

**Thurston County Voluntary Stewardship Project
Workgroup Meeting #17 Draft Summary
June 11, 2015 4:00-6:00pm
Farm Bureau
975 NE Carpenter Rd, Lacey, WA 98516**

In Attendance: Miles Micheletti, Jim Meyers, Theresa Nation, Patrick Dunn, Evan Sheffels, Aslan Mead, Budd Blake, Joe Downey, Jon McAninch, Rick Nelson, John Stuhlmiller, Kevin O’Sullivan, Bruce Morgan, Alex Callender, Charissa Waters, Jim Goche, Ron Schultz, Stephanie Zurenko, Karen Parkhurst

Communicated inability to attend: Kathleen Whalen and Glen Connelly

Discussion Summary:

Charissa Waters started the discussion on the new version of the Monitoring Plan Draft and a table of monitoring activities and responsible parties. The revised version of the Stewardship Plan was also passed out and Charissa explained that, as requested at the last meeting, it now incorporates elements of Chelan’s checklist and is organized in terms of the intersection of critical areas and agriculture with objectives and specific strategies for each. The group discussed the agricultural viability objective and economic viability metrics and how to measure a “vibrant agricultural economy”. Jim Goche suggested changing the first objective to “maintaining and expanding an agricultural economy”. “Maintaining and improving agricultural viability” is an overall goal of the VSP and can be replaced with a more specific objective for economic viability. The metrics under the first objective are primarily economic criteria for measuring Ag viability. Concern was expressed over Ag market influences and economic factors out of control of VSP and whether economic metrics are appropriate and if having an economic benchmark would be setting VSP up for failure. The group agreed that recording and measuring economic data and activity for agriculture is important for VSP and tracking Ag viability. The consensus was to elevate the headings in this section to Goal, Objective, and Measures.

Alex Callender recommended to weigh the benchmarks and metrics based on importance. Implementation of Stewardship Plans and conservation practices on the ground is very important because it is something we can measure accurately and easily show progress of the VSP.

John Stuhlmiller suggested focusing on what we are going to do on the ground and strategies to achieve the specific objectives that are described in the Stewardship Plan Checklist. He suggested that we need to make the goals and objectives very clear and separate from the tactical strategies to achieve those objectives and the metrics of how we are measuring performance on the specific strategies in the Stewardship Plan Checklist. The statutory goals are the program goals that we must meet and the benchmarks are the determination of whether we have met those goals or gone above them (maintained or increased protection). The objectives and specific strategies are how we are going to meet those goals. There are two overall goals: protect and voluntarily enhance critical areas and maintain and improve agricultural viability. The group voted and agreed (unanimously) that those are the two primary goals of the VSP in an effort to not go over them again. Those goals are repeated for each of the five critical area intersections with agriculture.

The group voted on some of the questions that Charissa presented in order to understand what the group's level of agreement is on specific elements of the Work Plan.

Question #1: Are site-specific voluntary Stewardship Plans, based on NRCS conservation planning methodology and practices, the preferred model?

- Yes, the group agreed on the wording above and clarified that there are other methods to meet the goals and objectives but if an individual wants to use something else they need to demonstrate how it will get similar results as the NRCS conservation practices. The group previously agreed on using the NRCS 9-step conservation planning methodology but wanted to clarify that it can be a hybrid approach of something similar but it doesn't have to be the exact 9-step process. It was clarified that the Conservation Districts use NRCS standards and practices.
- The group agreed that when a Stewardship Plan is written the preferred method is NRCS standards and practices. In order to be able to qualify for NRCS funding, their conservation planning process, standards, and practices must be used. The landowner doesn't necessarily have to use the planning process but can use the NRCS standards and practices (the tools). If they are not using the NRCS conservation planning process they would not necessarily qualify for financial assistance and incentive programs such as EQIP. One sideways thumb: expressed the concern that it is important that flexibility, adaptive management, and local practices all get built into the Stewardship Plan. If that is clear then it is a thumbs up on using the NRCS model.

Question #2: Can having more information help improve agricultural viability (from the technical assistance, agricultural liaison, online clearinghouse, etc.)?

- Yes, not specifically for the economic viability of Ag but for the overall viability. It's important for Ag operators to have a point source to get all the information relative to Ag that they need for starting, maintaining, or improving their operations (not necessarily a government source). One concern expressed that it shouldn't be a government source, that it needs to interface between the producer and government, and other sources of information are encouraged.

Question #3: Can providing more opportunities for marketing (individual VSP farm signs, recognition, certification, etc.) help improve Ag viability?

- Yes, it would be helpful to producers, for example, if individuals get signs and they are uniform. Could also have a 3rd party certification for the consumer to understand that the farm they are buying the product from is a VSP farm. Don't have to be government sponsored programs. There is also business assistance that can be provided to help with marketing and improving agricultural businesses and economic viability of Ag.

Question #4: Would reviewing county policies, codes, and fees related to Ag, and analyzing them to determine what items can be eliminated, modified or simplified, help improve Ag viability?

- The group had a spirited discussion of if we want to have a process in place to review other policies, codes and fees related to Ag that are not covered by critical areas regulations. Concern was expressed that this is not the purpose of VSP, it would be better addressed by the Agricultural Advisory Committee or some other group. This regulatory/tax reform issue was one of the primary barriers for Ag viability discussed at the Ag community workshop. This idea would

go beyond critical areas regulations and gets into ways to maintain and improve the overall viability of agriculture. No vote was made on this question as the group ran out of time.

Ron Shultz gave an update on the legislative budget. Chelan and Thurston have VSP funding up until June 30th because this funding is in the operating budget so it does not carry into the next biennium. After the new biennial budget is decided by the Legislature there will most likely be a delay (roughly 6 months last time) in getting the funding to the counties. They (CC) are looking at the budget now and seeing if there is funding for the two counties to finish plan development because there was a delay. Operating budgets for the house and the senate are very similar, which means they include full funding for VSP (7.6 million for all counties that opted-in). There is no funding until they pass a budget that is signed by the governor. The volunteer members of the group could continue meeting. WSU will likely not be on a contract for facilitating after June 30th and if the County continues staffing (pending funding) they may also bring in another facilitator, in which case WSU would help with the transition. The WA Conservation Commission's goal is to make sure that they have additional funding available to help the Work Group see the Work Plan through to completion.

Next Meeting was set for June 23, 2015 from 4-6pm.

John Stuhlmiller offered to have the Farm Bureau (Evan and himself) revise the Stewardship Plan checklist.

Charissa will revise the Monitoring Plan draft based on the feedback at this meeting and have a new draft for the work group to review as well as updated questions (#5-7) for the group to vote on at the next meeting.

We will continue to discuss and refine the work plan drafts at the next meeting. Please email Mike Gaffney at mjgaffney@wsu.edu with any items you would like to see added to the agenda.