

**Thurston County Voluntary Stewardship Program
Workgroup Meeting #23 Summary
June 13, 2016 1:00 – 3:00 PM
Washington State Farm Bureau offices**

In attendance:

Stephen Bramwell

Patrick Dunn

Bill Eller

Jim Goche, Friendly Grove Farms

Eric Johnson, Johnson Farms

Jeff Killelea

Bruce Morgan

Jim Myers

Theresa Nation

Rick Nelson

Karen Parkhurst

Evan Sheffels, WSFB

Staff: Maya Buhler, Charissa Waters, Neil Aaland

Welcome and Introductions: Facilitator Neil Aaland opened the meeting and asked attendees to introduce themselves; he then reviewed the agenda.

Recent review of draft work plan by Statewide Technical Panel

Bill Eller, Conservation Commission, discussed the recent review of an earlier Thurston VSP Workplan draft by the statewide Technical Panel (TP). The WSCC has been trying to have the Technical Panel meet more regularly, hoping to get them better positioned to start reviewing work plans. Bill has a goal of developing and putting out guidance. The intent of reviewing the Thurston plan, which was prior to the detailed informal review of the Chelan plan, was to introduce the TP to what a plan includes. He is working on meeting minutes for that meeting, and will also be preparing notes for Chelan.

Questions and comments from VSP work group members included:

- What was the TP view of the Chelan plan? [The TP was pleased; the early meeting on Thurston also went well but they had some suggestions. Charissa noted the Thurston plan they reviewed was the version from almost a year earlier.]
- Data was mentioned as something the TB is interested in; keep in mind a lot of information is not readily available, and remember the need for flexibility
- Remember that past reliance on things like big buffers has not always worked
- What are other counties doing in structuring work groups? [Some are having their CD's manage the process, others are hiring consultants]
- Is the VSP work group a government agency? We need to think about a potential challenge once a work plan is completed based on that issue; also concerned about procedural steps of approving
- Would it be helpful for Charissa to attend the next TP meeting? [They have a long road ahead]
- The issue of confidentiality/disclosure has come up, and direction from the TP on that would be useful

Public Agency Status of VSP Work Group/Application of the Open Public Meetings Law. VSP members again raised questions about the Washington State Conservation Commission's position on whether the VSP Work Groups are public agencies and subject to the Open Public Meeting Act. Member concerns include personal legal liability that may arise under the law and OPMA's effect on the VSP Work Plan.

WSCC has suggested that Work Groups are public agencies but has provided no clear direction on or legal guidance on this point. Members asked that WSCC clarify its position in writing and to also immediately obtain a legal opinion from the Washington State Attorney General office regarding the Work Groups' status in Thurston County and in the other 28 VSP counties.

Schedule for plan completion (topics, timeline, longer August meeting)

Bill reviewed the due dates. After considering the hiatus following the end of funding from 2013-2015, it appears the submittal date to the TP is April 2017; approval by July 2017. He will post confirmed dates on the WSCC website.

Neil handed out the proposed schedule that he, Charissa, and Maya prepared (refer to handout "VSP Timeline 5-31"). He noted the August meeting may be a longer meeting, and would have to be moved due to a date conflict.

Report from the Work Group's "Agricultural Viability" Subcommittee. The subcommittee presented six criteria that it had identified for assessing agricultural viability and which provide a basis for developing metrics and benchmarks that are necessary for the Thurston County VSP Work Plan. The Committee's report shows five bulleted points under the categories of "Land", "Water", "A Reasonable Regulatory Environment", "Infrastructure", and "Relationships and Communication" and adds a sixth point in a preamble regarding the need for a healthy agricultural economy to support farmers and working lands. A copy of the report is included in these minutes (below).

Evan Sheffels offered a summary of the subcommittee's last meeting and Jim Myers and Jim Goche discussed members' belief that Thurston County has to develop reliable economic data about local agriculture for both its VSP Work Plan and for County policy-making to support it. Jim Myers talked about the need for an agriculture economic impact study and Jim Goche' reported that the subcommittee had invited Dr. Riley Moore, who teaches Economics at St. Martin's University and who has served as a resource for other, similar data collection projects, to attend its next meeting.

The subcommittee also talked about a baseline conditions report. There was discussion about whether we can get information from individual farm plans, which are generally confidential. It may be possible to request higher-level information from the Conservation District, for example how many acres are covered by farm plans. Thurston staff should also ask Ron Shultz for that information. Another suggestion was to do a couple of case studies based on CD information.

Discussion centered on whether to use a subcommittee to help elaborate on information for the baseline conditions report. Charissa noted that data collection could be part of the early implementation phase of an adopted plan. The agricultural viability subcommittee has talked about working on the outreach and implementation plan at the appropriate time.

