

Irrigated Ag Working Group (IAWG)

Charge from Groundwater Management Area Advisory Committee

Working Group Members

Dr. Troy Peters (GWAC-WSU); Bob Stevens (interested party) Bud Rogers (GWAC-Citizen), Chelsea Durfey (GWAC), Dan McCarty (interested party), Dave Cowan (interested party), Dave Fraser (Interested Party - Simplot Agronomist), Donald Jameson (interested party), Doug Simpson (GWAC-Farmer), Frank Lyall (GWAC-Farm Bureau), Ginny Prest (GWAC-Dept. of Ag), Jean Mendoza (GWAC-Friends of Toppenish Creek), Jim Newhouse (GWAC), Kevin Lindsey (interested party), Kirk Cook (GWAC-WSDA), Laurie Crowe (GWAC-South Yakima Conservation District), Melanie Redding (Ecology), Mike Shuttleworth (interested party), Ralph Fisher (EPA), Ron Cowin (GWAC-SVID), Scott Stephen (interested party), Stuart Turner (GWAC-Turner & Co.), Tom Tebb (GWAC-Department of Ecology), Rosalio Brambila (interested party), Vern Redifer, Jim Davenport.

Meetings/Calls Dates

Meeting: Sunnyside Valley Irrigation District Office, 120 S. Eleventh Street, Sunnyside, WA

When: August 7, 2017, from 1:30 pm to 3:30 pm.

Call: (509) 574-2353 – Pin # 2353

Participants

Troy Peters (Chair), Vern Redifer, Kathleen Rogers, Jean Mendoza, Jim Davenport, Stuart Crane, Doug Simpson, Laurie Crowe, Rodney Heit, Gary Bahr, Perry Beale, Frank Lyall, Ron Cowin, Scott Stephen*, Chris Saunders (Yakima County Support Staff) *Present via telephone.

Key Discussion Points

Chair Troy Peters called the meeting to order at 1:30 pm.

Nitrogen Availability Assessment (NAA) Comments: After the customary introductions, the group began giving their feedback to Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) officials Gary Bahr and Perry Beale concerning the Irrigated Ag section of the draft NAA.

A member pointed out that the first paragraph on page 30 states, “This assessment is not intended to evaluate the practices of individual farming operations within the GWMA.” He then referred to Figure 8 on page 47, a map which depicted the medium-range nitrogen availability scenario within the GWMA. Land parcels colored in red depicted areas where nitrogen-rich products were potentially being applied at over 500 tons/year. The member felt this would be interpreted as indicting the practices of individual farmers on those parcels, and had been called a “litigation magnet” when it had been presented in Olympia. WSDA officials pointed to the language on

pages 30-31 under “limitations”, and the first paragraph on page 48, which laid out disclaimers explaining the uncertainties inherent in the survey data. They felt this would be sufficient to deter litigation.

Discussion ensued on the reliability of the sources that supplied the survey data. WSDA had collected data from a variety of sources, including crop consultants, agronomists, and telephone surveys of willing farmers. A group member felt this was mixing survey methods and that crop consultants, while an important part of the agriculture system, were too far divorced from on-the-ground field practices. While many farmers listen to consultants and agronomists, group members who were growers and consultants confirmed that they don’t always follow outside advice when it comes to applying fertilizer, manure, or compost to their fields. Troy and WSDA officials asked how they could communicate the limitations more effectively in the final draft. The group member felt most readers would focus on the maps without paying too much attention to the disclaimers, and that it would be better to drop the maps from the final draft altogether. He also felt that the NAA should have relied solely on application numbers supplied directly from farmers, and left out numbers from consultants. Another group member felt this was unrealistic, as participation the survey was voluntary, and many farmers declined to participate.

The first full paragraph on page 31 states that the NAA “does not include information on the use or benefits of nitrogen-fixing cover crops”, and that this was “beyond the scope of this study.” A group member felt that cover crops mattered tremendously to nitrogen levels in the soil. For example, cover crops such as pasture grass require additional nutrient application, can cover as much as 90 percent of the surface area in tree crops and vineyards, and can last for decades. He felt that Tables 13, 14, and 15 on pages 39, 43, and 44 did not present credible data as they didn’t take cover crops into account. WSDA officials stated they were already working on including cover crop data in the final draft, in response to written comments from members, and handed their initial findings out to the group. Their data was based conversations with WSU crop specialists, which led to further questioning of the reliability of survey data by supplied by experts as opposed to growers.

The discussion moved on to Table 15, a chart depicting the sum of inputs and outputs for the top 15 crops in the GWMA. Several group members questioned the low-range estimate for juice grape growers, which showed a nutrient surplus of 312 tons spread out over the entire GWMA. They saw this figure as highly inaccurate, and questioned why some crops were shown with no nutrient surplus in the low-range, but others were shown with very large surpluses. Given the variability in farming practices, a member felt that zero should be the low-end estimate in all cases. Another member pointed out the apple grower line on Table 14, and questioned the high-range figure of 219 pounds of nutrients per-acre/per-year, and requested time to review the numbers. He also felt that the disclaimer language on page 43 explaining that nutrient application levels will change year-by-year could have been set out more clearly.

Some members felt that the tables showing low-, medium-, and high-range estimates should be removed from the final NAA. WSDA officials said these categories were included at the direction of the various working groups after the Livestock/CAFO working group decided to disaggregate their data in this fashion. They felt using one median number for different crop categories had its own statistical drawbacks in communicating accurate information to the public.

A group member asked for clarification on a group member's earlier comments that the draft NAA had been "presented" in Olympia. The group member who had made those comments clarified that the NAA itself had not been presented, but merely some of its findings, before various farm groups in Olympia shortly before the April 26th Joint Working Group meeting.

A group member who had submitted written comments brought up the "Soil organic matter conversion to nitrate" section on pages 35-36. She felt that the NAA was inappropriately using a one-size-fits-all percentage of approximately two percent when it came to organic matter readings, and that the figures in columns AC, AD, and AE in the WSDA's "Irrigated Crop N Mass Balance Table" depicting low-, medium-, and high-range soil conversion rates should either be left off or readjusted to account for variations in organic matter content. WSDA officials weren't sure there was a way to do that, even with deep soil sampling data, given that crops rotate year-by-year, but agreed to see what they could do.

A group member also raised questions about atmospheric deposition. This subject was briefly mentioned on page 34, and covered in more depth in a separate section of the NAA, on pages 66-69. Table 31 on page 69 lists the estimated total atmospheric deposition in the GWMA in tons of nitrogen/year, but this information was not included in the Irrigated Ag section. The member thought it should be.

Response to EPO Questionnaire No. 6: There was consensus among the group in support of greater education and outreach efforts. Laurie Crowe agreed to send the EPO working group some of the brochures produced by the South Yakima Conservation District (SYCD) on water and nutrient management practices, with an eye to being reformatted and mailed out by the GWMA's successor agency.

The meeting adjourned at 3:37 pm.

Recommendations for GWAC

Resources Requested

Deliverables/Products Status

Proposed Next Steps

Laurie Crowe will supply the EPO Working Group with the SYCD's brochures on water and nutrient management.