

**Minutes
Work Group
Spokane County Voluntary Stewardship Program
May 11, 2022
6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m**

Work Group Members Present: Casey Flanagan, Methea Sapp, Kat Hall

Staff: Joe Zimbric

Facilitator: Andy Dunau

Welcome and Administration: The meeting convened via MS Teams video conference.

Approval of March minutes was postponed due to lack of quorum.

The deadline for accepting VSP membership applications was extended until May 31. A promising application from an EWU professor working on prairie restoration was received. Joe was encouraged to follow-up with her.

Joe reviewed with the group VSP budget and expenses through March. He reported that if the county fully covers the cost of acquiring aerial imagery, these VSP budgeted funds can be put to other use. The facilitation line is underreporting expenses. Once corrected, there may be excess funds in this line item as well. Consultant support for aerial imagery and monitoring is still expected to be expensed once projects are fully defined.

The group discussed and reached consensus on the idea of doing late June field trip of projects representing VSP priorities and challenges. Joe and Andy will identify date and develop agenda. The field trip will replace the July VSP meeting.

Informational Updates and Program Planning

Conservation Commission Adaptive Management Advisory: The commission provided VSP groups a definition that begins “Adaptive management is an iterative learning process producing improved understanding and improved management over time. It promotes flexible decision making that can be adjusted in the face of uncertainties as outcomes from management actions and other events become better understood.”

VSP work groups are to expected to apply adaptive management whenever it is warranted (e.g.—monitoring demonstrates benchmarks are not being) and as part of the 5 year report and evaluation process.

2022 VSP Supplemental Budget: As part of the recently signed WA State supplemental budget that extends through June 30, 2022, the WA State Conservation Commission received an additional three million dollars for VSP project implementation. Each VSP county can propose a project(s) to the commission for funding. Details on requirements, timeline, etc. will be released

on May 25th. A likely emphasis will be support of fisheries, particularly salmon bearing streams. Joe will communicate and engage with the work group as more information becomes known.

USDA Census Data: Ag census data collected by the USDA is released every five years. The last one was released in 2017 and used by VSP to consider trends such as number of farms, farm size, crops, acres in production, etc. The expected 2022 report is being pushed back to 2024. The assumption is this reflects a two-year work postponement that relates to COVID.

Yakima County VSP Workgroup Letter: A letter sent by Yakima County VSP was shared. Their dilemma is that a one-thousand-acre solar farm is being permitted on land where agriculture and critical wildlife habitat exists. If permitted, ag viability and critical area losses could negatively affect their ability to meet VSP goals and benchmarks. Essentially, two state priorities (clean energy growth) and VSP (no net loss of critical area habitat) are coming into conflict. While Spokane does not currently have an analogous situation, staff agrees that how the state chooses to balance out such competing issues is of interest to all. Joe will continue to monitor.

Acquiring Aerial Imagery: Lindsay has remained in contact with the county. Their acquisition still looks promising. A timeline for when it will be available is still pending.

Outreach: Activities include:

- A targeted mailing to streamside landowners in the Upper Rock Creek drainage of Hangman Creek was sent. The mailing encouraged landowners to contact Joe about technical assistance and other opportunities available to assist them. There was a low response rate. Kat explained that the Lands Council has also had low response rates when doing similar mailings. They've also followed up door-to-door to try to establish relationships with limited success. Joe will continue to send mailings out to priority drainages.

Kat shared that Gonzaga students identified 10 most promising sites for Beaver Dam Analogs (BDAs) in Rattler Run. There are significant challenges to working with landowners to support BDAs at these locations.

The group recommended Joe investigate "Next Door" app as another means of reaching out to landowners. In addition, there may be an ability to tie-in to Farmish, a web app connecting buyers with sellers of produce.

- Membership in the South and Valley Corridor Projects continues to grow. The new website to support public outreach is expected to launch in June. Members are also providing each other quarterly talks, e.g.—soil health in April.
- More updates to the conservation map will occur after the CD intern begins work in June 2022.

- Joe is developing a short Edge of Field video to summarize findings from the study.

Monitoring and Project Development Updates: Joe has developed a relationship with a UW Research Scientist, Dr. Meghan Halabisky, to continue developing wetland assessment tools. Possibilities now include:

- Remote sensing analysis of the Saltese Flats Restoration Area. This is a form of effectiveness monitoring that will validate the extent of wetland inundation pre and post restoration.
- Using lidar and machine learning to identify Wetland Intrinsic Potential (WIP). This is an effort in basic science that will help identify wetlands and support management actions in Spokane County.
- Updating the Columbia Plateau Wetland Hydrology LANDSAT that showed changes to annual mean surface water area for wetlands between 1984 and 2011.

Hangman Watershed Modeling: Ecology released their Hangman Creek Sediment Study in May. Joe will now begin an effort to model if VSP priority conservation practices, e.g.—conservation tillage, correlate with drainages showing reduced sediment loading. This will help validate VSP priority conservation practices and may suggest priority areas for additional effort.

Hangman Creek Riparian Restoration and Conservation Program: Per previous meeting notes, the program includes a 15-year competitive rental rate for landowners to receive \$225 per acre from Ecology and \$70 from FSA to restore a designated riparian buffer. The FSA component has been eliminated due to federal requirements that cannot be clarified in a timely manner. Ecology will bump up their share of rental rate, but overall it will be less than the original concept.

RCPP: 9 applications were received for distribution of \$1.8 million to WA producers within the Spokane River Watershed. The emphasis is on improving water quality. Applications will be ranked using the NRCS CART ranking tool.

Member Updates

Casey reported the Spokane Tribe is planting 1,000 trees/shrubs and installing cattle fencing as next phase of Little Spokane project.

Kat reported the Lands Council is doing plantings in Spangle Creek, Rattlers Run, Deadman Creek and Hangman Creek.

Both Casey and Kat commented that cool, wet weather is helping with survival rates and decreased short term needs for manual watering.

Action Items and Closing:

Administration:

- Organize work group field trip.
- Review workgroup member applications.

Project Development:

Continue:

- Supporting South and Valley Farm Corridor projects
- Identifying new project opportunities

Outreach:

- Investigate using Next Door app for outreach

Continue:

- Adding projects to Conservation Map
- Creating and sending targeted mail materials

Monitoring:

Continue:

- Working with Spokane County on acquiring aerial imagery
- Working with UW professor on development of wetland assessment monitoring.
- Development of Hangman Creek watershed modeling

Next Meeting

To be determined based on scheduling of field trip.