happen that is why in the plan should have enhancements to have a cushion. Harold stated there is control over inputs to protect critical areas that has been done historically. Harold also stated VSP allows technology and science to evolve and be implemented at the same pace as goals for implementation are being achieved. John stated it is vague how the State Technical Panel will evaluate the success of a program but it reads it would be on a county-wide basis over a span of 10 years. Matt asked if the plan will build in practices for Grant County only, when you have areas such as riparian buffer on the western side of the state is different than what would be applied in Grant County and that the reader understand certain practices do not work for Grant County. Harold said the plan needs to allow the flexibility and



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that the plan will have a list of practices that can adapt to an individual farm and unique situation such as crops/streams/soils, etc , for the diverse geographic areas within the county. Matt said he wanted to make sure we only adopt what is reasonable for Grant County versus another county and that there should be no misunderstanding by outside readers. John stated when you set the benchmark standard and show the protection practices for Grant County and explain why it is set versus standard in another counties, it should eliminate outside scrutiny. Sam asked if the benchmark can be changed after 10 years. John stated the benchmark is from 2011 and that is the only benchmark we have to meet. Harold stated each county is unique and there will be many different approaches to VSP plans that will be evaluated by the State Technial Panel. This is not a one fits all program. Damien stated the SMP justified reduced buffers making it a standard protection versus other county standards, which may be used as an example.

Adjourn:

Harold stated the Community Meetings will be going on the next couple of weeks if your able to attend one of them or invite others to attend.

John stated the next meeting they will present goals/benchmarks and discuss measurable standards and monitoring by other agencies along with a more updated detailed and draft plan. The plan will be presented in separate pieces. Matt asked if those materials can be sent out before the meeting.

It was discussed to consolidate the November and December meetings due to the holidays. The next Work Group meeting will be held December 5, 2016, 1:00-3:00 PM at the Washington State Potato Commission. The meeting adjourned at 5:23 PM.



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