

**Minutes
Work Group
Spokane County Voluntary Stewardship Program
February 10, 2021
6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m**

Work Group Members Present: Chad Atkins, Frankie Browning, Jay Cronk, Casey Flanagan, Doug Greenlund, Alene Lindstrand, Ty Meyer, Amanda Parrish, Methea Sapp

Staff: Doug Phelps, Lindsay Chutas, Walt Edelen

Facilitator: Andy Dunau

Guest: Levi Keeseker

Welcome and Administration: The meeting convened via WebEx video conference.

Minutes: Casey made a motion to approve the November minutes. Alene seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Budget and Expense Report: As of the end of January, there is \$58,200 of VSP funding available to the end of June 2021 (the biennium). Doug and Andy reviewed forecasted expenses, providing a low and high estimate. \$4,300 to \$14,800 of revenue is expected to be available for additional VSP work. Walt noted that if the work group wants to do additional work, e.g.—a restoration project, that is outside the budget approved by the state, SCD will need to request approval from the Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC). Staff agreed to bring options back to the work group at the March meeting. Work group members were also encouraged to contact Doug with suggestions.

Spokane County Comp Plan Update: Doug reported that the planning department director and a senior staff member retired. The new planning director and assigned staff acknowledge that VSP should have been informed of proposed comp plan changes and extended the deadline for comments for proposed amendments.

Doug distributed a letter with draft comments. Comments were prepared for changes that affect ag land classification and/or ag land intersections with critical areas. Although specific circumstances differ, comments encouraged the county to consider 1) preserving and protecting agricultural activity through conservation easements, and 2) mitigating the loss of farmland and critical area functions by creating an off-set development fund.

Creating an off-set development fund was called out in the VSP work plan. With new leadership in the planning department, this is an opportune time to do further research and develop a prospectus for the county to consider. The cover letter includes a request to set-up a meeting to discuss this possibility. The work group is supportive of Andy, Doug and Walt working on this.

Work members were requested to provide any additional comments or edits to the letter by Friday morning. Doug was asked to integrate what comes in and submit to the county.

Informational Updates

Nonpoint Source Settlement Agreement: Chad provides an overview of what the litigation involved and terms of the settlement. He stressed that the settlement was developed by staff on the west side and he was getting up to speed on its implications as well.

In 2016, Northwest Environmental Advocates (NEA) filed a suit alleging EPA failed to perform duties mandated by the Endangered Species Act (ESA) to consult with the Fish & Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service under the Clean Water Act (CWA) regarding nonpoint source management programs administered by the State of Washington Department of Ecology (“Ecology”).

The settlement resolves claims that EPA violated CWA section 319 by approving Ecology's 2015 nonpoint source program update; violated CWA section 319(h)(8) that Washington had made “satisfactory progress” in implementing its nonpoint source program; and violated ESA section 7 and the annual award of section 319 grant funds by failing to properly consult.

Under the proposed settlement, Ecology will update and submit to EPA a new nonpoint source program update and 319 funding guidance. Five chapters of the Ag BMP guidance, one of which is the riparian buffer chapter, must be updated by the end of 2022. The remaining chapters must be completed by 2025. EPA is required to seek comment on the new plan from federal fish and wildlife agencies before approving.

A major focus of activity will be updating ag BMP and buffer guidance, e.g.—widths and lengths and use of woody vegetation, by December 2022. Discussion related to implications for our region that focused on the flexibility of guidance and requirements given the distinct ecological and watershed differences between the east and west side of the state. How this will affect SCD's commodity buffer program is also unknown.

Outcomes of settlement actions are numerous, possibly affecting everything from the TMDL (water quality improvement plans), 319 funding, and ESA consultation.

Staff will follow settlement implementation closely to determine when, and how, VSP may wish to comment and participate.

5-Year Report Development

GIS Comparative Analysis: Lindsay and Doug reminded the group that comparisons for gains and losses are based only on areas where agricultural land and critical areas intersect.

Since the last meeting, Lindsay investigated significant differences found in wetlands. She discovered that the data file was not an apples-to-apples comparison with what was used for the 2011 baseline. When the appropriate data set was used, minimal change compared to baseline was found. Long term, however, staff believes a different method for comparing wetland changes over time should be identified. The data layer is based on the National Wetlands Inventory (NWI) that dates back to the 1980s. The county and state simply update the NWI based on field activities showing discrepancies, so it's not a true time-based comparative analysis

based on updated imagery. For VSP, Lindsay needed to compare the state's version of NWI in 2011 and 2017.

Levi reported other VSP projects were encountering the same issue. Staff recommended, and the group supports, investigating options with aerial imagery and further consulting with the state to determine if a better monitoring method is available to support the next five-year report.

Staff also recommended consulting with the Department of Fish and Wildlife to validate that the minimal changes found in 2011 vs 2017 imagery priority habitat species are not affecting priority species identified in the work plan. The work group supports engaging in this discussion before the March meeting.

Results for geologic hazards, critical aquifer recharge and frequently flooded areas remain unchanged.

The agricultural layer, which comes from WSDA, has a five percent error rate. Other layers do not report an error rate. Lindsay will write up an error rate description that will be reviewed at the next meeting. This is important because comparative differences within the error rate will not be considered statistically significant.

Lindsay then showed the group maps with examples of where changes could be detected. For instance, there has been significant growth in small farm production in Otis Orchards. The maps were difficult to view via WebEx. Lindsay will share with any interested work group member the full set of maps and discuss with them.

Aerial Imagery, Spatial Analysis: Lindsay further refined gains and losses based on aerial imagery analysis. Losses were quite small and of no statistical significance. Lindsay suggested that where losses were identified, this is an excellent tool to then follow-up with field checks to see if conservation practices may be needed.

5-Year Report Template Input

Doug is about halfway through inputting results into the 5-year template (about 280 of 550 rows). As data analysis continues to be validated, he will continue inputting data and give another update at the March meeting.

Levi encouraged the group to continue using the data to inform development of VSP activities and consider long term watershed and agricultural viability needs. The group thanked Levi for his assistance and encouragement of networking between VSP groups. There is much to learned through sharing of best practices.

Project Development and Technical Assistance

Lands Council Listening Sessions: As part of their Ecology 319 grant, the Lands Council is working with the University of Idaho and The Lands Council to host an online listening session with crop and livestock producers to hear their views on installing riparian buffers on their land. The essential purpose is to learn about their experiences, identify barriers and opportunities to installing more riparian buffers, and identify the most effective ways to communicate with them.

Amanda shared their flyer. Meetings will be held February 23rd and 26th. It's open to all livestock and crop producers. Chad clarified that the Lands Council would need to independently fund stipends for participants from Idaho.

Other: Staff continues to monitor activities. New work, however, is on hold until the 5-year report is complete and submitted.

Action Items and Closing:

Administration:

- Staff will develop options for spending down remaining VSP biennium funds.

5-Year Report

- Lindsay will write up definition of error rate for GIS mapping and aerial imagery analysis.
- Doug to acquire Edge of Field statistical analysis required for report.
- Doug to continue inputting data into the template.

Next Meeting

The next VSP meeting will be March 10th.