

Thurston County Voluntary Stewardship Program
Workgroup Meeting #21 Summary
April 21, 2016 4:00 – 6:00 PM
Washington State Farm Bureau offices

In attendance: Jim Goche, Evan Sheffels, Kathleen Whalen, Aslan Meade, Theresa Nation, Rick Nelson, Stephen Bramwell, Bruce Morgan, Brian Merryman, Karen Parkhurst, Jon McAninch, Kevin O’Sullivan, Maya Buhler, Charissa Waters, Brad Murphy, Neil Aaland.

EDC/Port – Scope of Work for Agriculture – Maintain & Improve Long Term Viability of Agriculture

Aslan Meade with the EDC addressed this topic. In 2012 the Thurston Economic Development Council (EDC) conducted a “cluster analysis”. Agriculture and food production emerged as one of the top 5 industries in the region. The EDC now has dedicated staff focusing on agriculture. He noted that much of the available local warehouse space is being taken up by marijuana businesses. He would like to see an agriculture business center funded, perhaps located in Tenino. The Port of Olympia might get involved. He also noted that the Visitor and Convention Bureau is putting some funding into the “bountiful byway” program.

There is also a lack of a cold storage facility in the area; there used to be one at the port but it was torn down. The area probably can’t support a larger facility. The Port has asked Aslan to watch for any appropriate investment for the port – a question is how the port decides what to fund. Aslan is looking for specific ideas and is also open to being opportunistic; he thinks the VSP effort might be able to help in either case for identifying needs and support for specific Ag infrastructure investments and actions.

Questions and observations from the work group:

- Where is the data to help the Port make its investment decisions?
 - This is a big question; won’t be doing a comprehensive agriculture impact study, but let Aslan know if there are specific questions. The Port has not asked for a comprehensive data review. They are gathering data as they go and reaching out to ag producers and others that provide Ag resources for developing a directory.
- Would be helpful to talk to WSU agricultural economists; and perhaps they could come here and give a thumbnail sketch
- We need to know what is considered “agriculture” and how to enhance
- This VSP process is driven by the need to address over-regulation
- Technical assistance could include finding funding
- Idea of an agricultural business center is supported by legislator J.T. Wilcox

Update on new subcommittee on agriculture economic viability

The new subcommittee has met one time. Members include Karen, Evan, Jim Goche, and Jim Myers, and is supported by Charissa. Evan noted the Farm Bureau has a lot of information on its website, including links to WSU economic trends. He also noted that he has a rough draft of a definition of “agricultural viability”. Jim Goche thinks the subcommittee is responsible for putting together a process to provide information.

It was suggested the work group should be careful to avoid creating the notion that the plan could fail based on not meeting agricultural viability benchmarks. The VSP work plan should not be focused on things we cannot control; for example, fixing the overall regulatory environment may not be possible.

Don't create the expectation that VSP will solve everything. We should limit the number of metrics so we don't lose focus. Charissa suggested starting with available data and "easy" numbers.

Round 2: Thurston VSP Work Plan Draft with Ag Caucus Edits (review monitoring and measurable benchmarks)

The workgroup continued the discussion from the last meeting on the work plan draft. Charissa began reviewing the draft, and handed out a list of questions for the group – to prompt discussion on components of the draft. Questions and observations included:

Table 2:

- Regarding Ag objective 2, there should be some room for "early wins" (meeting benchmarks), such as the number of people signing up for programs
- On Table 2, page 20, Ag objective 4 should be moved to the "participation" section
- The work plan needs to define agricultural viability in Thurston County; this term is not defined in the statute (Ag viability subcommittee is working on this)
- Water needs to be available; include as an objective for agricultural viability
- Should the work plan say that we are considering Ag viability actions countywide, not just for one watershed? [Yes; general agreement—all water sheds were chosen as priority in the VSP]
- Consider collaborating with nearby counties if appropriate

Table 3:

- Work plan should help demonstrate that farmers are not contributing to problems downstream in a basin when they are implementing a Stewardship Plan
- Concern from new members about critical area regulations
- Want to see some language that discusses what participation is (participation and goals are in a separate section and Table 9 of the Work plan)
- We should focus on the stewardship checklist, which helps people understand VSP purpose and goals and how it is applied on the ground

Neil summarized next steps

1. The new subcommittee on agricultural economic viability will continue to meet
2. We will continue to review the draft at the next meeting

The meeting adjourned approximately 5:45 pm.