

**Thurston County Voluntary Stewardship Project
Workgroup Meeting #14 Draft Summary
March 31, 2015 3:00-5:00pm
Farm Bureau
975 NE Carpenter Rd, Lacey, WA 98516**

In attendance: Kathleen Whalen, Karen Parkhurst, John Stuhlmiller, Jim Goche, Charissa Waters, Mike Gaffney, Laurie Pyne, Eric Johnson, Brad Murphy, Jon MacAninch, Rick Nelson, Ron Schultz, Alex Callender, Theresa Nation,

Communicated inability to attend: Cindy Wilson, Christina Sanders

Discussion Summary

Charissa Waters opened the discussion for feedback on the *Existing Information and Baseline Conditions Draft* that was sent out to the group on Friday, March 27th for review. The discussion focused on data gaps for agricultural activities. Mike Gaffney presented food for thought on the question of whether it is time again for the work group to consider an active survey of the agricultural community to fill in those data gaps. Mike mentioned that WSU could be a lead on developing the surveys. An idea was also mentioned to work with some of the other members of the community on the non-commercial efforts to understand what new Ag endeavors are going on and to document the non-commercial Ag, which is under represented and a critical piece to the VSP and for the development of baselines. The group briefly discussed that VSP will need to ensure that there is consistent data collection. Also, that the work group will need to educate the Ag community so that they know what this is really about, which could be a part of the VSP outreach. The group discussed the need for incentives to encourage people to respond to the survey and to give a sense that the information is going to be used for a “higher purpose”.

The group was reminded that Thurston Conservation District (TCD) was appointed as a technical assistance provider, although they may not be the only one, and that landowners could use another technical service provider (i.e. private contractor) or proceed without assistance. Members mentioned that TCD would handle the parcel-specific level of this (not necessarily the watershed level), pending funding. The group was also reminded that implementation of VSP will rely on existing programs.

The group discussed that VSP is practice specific and focuses on stewardship practices for resource protection not on the type of land. Members pointed out one of the practical questions that VSP is addressing: How is the landowner going to protect the critical areas/functions identified on their land and what are the programs available to help them do that? It was also discussed that VSP doesn't need to limit methods to what has commonly been done to protect critical areas and promote Ag, but that it does need to be able identify best practices that could be shared with others, and be able to measure those.

The group discussed that in order to work on a watershed level, VSP must address individual interests and draw people in on a parcel level. The main question discussed was: How do we encourage people to have stewardship plans? The VSP work plan needs to identify the incentive-based tools for encouraging participation. The group discussed that part of the outreach and messaging with landowners is to get over fear and distrust and educate them about this program and how it can help them. Members

mentioned that the stewardship plans can capture what landowners and Ag producers are already doing that could be considered stewardship practices. The VSP will need to track those existing activities with the metrics as a part of the monitoring plan.

A member raised the question about how we are addressing critical areas and measuring the agricultural practices (i.e. how do we track the fencing installed to protect fish habitat, are we addressing water quality, what is it supplying, shading?).

Ron Shultz explained that that question is answered by the benchmarks we are reporting on. Ron pointed out two categories of benchmarks: 1) reporting on progress of landowner engagement and outreach, 2) the resource benchmark, which is the monitoring and reporting on protecting the critical areas, in addition to benchmarks to measure agricultural sustainability. Some of these issues need to be discussed by the work group such as, if a landowner has a fence up, are we going to make a determination of whether or not that fence is at an adequate distance to the stream given the goals for protection of the critical areas identified on the site. Members discussed how it's a matter of meeting the overall goals, not requiring specific activities, and that the appropriate activities would be determined on a site-specific basis. It was mentioned that we're not reporting parcel by parcel for VSP, overall it is taking a system-wide approach, and reporting on the progress at a watershed level.

The work group discussed the role of regulatory agencies. Members pointed out that they don't have much of a role with VSP, unless there are water quality issues in a particular area. Ecology retains their authority in water quality, which could be a tool to use if there are issues with a specific landowner or in a particular area in the watershed.

The group discussed protection and enhancement, how VSP only requires protection of critical areas, and enhance if funding is available. Members pointed out that the VSP must maintain the baseline conditions in the watershed in order to protect critical areas and that stewardship practices for protection will be determined by what is needed for the critical area on a specific parcel. Members mentioned that if the critical area is not being damaged (it is being sufficiently protected) by the existing activity it may not have to be changed. Members further discussed the stewardship plans and how they would evaluate a parcel and check off the activities that are already protecting critical areas. The activity could be changed to better protect critical areas and to enhance the agricultural operations.

