

**Minutes
Work Group
Spokane County Voluntary Stewardship Program
June 12th, 2019
6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.**

Work Group Members Present: Casey Flanagan, David Boleneus, Jay Cronk, Crystal Oliver, Ty Meyer, Chad Atkins

Staff: Lindsay Chutas, Seth Flanders, Walt Edelen, Doug Phelps

Facilitator: Andy Dunau

Guest: Mike Placzek

Welcome, Minutes and Announcements: Andy welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made around the room. Minutes from the May meeting were reviewed. Casey motioned to accept the minutes and Jay seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Updates

Story Mapping: Approved for development at the previous meeting, this will be an interactive web page that will 1) showcase VSP stewardship projects, 2) provide opportunities for agricultural producers to share and post their stewardship practices, 3) provide agricultural producers a means of joining VSP and/or requesting technical assistance, and 4) assist with reporting. Lindsay and Walt shared progress being made, including expectation that working version will available by the end of the month.

Aerial Imagery: Approved for development at the previous meeting, Lindsay shared that Core GIS is under contract and has initiated development of a proof of concept. Lindsay also shared monitoring perspectives of a VSP technical team member representing the Conservation Commission provided at a conference the previous week. The Core GIS methodology is consistent with what Spokane proposed in the work plan and is also being used by Chelan VSP. A key attribute is the ability to detect both losses and gains in riparian vegetation. Results of the proof of concept will be presented at the August meeting and be included in the Biennium Report to the Conservation Commission at the end of August.

Placzek Project: This is the first VSP funded stewardship project, which is located near Dartford Creek. Lindsay shared pictures of native plantings, including four different planting methods: a control bark chip, polymer additive, PVC piping injected at root, and a cocoon watering reservoir (see <http://www.landscapeonline.com/research/article-a.php?number=29483>). Monitoring will allow VSP to conduct a watering method effectiveness evaluation that can assist other projects. Casey was pleased with the potential of projects like this to assist with protection of native fish downstream.

Lindsay introduced Mike Placzek, the landowner. Mike share his positive experience reaching out to and working with the Conservation District. He's excited about the project and is watering the planting project to support survivability.

Walt thanked the workgroup for approving the funding to make this project happen.

Inventory:

Doug Phelps has been working on GIS mapping that delineates and monitors agricultural farmland intersects with critical areas. The initial part of his effort is to further calibrate what Lindsay did in the workplan to establish the VSP baseline. This calibration will be shared as part of the Biennium Report.

He will then be using this data to help VSP better assess and monitor tillage practices being used in the watershed. This information can be compared to what is being reported by the Ag Census and the VSP Conservation Practice Data Base. He will also be visiting willing producers to ground truth GIS information and the condition of projects listed in the Conservation Practice Database. For instance, VSP is interested in the accuracy of estimates regarding disenrollment (practices installed but either no longer functioning or removed).

Budget:

Walt passed out the Statement of Work, including budget, for VSP implementation from July 1, 2019 – June 30, 2021. The "Tasks" include deliverables that are required in the state contract. The workgroup will be instrumental in direction of funding to meet these tasks. For instance, the level of investments in tools like Story Mapping, aerial imagery monitoring, or supporting a Agricultural Viability Liaison position. As funding is limited, several strategic decisions will need to be made.

Walt and Andy both commented on the importance of the district being able to obtain funding to support delivery of technical assistance and project implementation. Once the VSP work group has completed review and submission of the Biennium Report to the state, additional budget discussions will occur in the fall.

2017 Agricultural Census Review

The USDA updates the Agricultural Census every five years. It provides a count of U.S. farms and ranches with information on things such as ownership, land use, demographics, commodity sales, production practices and income. It's broken down by state and county.

The VSP workplan used the Ag Census data from 2012 and before to summarize agricultural activities in Spokane County, note trends related to agricultural viability and how these trends compared to statewide data.

The 2019 Ag Census was released in May. Andy reviewed the census and summarized for the group information, including changes since the 2012 census. Key findings include:

- There was a small increase in “land in farms,” which halted a significant decline from 2002 – 2012.
- Large farms are (by acreage) getting larger and the number of small farms (also called hobby or ranchette farms) continues to increase. But the number and acreage of mid-size farms has declined.
- The value of wheat dropped precipitously and, as a result, Spokane County dropped from 14th to 18th when ranking the market value of agricultural products sold in the state’s 39 counties.
- 77% of harvested acres of crops reported using no-till or reduced till practices, with no till practices increasing by 25%. Experienced producers on the work group believe the self-reporting of no till is higher than the actual practice, reflecting issues with understanding practice definitions. GIS and Conservation Practice Data Base activities will help the work group better ground truth this data. Regardless, the work group does believe movement away from conventional till practices is significant and strongly supports the goals and objectives of VSP.
- Cannabis, which is not surveyed by the Ag Census, continues to provide very strong commodity value on a very small number of acres. Crystal is being of assistance collecting data that will be used in the Biennium Report.

Action Items and Closing:

The meeting in July will focus on the following Biennium Report sections:

- Outreach and technical assistance.
- Recalibrated GIS data.
- Permit and regulatory input from Spokane County

Walt will also begin drafting a job description for an Agricultural Liaison position for the work group to review.

Andy thanked everyone for coming.

There were no further comments and the meeting adjourned.