

**Spokane County VSP  
Work Group Meeting  
Minutes  
January 18, 2017**

**Work Group Members Present:** David Boleneus, Brent Burger, Judy Crowder (Phone), Casey Flanagan, Doug Greenlund, Robyn Meenach, Ty Meyer, Kevin Paulson

**Staff:** Lindsay Chutas, Walt Edelen, Seth Flanders

**Facilitator:** Andy Dunau

**Welcome and Minutes:** Walt Edelen and Andy Dunau welcomed participants to the meeting. Brent made a motion to accept the October 19 minutes and Robyn seconded. The motion passed.

The work group reviewed the updated Spokane BOCC resolution designating the Spokane Conservation District as the Lead Entity. The language was modified from "... hereby designate the Spokane Conservation District as the Lead Entity to develop and implement the VSP in Spokane County" to "... hereby designate the Spokane Conservation District as the Lead Entity as provided for in RCW 36.70.715(4) to coordinate the local watershed group."

Walt shared draft language and picture for "retractable" that could be used at public meetings to support VSP outreach. Wording edits were suggested. Walt will work with communication consultants and send e-mail with artwork for further input.

Walt then discussed Karoline Nagel, a speaker at the PNDSA conference, who supports outreach for agriculture in Canada. Nagel helped develop an outreach piece in magazine format that introduces the general public to what's grown, economic value, environmental stewardship, and other benefits of their work. He suggested the possibility of VSP doing a similar publication for Spokane County. The group is interested and will consider as further progress in work plan development is made. Walt also suggested watching the short documentary called "License to Farm" which is a promotion of the farming community in Canada

**Mapping Report and Progress:** Maps, by WIRA, of each of the five critical areas and agricultural lands were hung around the room. There are five WRIAs (watershed units) in Spokane County. Maps also included the small sections of other watersheds that are within the borders of Spokane County but do not cover a significant section of land.

Lindsay introduced the maps and had work group members use sticky notes to note observations and questions. The group then reconvened and discussed. The most common group comments for the maps included:

- Emphasize the ag land layer and deemphasize the aerial photo, "Make those ag lands pop!"

- What is critical about the critical area habitat? Does each and every color representing various species need to be on the map, or can defining the critical elements reduce the number of species and thus color needed on the map.
- Clearer representation of the Spokane Valley Rathdrum Prairie Aquifer.
- Important to clarify definitions, e.g.—high and moderate sensitivity of aquifer recharge and 30 vs. 100-year probability of flood areas.
- Need range layer

Regarding ag layer, WSDA is what is currently being used. Review of USDA census data shows significant differences in number of acres and gains/losses over time. The group will need to determine what information is going to be used for mapping based on what is attainable, repeatable and best represents the county. Robyn suggested inquiring about use of FSA data. David suggested using DNR. The DNR maps, however, are not broken down enough to provide the information needed by the group.

Lindsay then described the three phases of the mapping process.

- 1) Create the maps to the specifications of the workgroup, which is what is currently being done.
- 2) Create definitions for each layer and data source, e.g.—when it was created, what does it include, when it is expected to be updated.
- 3) Create data tables showing the intersection (by acreage) between ag lands and each critical area by WIRA.

Lindsay will follow-up with agencies and report back at the next meeting. The goal for the next meeting is to provide updated maps and draft definitions.

### **Agricultural Viability and USDA Census Data**

Andy used the USDA census data to help develop a profile of agriculture in Spokane County. Summary information was provided and supported by a series of tables. The group reviewed, and highlighted the following:

- Ag in Spokane largely falls into two “buckets.”
  - Large scale farms. 10% of farms contribute 89% of commodity value. Farms greater than 500 acres represent 9% of the farms but 73% of the acreage.
  - Small farms. 60% of farms are less than 50 acres and 73% are less than 99% acres. 80% of the farms contribute only 3% of the commodity value.
- The primary agricultural activities are
  - wheat and other grains, which account for 62% of acres and 60% of commodity value;
  - forage, which accounts for 59% of farms and 20% of acres
  - livestock, which accounts for 44% of farms and 11% of commodity value.

- Spokane County farm lands are declining substantially.
  - From 2007 to 2012, a 14% decline; from 2002 to 2012, a 16% decline (or over 105,000 acres). Staff noted that WSDA data does not show this large drop off in farm lands.
  - 75% of losses are in pastureland and 9% in cropland.
- While the total number of farms is stable, this is due to loss of large farms being replaced by increases in small farms.
- Compared to the state as a whole, Spokane County farms are smaller and average sales less.

The analysis also supported previous committee discussion that irrigation is not a major factor in Spokane County agriculture, and that small farming activities are increasing.

Comments from the work group included:

- Ag losses may relate to increases in urban encroachment such as lands being sold for development of residential lots.
- We need a better understanding of what’s happening with the land being lost. Are the lands truly being lost as ag land, or is their reclassification that needs to be better understood?
- Work with county assessor to determine if open space lands are increasing or declining, and whether this is supporting trend lines indicating increases in small farming.
- Better understand how USDA is counting lands. For instance, what is the effect of a large farm being broken up into a number of smaller, leased operations.
- Contact FSA to get their perspective and possible information.
- Work with USDA and WSDA to better understand differences in their data sets.
- Ag viability section of work plan should differentiate between the different circumstances of large farm vs. small farm operations.

Lindsay and Andy will follow-up with USDA and WSDA.

**State Updates:** WA State Conservation Commission has scheduled regional VSP meetings for January 24<sup>th</sup> (Moses Lake) and January 27<sup>th</sup> (Olympia). These are full day meetings to address VSP progress, on-going questions and issues of concern, and examples of work plan product.

Presentations were made by Thurston County and QEA Anchor (which is working with five counties, on work plan development. Their PowerPoints can be found on the conservation commission VSP web site under technical panel tab. The presentations give a sense of how benchmarks, goals, objectives and monitoring will be addressed.

**Closing and Action Items:** Follow-up and action items include:

- Walt will continue work on “retractable.”
- Andy will draft and distribute January minutes.
- Lindsay continue mapping development with particular emphasis on responding to group comments and developing definitions for each GIS layer.

- Lindsay and Andy follow-up with USDA to better understand census data and differences with other data sets.
- Andy determine availability of statistics showing contribution of agriculture to Spokane County economy.
- Seth continue summarizing related plans.
- Walt continue to identify field trip opportunities.

The next VSP meeting will be Wednesday, February 15th, 6:00—8:00 p.m. at the Spokane Conservation District. The meeting was adjourned at 8:10 p.m.