Members pointed out that the VSP is all about incorporating practices that the Ag community already does well and how that protects critical areas versus what is done in the regulatory world, which is often very "cookie cutter" and doesn't allow for much flexibility. The VSP would communicate with producers and figure out what works best for them and for the watershed overall to maximize Ag production and also protect critical areas. The group further discussed that instead of the enforcement approach, which is more adversarial, VSP would work with individual landowners and incentive based tools and programs that could help them implement stewardship activities. These activities would then come back to the work group to assess how the VSP is doing with engaging landowners and making progress on the protection goals for critical areas, and then adjust based on that (adaptive management).

The group discussed the draft metrics handout distributed by Charissa Waters. Charissa explained that the new iteration of the draft metrics is organized based on the stewardship practices and also looks at how we can measure the long term viability of agriculture and the overall progress towards the VSP goals. The group further discussed that protection would be maintaining the baseline of the amount of

agricultural activities before the implementation of VSP and enhancement would be ways that the viability of agriculture and agricultural activities are improved. First we need to know what the current condition of “agricultural activities” are and where they are occurring in the county, which is where the existing data is lacking. People’s perspectives were also discussed and how it is important to track how those change overtime, which could be a narrative type of metric. Members mentioned that VSP reporting could have a narrative explaining the improvement over time and success stories from Ag producers. It was also emphasized that the metrics need to work for all Ag activities and large and small operations.

The work group discussed adaptive management and how developing and implementing the work plan is an iterative process. Members discussed that adaptive management is built into the VSP process and that if a strategy needs to be changed or VSP is not making the expected progress towards the benchmarks then it the methods can be changed if needed. It was also mentioned that the work group needs to carefully choose the benchmarks and goals because that is how VSP will be measuring progress and success.

Karen Parkhurst passed out the notes from the agricultural community work group that met at the end of February. The main focuses of the Ag meeting were on what it means to protect and enhance the long-term viability of agriculture, what farmers need to run their operations and be successful, and the barriers to that. Some of the main points and recommendations included: having a county ombudsman that can help farmers sort through the rules and advocate on their behalf, having financial support and technical advice, and to expand on the transfer of development rights program (the group mentioned that there is a lot of interest but it needs to be improved in order to work). Some barriers that were discussed included: availability of water and water rights, lack of infrastructure, and lack of markets. The ability to get water rights was further discussed by the group as an important barrier to consider as well as focusing on irrigation efficiency improvements to address the water quantity issue rather than water rights, which could be difficult to quantify. It was emphasized that there is a need for a clearinghouse for information on rules, regulations, water rights, and other information that is important for Ag operations.

Karen is also putting together a draft outreach plan with the help of the Ag work group.

Ron Schultz described questions for the work group to address in the work plan:

1. Need to be clear why we picked the Chehalis Watershed
2. When will we get to the others?
3. What’s the status of agricultural activities in the other watersheds?

The conservation commission, the landowners, the county staff, and others will all want to know the answers to those questions and how the work plan plugs into the GMA and CAO. Chehalis is the model that the work group chose, which needs to be clearly explained in the work plan.

It was also discussed that there may need to be some special outreach to the South County and to have a strategy for reaching out and engaging with those folks in particular. Could appoint a sub-committee of people that are familiar with the area.

Ron also described the timeline for submitting the work plan. The timeline is 2 years and 9 months to have an approved work plan, which needs to account for the 45 days the technical panel has for review.

By June 30th we will be a year and a half into the contract, which started January, 2014. However, June 30th is the end of the fiscal year and the funding can't be carried over. Christina is developing a budget for what the VSP work group will need to continue beyond June 30th to finish the work plan.

Tentative agenda for next meeting:

- The work group will think about what it would take to include the other watersheds in the work plan. How long would it take to collect all of the data and existing information for the baseline conditions reports for each watershed? This starts to address Ron's second question of when will we get to the other watersheds
- Karen and the Ag work group will discuss the progress on the outreach plan
- Mike will recalculate the work plan development timeline and let the group know when our deadline is for submitting the work plan
- Homework for the work group: review the draft Existing Info and Baseline Conditions Draft (emailed on Friday March 27th) and the draft *Ag Stewardship Metrics* document and get feedback to Charissa (watersc@co.thurston.wa.us)