

Yakima County Voluntary Stewardship Program
Workgroup Meeting #1
March 30, 2016 1:00 – 3:00 PM
North Yakima Conservation District Office

In attendance: Lynda Jamison, Matt Bischof, Gail Thornton, Bill Eller, Byron Gumz, John Marvin, Eric Bartrand, Donna Boers, Michael Tobin, Justin Bezold, Carolyn Comeau, Betsy Bloomfield, Lynn Deitrick, Arden Thomas, David Holland, Steve George, Laurie Crowe, Troy Schilperoort, Eric Johnson, Frank Hendrix, Eric Olson, Frank Lyall. On phone: Evan Sheffels.
Staff: Neil Aaland, Lisa Grueter, Sarah Sandstrom.

Welcome and introductions:

Facilitator Neil Aaland opened the meeting. He introduced himself and the project team, Lisa Grueter from Berk Consulting and Sarah Sandstrom from the Watershed Company. He asked attendees in the room to introduce themselves.

Background on VSP

Eric Johnson, Executive Director of the Washington State Association of Counties, provided an overview. Counties were working on Critical Areas Ordinances (CAOs) as required by the Growth Management Act, and most of these CAOs exempted agriculture. There was concern about CAOs and how they did or did not regulate agriculture, and interest in legislative actions was growing. A key point was a 2007 case decided by the state Supreme Court – Swinomish Tribe v. Skagit County. The case held that the duty of a CAO is to protect critical areas, and agriculture cannot be exempted. The legislature responded by passing a bill creating a voluntary program, and the Ruckelshaus Center at the UW/WSU was directed to work with stakeholders and develop a voluntary program. The Voluntary Stewardship Program resulted, which aimed at protecting the viability of agriculture while also protecting critical areas.

Under VSP, there is a requirement to monitor and manage. This is different than other programs. A fundamental underpinning is this is voluntary and not about creating a regulatory scheme. Eric noted that many compromises were made, and at the end, tribes withdrew but other partners remained.

Evan Sheffels, Washington State Farm Bureau, added to Eric's points. There was strong support for this in the legislature. The difficult part is how to enhance agriculture. He said the Farm Bureau strongly supports VSP because agricultural viability is on an equal footing with other program components, it is a voluntary approach, and it is producer-centered. He noted the Farm Bureau has a VSP website (<http://wsfb.com/advocacy-4/voluntary-stewardship-program/>). The Farm Bureau believes we can have both agricultural viability and protected critical areas.

Bill Eller from the Washington State Conservation Commission then reviewed a PowerPoint presentation. He discussed the statutory requirements of VSP. [Refer to the presentation for details].

General Questions and Discussion

- Is it anticipated that VSP will attract more producers into existing programs, such as CREP?
 - Yes, the intent is to work on more funding
- CDs have been doing this kind of work
- Is it really possible to get credit for restoration projects?
 - Discussion on this point needs to occur with the statewide VSP advisory Committee
- Does this apply to new agriculture?
 - Yes, but remember it is voluntary
- Improvements already made by producers were made in good faith, and they should not be penalized for that
- Educational outreach should emphasize that federal and state laws are still in effect
 - Yes, VSP is only a replacement for regulations under a GMA CAO
- VSP will fail or succeed based on the monitoring component
- Are artificial wetlands included?
 - No, they don't tend to be regulated, and that is the key point
- Were statewide environmental organizations supportive?
 - Yes, these types of workgroups are thought to be much more effective than a regulatory program
- Most growers are "modestly hopeful"

Scope of work and schedule

Lisa Grueter reviewed the schedule, handing out a scope of work and timeline. She noted that the baseline date for the status of critical areas is July 22, 2011. The work starts by using a variety of existing information to map the critical areas as of that date.

Organizational items

Ground rules: Neil listed some potential topics that could be included in ground rules. He noted that his preference is to have less detailed ground rules. Attendees at today's meeting asked him to suggest some written rules for consideration, and to e-mail those prior to the next meeting.

Smaller subcommittee: Neil mentioned the idea of having a smaller subcommittee that was comprised of people willing to dive into the details. Some committees prefer, and are willing, to have the entire workgroup be part of that. This will be on the agenda for a future meeting for consideration.

Co-chair: Neil mentioned a conversation with Frank Hendrix about the notion of a co-chair. Frank thinks this would be valuable, especially since the work group will be meeting into the future after Neil's contract is over. Neil suggested workgroup members think about this, and we will have this on the agenda next meeting for decision.

Future meetings: The workgroup generally settled on the fourth Thursday of each month. For April, there were several conflicts, so Neil will send a poll around to set the meeting for April.

The meeting adjourned approximately 3:00 pm.