



NRCS Coquille Local Work Group, Coos and Curry Counties

**Location: Bandon Library large Conference Room
1204 11th St SW, Bandon OR 97411**

4:02 PM Welcome: Facilitator Thomas Snyder welcomed participants, then outlined the objectives of the Local Work Group meeting. The LWG meeting provides a snapshot of conversations that happen year-round, and a mechanism for input to provide locally-led conservation. Tom described the Oregon NRCS Strategic Approach to Conservation and NRCS's relationship with SWCDs dating back to the dust bowl, then asked participants to indicate their affiliation and NRCS program interest with raised hands:

Attendees: 26 In-person and Zoom attendees included NRCS staff, cranberry producers, tide gate owners, pasture managers, landowners with gorse/invasive weed concerns, forest/woodland managers, partners (Extension, SWCD, Watershed Council, ODF, Farm Bureau), and government agencies.

Current programs Overview: District Conservationist Katie Woodruff provided a brief NRCS program overview including how programs work, available Conservation Implementation Strategies (CIS) and other opportunities in Coos and Curry Counties, and an update on progress for each local CIS.

2023 Active EQIP Conservation Implementation Strategies:

1. Gorse

The Gorse CIS launched in the past year, with 4 current applications. The strategy area includes all private ag land in the service area and important partners include the Gorse Action Group. The primary resource concern addressed is wildfire.

Forestland owners must have a Forest Management Plan (may be written by landowner or qualified forester if plan has all required elements), and agricultural operations must include grazing management.

2. Forest Management Planning

2022 had 2 applications; 2023 has 2 applications. The strategy area includes all forestland in the service area and important partners include ODF. Primary resource concern is Plant Condition with wildfire hazard and wildlife habitat. Funding to hire a qualified Technical Service Provider to create FMP and develop FMP management activities.

3. Coos-Coquille Coastal Floodplains and Ag water quality

Intended to leverage partner investments in tide gates and other watershed instream habitat work. DC shared location maps for the strategy watersheds.

Locations have been expanded to incorporate ODA Strategic Implementation Areas, where ODA and SWCD partner to proactively address potential Ag Water Quality Management violations. No applications received this year. This CIS will sunset if there is no active landowner interest.

4. Hightunnels and Organic Program (State/national funding pools)

2 applications per year for high tunnel assistance; no applications locally for organic assistance in the service area. DC shared a brief description of these state and national funding offerings and encouraged anyone interested to contact her.

The Oregon Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP): Coos-Curry CREP Technician Barbara Grant provided a brief CREP program overview. CREP provides State and Federal cost-shares, incentive payments, and annual rental payments to landowners who restore and protect pasture riparian buffers in 10- to 15-year FSA contracts. CREP can be a useful match for instream habitat projects. All practices follow NRCS practice standards and planning procedures. Contact info provided.

Farm Service Agency Assistance: Facilitator provided a brief description of FSA assistance available in Oregon, including disaster relief (fire, flood, drought), insurance programs, and farm loans.

Proposed CIS changes: After a short break, Coquille DC provided an overview of the components of CIS proposals including land uses, resource concerns, and other supporting information for budgeting, then requested feedback from attendees about 2 proposed CIS changes for 2024 based on interest expressed over the past year:

- 1. Potential Cranberry irrigation automation/irrigation efficiency:** About 10 producers have expressed interest in improving irrigation efficiency. A “hard list” of interested participants is needed to start developing a budget. An experienced participant explained how valuable past efficiency projects have been. Potential practices were discussed, and cranberry operators in attendance agreed that automation provides a high degree of water savings and would be the highest priority and that the best metric for a proposal is likely total acres. Tailwater recovery also helps water conservation, but much less essential, so the list of potential practices shared by DC looks right.

Outreach opportunities were discussed, and cranberry producers were requested to spread the word: contact Coquille DC Katie Woodruff if interested.

- 2. Potential Tide gates for Fish Passage and Ag Water Quality:** Coquille NRCS has received partner inquiries and would like to build from surface water quality work to incorporate tide gate upgrades if there is partner support and landowner interest. A tide gate CIS primary resource concern would be fish passage barrier with additional concerns including water quality, economics, degraded plant condition.

Obstacles to address for a successful CIS: tide gate projects require complex engineering with limited NRCS engineer staff; expense (In 2023, an example of a

EQIP-funded small 4-ft tide gate upgrade scenario that covers about 50-75% of overall expenses provides about \$125k, more than half of this year's Coquille EQIP allocation), complicated permitting, long-range operation and maintenance/water management planning requirements, and need to preserve applicants' eligibility for Farm Bill programs -- NRCS cannot help drain reverted wetlands to create agricultural uses.

A successful tide gate CIS would address obstacles by prioritizing applications where partners have secured additional funding, engineering, and permitting support. Facilitator pointed out that partners can not only lead CIS work, but can also write the CIS in consultation with local NRCS. The CIS process identifies a specific geography with ready and willing landowners, and they are strongest when supporting a cohesive partnership. The deadline to submit a CIS proposal for Basin review and input is March 28. A CIS can be developed now, then feed into an RCPP proposal for future year(s).

Additional options to address tide gates: Facilitator and DC provided information about partner-led Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), and support for PL 566. PL 566 provides funding and support to a qualified Special District or other government entity who sponsors watershed-scale project(s) with a long-term operation and maintenance commitment. Facilitator explained that RCPP and PL 566 have the advantage of a dedicated funding pot separate from CISs, but they do require a qualified partner to take the lead. Timeframe to develop a proposal would be about a year with an actively engaged, high-functioning partner.

Coos SWCD staff indicated that they are not averse to a program using PL 566 funding, but that they need to understand more about the obligation to the District and have limited bandwidth. DC suggested that Coos SWCD, NRCS, and interested partners meet to discuss PL 566 and RCPP.

More discussion to clarify how a CIS differs from RCPP and PL 566, which entities can sponsor PL 566 (Special Districts, not Watershed Councils), and landowner responsibility to secure permits.

DC: Would participants prefer to see a separate tide gate CIS, or addition of a few tide gates and extension of existing Water Quality CIS?

Coos SWCD is working on 5 tide gates, with 4 located within the existing water quality CIS boundary. 1-2 tide gate projects per year is the right progress pace. If the current water quality CIS is allowed to expire, potentially bringing it back in time for the fund-raising phase could also coincide with release of new TMDL requirements that would impact Agricultural Water Quality Rules. Coos SWCD has 2 landowners potentially interested in the Water Quality CIS as-is.

Facilitator clarified that applications for EQIP assistance are accepted year-round with or without an existing Strategy, and may be useful to help local office understand willingness and interest of potential cooperators as new CISs are discussed.

Further input from attendees:

Question about Tribe involvement in planning CISs. DC shared that Tribes are consulted, and separate meetings are planned for forestry CIS to ensure their interests are supported.

Appreciation for NRCS's willingness to engage on tide gates, especially to leverage Watershed Council and other partner work and existing tide gate inventories and scoping.

Discussion about whether irrigating new riparian plantings is eligible for EQIP projects due to drought impacts on restoration success. NRCS staff: Generally, irrigation improvements are geared toward improving efficiency of established systems rather than creating new systems.

Question about where to see current EQIP payment rates and scenarios, DC will provide link on request since it can be difficult to find.

6:00 Meeting Adjourned with thanks to all participants.