

Thurston County Voluntary Stewardship Project
Workgroup Meeting #15 Draft Summary
May 12, 2015 4:00-6:00pm
Farm Bureau
975 NE Carpenter Rd, Lacey, WA 98516

In Attendance: Jim Goche, Erin Ewald, Jon McAninch, Brad Murphy, Charissa Waters, Kathleen Whalen, James Myers, Rick Nelson, Evan Sheffels, Alex Callender, Stephanie Zurenko, Glen Connelly, Derek Rockett, Jeff Swotek, Karen Parkhurst, Christina Sanders.

Communicated Inability to attend: Teresa Nation, John Stuhlmiller, Bruce Morgan, Cindy Wilson

Discussion Summary:

Charissa Waters opened the discussion on the *Monitoring Plan Draft*, which is based on the discussions in the technical subcommittee meetings and the metrics the group has been developing. The metrics are a way to measure the progress towards the goals and benchmarks of the VSP. The work group discussed the potential benchmarks in the Draft Monitoring Plan. There are benchmarks for critical area goals as well as benchmarks for agricultural viability goals. The water quality benchmark was discussed along with the water quality monitoring stations proposed for monitoring for the VSP. Concern was expressed about creating metrics where there are more factors involved than agricultural activities. Particularly water quality where there are many other impacts and issues such as septic systems. We need to deal with things that are in the control of the agricultural operator and the VSP. Potential water quality monitoring stations were chosen during the site visits to be up river of most agricultural activities, midstream near activities, and downstream of most activities. Some of these stations have varying data available, most of them will have the correct baseline data around 2011 but some are inactive. The active ones are monitored by Thurston County Dept. of Health on a monthly basis.

The point was made that the water quality is best to be used as a focus for VSP activity and where the technical assistance can target outreach and develop stewardship plans with agricultural operators in that area, not as a metric or benchmark that success of the program depends on because there are so many other factors that affect water quality that are beyond the control of VSP. Water quality is an indicator of the impacts to critical areas.

Discussion of difficulties tracking non-point pollution. If the Ag operator is implementing a stewardship plan they are complying with VSP and presumed to be working toward the protection and potentially enhancement of critical areas. Other land uses are covered by the CAO and have to satisfy those requirements. If there is a water quality problem and the stewardship plans are being followed in that area then the landowners participating in VSP would be considered as protecting the critical area functions and other areas and land uses would be looked at for the source of the issue (it would provide some assurances to the participating Ag operators). Monitoring at the parcel level is how the VSP will determine that the participating Ag operator is implementing the approved stewardship plan and protecting critical areas and monitoring at the watershed level is to show the overall impact of the program. Questions were brought up regarding how to separate the impacts of VSP and other activities in the watershed. It will have to be assumed that there are a lot of other factors and we can't assume on

a watershed level that the water quality is a result of the VSP. As long as the Ag operator is following the VSP and implementing the stewardship plan they would be considered “off-the-hook.”

Discussion of NRCS monitoring tools and metrics for measuring progress. NRCS uses a lot of tools to score water quality and show enhancements from conservation practices that can be used to measure the impacts and show progress of stewardship plans and the VSP. We need to pick metrics that clearly show progress such as percent canopy cover and water quality scores (documented in the stewardship plans). We also need to make sure that the benchmarks and metrics are things that we can measure and have the funding to be able to measure. The point was emphasized that stewardship plans are not stagnant and we will be able to make adjustments based on changing conditions and adaptively manage the VSP in order to meet our goals and benchmarks.

The group discussed the Stewardship Plan process. Metrics depend on what the process actually looks like and what the technical assistance provider will be doing with the Ag operator to develop a stewardship plan. Concerns were brought up over liability of property owner when a technical assistance provider comes on the property and confidentiality of stewardship plans. Conservation planning process is mostly confidential, some things within the plan are disclosable, but specifics on Ag activities are not. Stewardship Plans would be similar, but with less specific information than a conservation plan. The VSP needs to encourage a high-trust/low-fear relationship with the Ag operators. There needs to be an understanding that the technical assistance will focus on the stewardship activities and developing the plan while they are on the property, not looking at unrelated issues. Whatcom County has some good examples of how they deal with those issues of disclosure and monitoring and have policies that provide legal protections to the landowners (more info at <http://www.whatcomcounty.us/745/Farm-Plans>).

The group continued reviewing the benchmarks and monitoring plan and discussed metrics for measuring the long-term viability of agriculture. Jim Goche mentioned the need for an economic benchmark and indicator. Other group members agreed that the economic piece is important for Ag operators, if they can't make a living they are more likely to sell to developers. It was acknowledged that using an economic benchmark and metric would be difficult because it is hard to measure given the broadness of the definition of agricultural activities, which will include a wide variety of activities in the VSP, and also that there are many factors involved in the economic viability of agriculture. Economics may be better as an indicator rather than a benchmark, similar to water quality, there are too many other factors that influence it that are beyond the scope of VSP.

The group discussed how to improve the viability of agriculture and how that is not easy to do or measure. Things like having a resource clearinghouse where people can go to get all of the info they need and an agricultural ombudsman at the county to help people navigate all of the info and programs would help maintain and improve agricultural activities. Stewardship practices may also be implemented to enhance agricultural activities, it depends on the practice. The VSP allows flexibility of practices, so that critical areas can be protected with site-specific practices that also help to enhance agricultural activities. The purpose of the VSP is to be protective of critical areas in a flexible way that also protects and improves the viability agriculture. Conservation practices that enhance agriculture should be at the center of the activities that are encouraged in the VSP Stewardship Plans.

Karen Parkhurst discussed the outreach plan and issues with distrust of the County government. She also asked the group to answer the question before the next meeting; what would need to happen for

me to trust this process? What two or three things would it take to trust this process? She passed out a list of outreach activities that need to happen as we move forward with development and implementation of the work plan. The conservation district is primarily listed as a distributor of outreach materials. The information flyer needs to go out to the general public using every form of media and outreach possible to get the word out as soon as possible. She also mentioned the need for a short survey to get peoples beliefs and perspectives about this process. It may also be time to have another meeting with the agricultural community to let them know the progress we have made and get their input on the outreach plan and what specific activities will help them to maintain and improve the viability of their Ag operations. We need appropriate ambassadors for this program that are trusted in certain parts of the community. She also called for stories from the work group to communicate how the process is working and recommendations for improvement. It's important to solicit early adopters that are willing to give it a shot and communicate success stories to spread the word and increase participation as we go. A website will help with tracking and sharing this information. Branding and recognition for participating Ag operators was discussed as a good way to encourage participation. We need to create a document that details who is going to do what and who is responsible for what, and provide a matrix of that to show people (i.e. TCD will provide technical assistance to landowners).

Discussion of potential funding to continue developing the work plan beyond the present June 30th cut off. Hopefully we receive funding but we are still forging ahead to get a work plan together.

Tentative agenda for next meeting:

The next meeting will be set for about two weeks, with the first option falling on the 26th of May. We will further discuss the work plan drafts, including the monitoring plan and outreach plan at the next meeting.