BENTON COUNTY VOLUNTARY STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

Review of Comments since January 2017 | February 2017

The following summarizes comments received since the January meeting. Key questions stemming from these comments for the Working Group to consider and discuss are identified in italics.

CHAPTER 7- GOALS AND BENCHMARKS

Critical Area Benchmarks

Water Quantity

Yakima Basin Integrated Plan details

- Within Yakima Basin Integrated Plan, flow objectives for the Lower Yakima River within Benton County are a low priority
- Specific flow objectives are established for Prosser Dam to Chandler Powerplant (>1,000 cfs in Sept, >1,000 cfs in spring)

Questions:

-Does this understanding affect prioritization of flow for VSP?

-Should numerical thresholds for enhancement be identified?

Proposed metrics

- Irrigation efficiencies do not necessarily translate to increasing or even maintaining in-stream flows in tributary streams or the mainstem Yakima River
    - The impact to instream flow depends on the type of water right, and whether efficiencies occur on-farm or through the distribution system
        - Efficiencies typically affect reach-level flows
        - Reductions in consumptive use may affect areas beyond affected reach
        - Reduction in consumptive flow for natural flow-based water rights will affect instream flows, whereas reduced consumptive use for storage-based water rights (including from irrigation district system) will result in more water being held in storage
        - Improvements in irrigation delivery systems may be more effective than incentives for individual water conservation
    - *"The Water Use Subcommittee of the Integrated Plan workgroup is working to develop guidelines to account for water conserved as part of projects funded under the Integrated Plan. It is proving to be a complex task to say the least."*
- Floodplain area does not necessarily equate to improved instream flows

- Minimum flows at Prosser Dam are federally regulated
    - The relationship between conservation and return flows in the lower river is not well understood, but the USBR is just starting to model inputs to gain a better understanding. This modeling could help distinguish the role of agriculture in meeting minimum flow standards

Questions:

Are irrigation efficiencies an appropriate metric of VSP success?

Should efficiencies and reductions in consumptive use be prioritized for flow-based water rights?

Should connected floodplain area and/or minimum flows be used as a measure for VSP?

Are the effects of agricultural water use in Benton County discernable enough to be a metric of VSP success?

Approach to flow objectives in the Yakima versus Columbia River

- The following footnote is included in the draft goals and benchmarks: "Note- Agriculture in Benton County has a very limited effect on flow in the Columbia River relative to the effects federal water regulation; therefore, no goals or benchmarks for flow on the Columbia River are proposed."
- Comment received: *"While the Yakima River is a much smaller river system than the Columbia, and agriculture does have an impact on flows in the Yakima, the river is controlled by the USBR, and instream flow goals through VSP will need to be coordinated with the USBR and Ecology to determine feasibility in many cases."*

Question: Is it appropriate to continue to exclude Columbia River flows from water quantity goals/benchmarks?

Water Quality

Stream temperature

Questions:

Since Working Group recognizes limited opportunity to improve water temperature, should this be a lower priority?

- *Cool water recharge?*
- *Shading only in tributaries?*
- *Shading at springs and seeps?*

If shading is maintained as a benchmark, should non-native trees (i.e. Russian olive) count toward benchmark?

Upland Habitat

- Blackrock Area (Yakima County?) holds significance for long term shrub-steppe and corridor conservation

Should VSP prioritize areas near Blackrock for shrub-steppe and corridor conservation?

- Rural Fire Districts important for long term shrub-steppe and corridor conservation

Are rural fire districts closely enough related to agricultural activities that they should be a critical area benchmark?

Aquifer Recharge

Groundwater Quantity

- Efficiencies will only support groundwater recharge where the source is well water; therefore, measures should be specific to efficiencies from wells and groundwater in areas of wells.
- Groundwater conserved will generally not necessarily be available for consumptive use
- Measuring groundwater levels ignores the issue that irrigation efficiencies from stream sources will reduce groundwater levels; this further supports the idea that groundwater measurements should only be used in areas of concentrated well use.
- Proposal to measure recharge projects, groundwater discharge, and acre-feet recharged

Question:

Are there specific areas in Benton County where the working group would recommend groundwater level measurements?

Minor changes to critical area verbiage

Incorporate implementation of Benton County Groundwater Community Action Plan as a performance metric

- General- Preference to use term “maintain” rather than “protect,” which has a regulatory connotation
- General- Ensure that protection is not confused with enhancement benchmarks
- Streams- Include reference to other invasive plants with water stargrass
- Shrub steppe- Clarify shrub steppe conservation based on WDFW definition, eliminate “intact” terminology
- Shrub steppe- Identify desired plants for specific ecological communities
- Wetlands- Ensure that all wetland functions are addressed, including those of unintentionally created wetlands
- Geohazards- Remove wind erosion, as it is not a metric directly relevant to critical area functions
- Geohazards- Include sloughing of steep slopes as a metric

Ag Viability Benchmarks

- Identify lands that are likely to transition to agricultural use or move from grazing or dryland farming to irrigated farming as priority areas for agricultural expansion
- Promote legislation/programs allowing the irrigation of additional acreage with water saved through on-farm practices
- Support allocation of new water rights from the John Day/McNary pool (WAC 173-531A)
- Support groundwater recharge projects that utilize winter flows and flood waters above the environmental baseline

- Develop and implement incentives for on-farm soil conservation and soil health practices
- Clarify that "agricultural uses are not *involuntarily* restricted by surrounding landscape"
- Clarify that drains that were not previously a natural channel are not included in the definition of wetlands

Participation Benchmarks

- Change active/passive participation to direct/indirect
- Measure direct participation based on grower involvement rather than outreach provided (indirect)
- Rework Technical Assistance Tracking Tool in coordination with Benton CD

Questions:

How should checklist relate to Individual Stewardship Plan (ISP)?

Should checklist be considered adequate to demonstrate participation?

CHAPTER 8- MONITORING

- BCD to evaluate tracking tool output
- BCD to draft annual report, to be reviewed by VSP working group
- BCD to conduct mapping
- Include onsite visit in Type E monitoring where feasible/applicable