

## Education and Public Outreach Working Group

### Charge from Groundwater Management Area Advisory Committee

#### Working Group Members

Andres Cervantes (GWAC-DOH), Jean Mendoza (GWAC-Friends of Toppenish Creek), Tom Tebb (GWAC-Ecology), Elizabeth Torres (Citizen), Gretchen Stewart (EPA), Nieves Negrete (Citizen), Patricia Newhouse (GWAC-Citizen Rep Position #2), Tom Eaton (GWAC-EPA), Dean Effler (Citizen), Joye Redfield-Wilder (Ecology), Stuart Turner (GWAC-Turner & Co), Ignacio Marquez (AGR)

#### Meetings/Calls Dates

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Meeting: Wednesday, December 10, 2014                      1:30 PM – 3:45 PM

#### Participants

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Lisa Freund (EPO Chair -Yakima County), Jim Davenport (Yakima County), Elizabeth Torres (Citizen), Andres Cervantes (GWAC-DOH), Joye Redfield-Wilder (Ecology), Avery Richardson (Ecology), Ignacio Marquez (WSDA), Karri Espinoza (Yakima County staff)  
\*Jean Mendoza (GWAC-Friends of Toppenish Creek), \*Gretchen Stewart (EPA), \*Kelsen Caldwell (UW)

\*via phone

#### Key Discussion Points

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**Welcome & Meeting Overview:** Lisa Freund welcomed the group, introduced guests Avery Richardson and Kelsen Caldwell, and reviewed the meeting agenda: to discuss the campaign to identify abandoned or improperly decommissioned wells in the LYV GWMA and septic system outreach. Avery will speak to Ecology's experience identifying abandoned wells, conducting outreach and decommissioning wells. Kelsen will introduce the UW's Common Book course and proposed partnership with the EPO. Based on the presentations and discussions, the EPO will determine its abandon wells outreach next steps and identify time frames to complete the work.

#### Abandoned Well Outreach - Lessons Learned -

Avery Richardson, Ecology hydro-geologist, spoke to the group about experiences Ecology has had identifying abandoned wells, conducting outreach and decommissioning wells:

Avery provided the definitions of abandon wells vs. decommissioned wells

- Abandoned well – a well that is no longer in use; property owners have simply walked away from the well.
- Decommissioned well – a well that is no longer in use and has been shut down/capped off by a licensed well driller and reported to the Department of Ecology (See WAC 173-160-261).

## Challenges

**Definitions:** Avery noted that challenges to outreach include defining for the public the legal definitions of “abandoned” and “decommissioned” wells, and the property owners’ legal requirement to decommission unused wells. He observed that Ecology’s well log database would not be helpful for EPO’s purposes. It is a snapshot in time that does not reflect change of use or change of ownership over time.

**Costs:** Decommissioning a well can cost between \$1,000 and \$20,000. All wells are different and the cost is determined by the size, age and type of the well. Generally, older wells (pre-1972) that were not constructed by a well driller are at a higher risk. Wells with no cap, no surface seal and/or old dug wells pose a higher risk.

**Partners:** Because of the high costs of decommissioning a well most property owners are not willing to self-identify abandoned wells on their properties because they will be on the hook to decommission the well at their expense. The most effective way Ecology has identified abandoned wells is from bank-owned properties (foreclosures) following the 2008 recession. Land-use decisions at the County level are another means to bring property owners into compliance. For example, counties could require well decommissioning as a condition for short plat approvals. Well drillers are strong supporters of decommissioning wells properly.

**Wells and Risks:** There are an estimated 45,000 wells on record with Ecology dating back to 1972. Hand dug wells and wells with ground level openings tend to have a higher risk of contamination and be a danger to the public. Wells dug by well drillers and have higher level openings with proper covers and seals tend to have a lower risk of contamination to the ground water and less danger to the public.

