

NRCS Hood River County Local Working Group Meeting

January 29th, 2024

USFS Ranger Station 6780 Hwy 35 Parkdale, OR 97041

Attendees: Carly Heron (NRCS), Damon Brosnan (NRCS), Hilary Doulos (ODFW/NRCS), Les Perkins (FID, County Commissioner), Heather Hendrixson (HRSWCD), Andy Dwyer(ODF), Steve Pappas (EFID), Ann Walker (Walker Consulting), Martha Blair (FSA), Brian Nakamura (SWCD/EFID), Mike McCarthy (landowner), Ashley Thompson (OSU Extension), Megan Saunders (FID), Nicky Bradley (USFS), Lanier Fussell (WyEast RC&D), Cindy Thiemen (Hood River Watershed Group), Andrew Spaeth (Hood River Forest Collaborative)

Carly called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone. Brief housekeeping was gone over and then she shared the purpose of the LWG meeting with the group. She emphasized the need for local voices to guide the programming and strategies as well as improve the services offered by NRCS. The group went around and introduced themselves and their role in the community.

Carly presented to the group on the NRCS accomplishments of 2023. These included work with the pollinator CIS, Air Quality, Farmer's Irrigation On-Farm CIS, and the MFID CIS (which was used to submit a WaterSMART grant). The group was supportive of all the work that was accomplished. Carly explained that for 2024 there is the Air Quality Program, the Farmer's Irrigation CIS and the MFID WaterSMART funding for irrigation upgrades, and the forest resilience CIS which has proven to be popular. Carly applied for the NRCS WaterSMART grant in 2022 and it was not selected for funding. She applied again in 2023 and was awarded the grant for FY24 funding. The awarded is around 4 million dollars for irrigation improvements in MFID over the next 5 years. Damon noted how competitive the grant applications are and that it was due to a strong application from Carly that it was awarded. Carly gave a quick explanation of the CSP program and how it could be a good fit for those operations that have already had an EQIP contract to address the big-ticket items.

Jennifer Eatwell who is the NRCS small farms and organic specialist was unable to make it so her contact info was provided as well as a brief overview of her programs. Damon explained that the Food Security CIS is a good fit for the smaller more intensively managed operations. He also shared with the group how large of an area she covers. Martha asked if FSA should send folks to Carly or directly to Jenn. Carly said it really didn't matter, but if the producer had any questions about which category they fit under, then they are always welcome to contact her and NRCS will make sure they get to the correct specialist. The Food Security Initiative has a focus on soil health and prioritizes projects that contribute food to low access and low-income areas. It was asked if Jenn has a contact with Gorge Grown (the group that oversees the Farmer's Market as well as helping smaller farms in the area). Carly noted that Stephanie Payne who was the previous small farms specialist had been in contact with Gorge Grown and she would assume that Jenn had those contacts handed down to her.

Carly started into a discussion that was aimed at coming up with ideas for future CIS's and wanted input from the group on what they see as resource needs in the county.

Mike noted that he feels there needs to be more emphasis on chipping orchard waste. When there was a stewardship payment for chipping instead of burning a business brought a tub grinder to the area and folks were able to effectively grind whole trees rather than burning them. They can then use the chips on the fields the trees came from. He said they have had some success in chipping along a windrow if the trees are piled up in such a manner but then the chips are not evenly distributed throughout the fields.

Carly asked Heather to talk a bit about the Air Curtain burner they have used in recent years to do some mobile burning as well as a mobile chipping program that the SWCD had provided through a grant to help small landowners do some defensible space clean up on their properties. In discussing the air curtain burners, biochar was brought up as a strong interest. Ashley noted that there is currently a trial going on in WA to see what differences there are between biochar and mulch used in a working orchard.

Ashley also noted that some groups in CA are shipping their wood chips up to OR and WA for use by Georgia Pacific to make toilet paper. Mike noted that the cost of trucking or shipping wood chips anywhere makes it cost prohibitive to not use them on site where they are produced.

Ann wanted to note that she wasn't hearing anyone discuss wildfire or drought resiliency. Carly pointed out that the forest resiliency CIS was focused on helping to reduce the local wildfire risk. Andy also noted that in the ranking question for the CIS, that more points were given to the applications that were adjacent to other fuels reduction work to try and increase the landscape resiliency as well.

Carly mentioned that in terms of drought resistance, the work that had been ongoing as well as planned to upgrade irrigation systems to the most efficient systems possible, was helping in the overall surface water draw for the valley. Heather shared the information with the group regarding the Focused Investment Partnership (FIP) through the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board. It will help provide partners an overview of those irrigated acres in the county and what level of irrigation efficiency they are currently using. It will help to identify those acres that are still needing to be upgraded to be most efficient. Perhaps a CIS written from that data could be developed in the near future.

On farm energy production was another concern that Mike brought up. He feels that if there was a way to produce energy on farm it would make farming a lot more cost effective than as it stands right now. The discussion about on-farm energy production then led into a discussion about carbon credits and if there was anything available from NRCS in the way of payments for carbon credits. Carly noted that while we're moving more towards climate smart practices and specific funding for those practices, that the agency does not yet measure out carbon credits and deliver payments based on that alone. Martha noted that climate smart activities are being noted and provided higher ranking scores under the Conservation Reserve Program. That by planting trees vs grasses, the applicants get a higher ranking score.

Since Martha had brought up the CRP program Carly invited her to share the information she had brought to the meeting about the programs that FSA administers.

Martha noted that the FSA is the agency that assists people working with NRCS programs by building the eligibility file and doing the producer eligibility portion. She then discussed the Tree Assistance Program, Noninsured Disaster Assistance Program, and the Emergency Relief Program. There were some questions and discussion around how the determinations were made regarding if it was a management

issue that caused a crop failure vs an actual natural disaster. Martha wanted to make sure that everyone knows they can come to FSA to help with any of their programs.

Heather noted that the SWCD has received a grant to support NRCS outreach for forestry work/applications.

Andy shared that ODF has been awarded some funding for both large and smaller forestry/defensible space work. And that the agency has been creative in using some of their fire fighting crew to do reduced cost fuels reduction projects for the parts of the community that are financially in need of assistance to get the work done.

Heather asked about a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) possibility and how that would look for the County/projects. Damon shared some overview of the program and how the different versions of the program could work for the groups in the meeting. Steve noted that he would be interested in doing more on-farm work in the East Fork Irrigation District as well as updating some of the laterals.

Megan asked if there might be funding to assist with filtration on the irrigation projects. Carly explained that under the 2018 Farm Bill, irrigation districts can apply for funding through EQIP. Thus, if the ID wanted to apply to do filtration work that would improve on farm water cleanliness, that would be something to look into.

The list that was generated by the group:

EFID irrigation upgrades

Large infrastructure for Irrigation Districts (pipes and filtration)

EQIP individual on-farm projects

Utilizing on farm wood waste in a productive and efficient manner

Utilizing on farm wood waste to create biochar and incorporate it into the soil

Carbon markets- how to engage?

Fossil fuel on farm reduction/ convert to renewable energy sources

Moving on from Farmer's Conservation Alliance Conservation Innovation Grant to write a CIS for seeding native pollinator attracting species immediately following new infrastructure pipe installation

Weed control

Carly thanked everyone for their time and for being active participants in the meeting. The meeting adjourned at 3:30pm