Review revised metrics/benchmarks for section 2 of work plan (review work from technical subcommittee)

Charissa reviewed the revised metrics/benchmarks, looking at section 2.1. Evan thinks this should be simplified; he is concerned it will be harder to meet the goals. For example, have a simpler goal that for each critical area, we meet the baseline of July 2011. Charissa noted the goal is not the benchmark, and thinks we have to formally meet the benchmark for work plan success, which is why those statements are kept simple. Evan had a different opinion on that. Jim suggested a statement explaining what is aspirational (the goal) and what is required (the benchmark). Evan noted that the statute references

goals, and thinks they should just protect the baseline. Enhancement activities should be further articulated.

Other questions and comments:

- Need clarification on what really applies, e.g. components of geologically hazardous areas that are relevant
- Some objectives in the table are not really part of fish and wildlife conservation; e.g. protect ag productivity from wildlife and pest damage”
 - Charissa noted the different objectives for ag vs. critical areas in the table are side-by-side, which was causing some confusion
- General agreement to separate the tables by ag viability and critical area objectives and measurements for each intersection area to increase clarity

Charissa summarized the “beta test” at Bruce Morgan’s farm. They got a lot of good information, and have to make some revisions to the checklist. For example, it seems better to have separate checklists for different types of land use.

Next steps (Neil)

1. Continue work on goals and benchmarks
2. Work on obtaining information from individual farm plans
3. Continue the subcommittee work
4. Hear more about Technical Panel input at next meeting (Charissa will summarize Thurston and Neil will summarize Chelan)

The meeting adjourned approximately 3:00 pm.

The next meeting will be on Thursday, July 21.

THURSTON COUNTY VSP AGRICULTURAL VIABILITY SUBCOMMITTEE

Definition of “Agricultural Viability”

Updated revision from June 6, 2016 meeting

Preamble

Though preservation of Ag land is an important tool in the Ag Viability toolbox, simply saving farmland isn't sufficient to keep the Ag industry viable. A healthy and prosperous farm economy is the foundation of a strong food system. The bumper stickers make the point concisely: “No farms, no food” and “It's not farmland without farmers”. Ag viability and local food security turn first and foremost on the economic viability of farm and ranch operations, and that depends on several necessary Ag viability elements. Consistent VSP efforts to strengthen these elements on a county or watershed-wide basis (not farm-by-farm), will help maintain and enhance the viability of Thurston County agriculture. The five elements of agricultural viability in this document are also applicable to aquaculture and necessary resources, including growing area and clean water. This is implied through the remainder of the document when agriculture or resources are mentioned.

Agricultural Viability. The Thurston County Voluntary Stewardship Program defines “agricultural viability” in the following manner:

1) Land. Agriculture requires adequate land with good soil to produce healthy crops of food, fiber, and fuel. Businesses that support agriculture (like farm & garden stores, horticultural operations, food processors, suppliers, equipment dealers and repair facilities) need an adequate base of productive agricultural lands to remain viable.

Potential Ag Viability land base indicators/interactions to inventory and track:

The statute already identifies a number of indicators which include land in production, production totals of crops, and economic benefits created by local agriculture for Thurston County.

2) Water. Agricultural production needs clean water to grow crops and farms/ranches need access to sufficient water resources in order to remain viable. Therefore, laws must support farmers' existing and future water rights and farms' access to sufficient water in order to maintain and enhance agricultural production.

Potential Ag Viability water resource indicators/interactions to inventory and track:

VSP-sanctioned actions / efforts to help producers improve the reliability of their water rights, implement new technologies to improve irrigation efficiency, or pursue water supply solutions and structural/operational improvements to Ag water infrastructure.

3) A Reasonable Regulatory Environment. Producers need reasonable and predictable standards and streamlined processes to reduce costs and burdens.

Potential Ag Viability regulatory indicators/interactions to inventory and track:

4) Infrastructure. Viable agriculture needs infrastructure including transportation, water and waste utilities, drainage systems, access to markets, and equipment.

Potential Ag Viability infrastructure indicators/interactions to inventory and track:

5) Relationships and Communications. Ag viability depends on a healthy network of community support for producers, including university and field research, technical assistance, training and education, farm bill assistance, business planning, financial assistance, value-added product development and marketing, farm succession, soil and water conservation, and other Ag-enhancing or risk-reducing efforts. Agricultural operators require readily available access to accurate and timely information in order to meet ongoing changes in the marketplace as well as future political and regulatory climates.

Potential Ag Viability technical support indicators/interactions to inventory and track:

DRAFT