**Funding Options:** Jim Davenport observed that the question before the GWAC is, can we identify a general public benefit to decommissioned wells that might allow us to use public funds to decommission wells? Avery replied that that was a legal question he could not answer. He added that a new “Notice of Intent” fee has been discussed at Ecology but would require legislative action to implement.

Currently, for Ecology to require property owners to decommission an abandoned well, there must be an administrative order, which is an appealable action. Other expenses

could include attorney, court fees and penalties. Ecology has not had much success with the courts issuing judgments to the property owners.

News releases, PSA's and social media have been the most effective way to educate the public on the hazards and dangers of abandoned wells.

Avery observed that another selling point [to the campaign] would be an increase to a property's value. He concluded that wells are not consistently risky – some are (as discussed above) but many are not high risk.

**ACTION:** EPO has agreed to begin the education and outreach on abandoned wells as well as strategize on how to identify them.

**Audiences:**

Local Well Drillers  
Banks  
County- Planning (Short Plats)  
Landowners/farmers  
Yakima Health District  
Department of Health  
Ecology

**Constraints:**

Cost  
Reluctance to self-identify  
Legal liabilities

**Abandoned Well and Septic System Outreach – UW Partnership Proposal:**

*Background:* Kelsen Caldwell, a co-instructor in the Health Science Division at the University of Washington, is teaching a one credit graduate course winter quarter (January 5-March 2, 2015). The curriculum will be designed around the book “*Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies,*” an anthology of the social suffering of farmworkers in the United States. The class is comprised of future healthcare providers; the intent is to engage them in the communities they will serve through a project-based assignment. Kelsen has had preliminary conversations with Nieves Negrete, Elizabeth Torres and Jean Mendoza about class collaboration with the EPO on the Abandoned Well campaign.

Because it is only a one credit course, students will have limited opportunities to engage on a local level. They will take one field trip to the Yakima Valley early in the course to get a better feel and visual of the environment they will be studying. Kelsen asked the EPO to consider a class white paper proposal that would provide an outreach implementation strategy for the EPO. In exchange, she will need assistance connecting students with the appropriate community partners and with field trip coordination.

Jim Davenport observed that although the white paper has good ideas, it does not address the primary need of the group: the need for bodies to go out and find abandoned wells.

Discussion followed on what would be useful class products for the EPO and the campaign. Ideas included a written request to legislators to promote legislation for

funding to decommission wells, targeted messaging to specific audiences (banks, well drillers, property owners); messaging and content for news releases, brochures, billboards and accompanying layout/design work.

Kelsen was asked if there are any Spanish speakers taking the course. She replied that a few are, but not the majority. A member observed that the strength of the UW is its community-based participatory research, a strength the group should take advantage of.

The group agreed that given proposal's limited timeframe, the students will not have time to address septic system outreach. Accordingly, that component will be dropped from the UW proposal.

Kelsen agreed to resend the proposal with the more informed perspective she has heard today. She will resubmit it to Lisa Freund by close of business Friday, December 12. Lisa will share it with the EPO and request their comments early in the week of the 15<sup>th</sup> so Kelsen can finalize the class syllabus.

**ACTION:** Kelsen will submit an updated proposal along with a list of potential dates for the field trip to Lisa by Friday December 12, 2014.

**ACTION:** EPO members will give their feedback on the proposal early next week to insure Kelsen has enough time to prepare for her class that begins Jan 5.

**ACTION:** Lisa, Elizabeth and others will provide Kelsen with contacts of community liaisons that can assist her during the class.

### **Proposed Next Steps – January Meeting Topics**

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- **ACTION:** Monday, January 5, 2015, 6:20 PM: Andy Cervantes (others-to be determined) will give a Skype or in-person presentation to the class using a power point presentation and Q&A session.
- Begin Education and Outreach for abandoned wells.
- Strategize the most effective way to identify abandon wells.

Next meeting: Wednesday, January 7, 2015 at 1:30 PM, Yakima County Courthouse Room 419 (phone: 509-574-2353 [PIN# 2353#])