

**Benton County Voluntary Stewardship Program  
Workgroup Meeting #10  
February 27, 2017  
Benton PUD Meeting Room, Prosser WA**

In attendance:

Debbie Berkowitz  
Stuart Crane  
Seth Defoe  
Robin French  
Ron Harle  
Gwen Hoheisel  
Phil Hull  
Tom Mackay  
John Marvin

Fred Muller  
Mark Nielson  
Larry Pearson  
Dirk Peterson  
John Raap  
Mike Ritter  
Evan Sheffels (call-in)  
Matt Vickery

Benton County staff: Michelle Cooke

Project staff: Neil Aaland, Lisa Grueter, Sarah Sandstrom

Open the Meeting: Facilitator Neil Aaland opened the meeting at 1:30. He asked attendees in the room to introduce themselves. He then reviewed the agenda.

Public Comment: No members of the public were present to offer any public comment.

Outreach: Neil explained that, based on the discussion at the last meeting, the outreach table was revised. He has also added a description of the different phases of outreach and the statutory requirements.

Gwen Hoheisel said she thinks the different outreach tasks should match the objectives and goals, as well as having some metrics such as number of people attending meetings. Some of the objectives might be combined. As an example, could just ask if people attending meetings had heard of the VSP.

Lisa noted that the plan has to have participation bench marks; we could talk about those in combination with outreach. Debbie Berkowitz thinks that outreach is need to other stakeholder groups.

Ron thinks that at some point, it's important to have a targeted approach to outreach, being sure we are reaching the key stakeholders. Debbie suggested that implementation outreach needs to include additional stakeholders other than just agricultural producers.

One suggestion was for an open house, before adoption and before the growing season. Could mail notice to property owners. The consultant team could tailor short descriptions in the form of handouts.

Phil thinks coordination with other VSP counties could be useful. Neil mentioned that the Conservation Commission holds monthly conference calls for VSP participants. He will send an e-mail sign up for those. He will also provide a link for the WSCC FAQ materials.

Workgroup members said it was important to get going on the outreach tasks, especially task 1 (writing a general article on VSP).

### **Goals and Benchmarks**

Sarah Sandstrom opened this discussion. She showed a PowerPoint presentation to help guide through the key sections where working group members had commented. There were questions related to several of the comments posed to the work group.

Water quantity: Sarah noted that the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project (YRBWEP) said in 2012 that “flow objectives for the lower Yakima River in Benton County are low priority”. She asked the group: “Does this affect prioritization of how VSP prioritizes flow?”. Discussion points included:

- It makes sense to rely on the regulatory backstop of allocated water rights to maintain flows
- The VSP work plan should focus on what we can affect
- For critical area enhancement, rely on the integrated plan for water quantity

Water quality/stream quality: She asked if riparian shading to manage temperature should be a priority. Discussion points included:

- Shading doesn't have a lot of impact in the Lower Yakima, so it shouldn't be a priority
- Flow is a key tool but we don't have a lot of impact on this due to position in the watershed
- Stuart suggested there may be some areas where cooler water returns may be helpful where possible; Seth agreed, noting that it may help to enhance a cooler water seep through aquifer recharge projects.
- Mark suggested that riparian area be included as a benchmark for benefits to sediment, nutrients, etc., but that the benchmark should not address riparian effects on temperature.
- Fred suggested using the term “managing livestock” instead of excluding livestock; others agreed
- Phil asked if temperature is monitored; Sarah said it is not regularly monitored and she would not recommend it as a benchmark

Upland habitat: Discussion points included:

- Mike Ritter said WDFW has gone through an exercise to develop priority habitat areas, he has a “draft map”
- He also noted that the fire issue has brought this up; after last year's fires, how do we address? WDFW wants this on the radar screen for VSP work groups
- He asked if the work group should prioritize the Black Rock area; in response to a question he said the ownership is a patchwork of private, federal, and DNR

lands, most of which are used as rangelands. He also thought that actions would primarily be in the private lands in the area.

- Sarah asked if rural fire districts are closely enough related to agriculture so they should be used as a benchmark; members thought they could be used as an enhancement benchmark but not a critical areas benchmark
- Lisa thinks it is useful to identify measures for agricultural viability appropriate for others to take action on; could perhaps include fire districts as an agricultural viability benchmark
- Debbie noted that we don't have any control over rural fire districts; she also agreed with Black Rock as a priority but not at the exclusion of other areas
- Debbie also thinks the work group should consider, as a policy for ag viability, that encroachment of development is not encouraged. Sarah thinks this could be proposed as an ag viability aim.

**Aquifer recharge:** Sarah asked if there was an area appropriate to focus on for groundwater quantity/aquifer recharge. Tom Mackey notes that in many places groundwater is in continuity with river water. Fred noted that in Upper Horse Heaven, the county has restricted wells due to a lowering aquifer. Mark noted he had made some suggestions, but didn't see them in the presentation. Mark's suggested language additions will be incorporated in the next version of the goals and benchmarks document.

John Raap was not sure how VSP could affect recharge. Mark suggested deferring to the Integrated Plan. Sarah suggested noting that recharge projects can support enhancement and contribute to maintenance. Workgroup members liked those ideas.

**Agricultural viability:** There were several suggestions and additions from last time. One comment suggested identifying lands for expansion of agriculture. Debbie asked what happens if it is next to a critical area? Sarah thinks it is useful to identify lands for expansion of agriculture to know if they are next to critical areas. Mike Ritter liked that perspective. Phil thought it was something to consider, and should be left in but shortened.

Another comment suggested promoting legislation to allow additional irrigation acreage with water saved from on-farm practices and supporting new water rights from the John Day/McNary Pool. Seth thinks the idea of promoting legislation and programs that allow using conserved water for acreage expansion is problematic, since water conserved through efficiency improvements is return flow water that is supply for downstream users, and provides instream flows for fish. This idea probably won't work in the Yakima River, but may not be not impossible in other basins if such actions are proven to not harm other water users or the environment. Stuart noted that the Yakima Nation would not support legislation that promoted water spreading in the Yakima Basin. Should clarify that the Columbia water rights allocation might be done. Phil thinks it is important that if you do conservation practices, need to be able to use the water that you already have a permit for. Debbie noted that with climate change, less water available will affect legal availability.

The group also discussed incorporating incentives for on-farm soil conservation as a viability aim. Producers noted and soil conservation is at the heart of any ag operation. Mark suggested that there may be opportunities to help smaller producers with new technology (i.e. overcrop and direct seed). The group agreed that long-term soil conservation and programs that provide new opportunities for soil conservation should be an aim.

**Stewardship checklist:** Neil asked if anyone had filled it out to test it; several workgroup members did so. There was some discussion about the date of July 2011 and figuring out what had been done since that baseline date. Ron said practices had come a long way since even before, since 2000. Tom wonders if there are ag producers who won't fill it out; he thought the bottom part was redundant. Matt said the question about identifying critical areas made him cringe. Phil said some of it needs explaining; for example, the question in part 3 #A1, "irrigation canal or laterals" – is there a canal on my farm? For some programs, it's the record-keeping that is difficult, sometimes hard to quantify.

One question was if someone will help the producer to fill out the checklist. Lisa said the idea is someone like Mark Nielson should help. A broader form can be developed. Gwen suggested that the way it's written should be changed, eliminate the larger terms, and the way it is written does not appear neutral.

Another version will be produced based on the discussion today.

The meeting adjourned at 3:30 pm.

**Next meeting: March 27, 2016, from 1:30 to 3:30.**