



*Columbia County Local Work Group Meeting
February 28, 2024 Virtual Zoom Meeting*

MINUTES

The meeting was called to order by Hannah Isaacs at 9:30 a.m. Those in attendance were:

Hannah Isaacs, NRCS	Debi Brimacombe, Columbia SWCD Board
Kim Gray, NRCS	Bekah Gaxiola, NRCS
Selene Keeney, Columbia SWCD	Dee Robinson, NRCS
Michele Long, ODFW/NRCS	Ann Walker, Consultant
Malyssa Legg, Columbia SWCD	Jake Constans, OWRD
Kevin Nelson, ODF	Brittany Mills, ODA
Crystalyn Bush, Columbia SWCD	Shalako Emly, NRCS
Tom Nygren, TSP Forester	Eleanor Kenyon, Pheasants Forever/NRCS
Amber Kester, Columbia SWCD	Jasen McCoy, ODF
Ben Cate, ODFW	York Johnson, DEQ
Amanda Robinson, ODA	Marissa Theve, NRCS
Derek Wiley, ODFW	Linda Zahl, Pollinators
Ana Eby, Pheasants Forever/NRCS	Jessica Wells, NRCS
Taylor Theel, SBWC	Marc DesJardin, ODF
Elizabeth Beechwood, Watermaster	

Hannah welcomed everyone to the meeting and stated that the purpose of this meeting is to provide a forum for partners, farmers, ranchers, foresters, and conservation groups to share conservation activities and discuss natural resource problems that should be prioritized. The group assists in guiding NRCS where to use farm bill funds for technical and financial assistance in the future. Hannah stated our appreciation of everyone in attendance for coming and volunteering their time to participate. We (NRCS) have the ability to target specific resource issues that are important to the county.

Hannah introduced our newest member to the NRCS team in St. Helens, Rebekah Gaxiola, Natural Resource Specialist. Bekah gave a brief bio for the group.

New for next year, NRCS's High Tunnel practice might require proof of water rights. Jake mentioned that landowners irrigating from a well are allowed ½ acre of non-commercial garden without needing a permit. Anything over that, or commercial gardens, will require a permit. Jake is available to answer any questions and help with this process.

The NRCS State Conservationist retired last August, we are still waiting for a replacement.

NRCS is also awaiting the new Farm Bill coming out soon, which drives funding and programs for the agency.

Hannah presented a PowerPoint presentation explaining the Local Work Group process, our current Conservation Implementation Strategies (CIS's), Farm Bill Programs, and showcased conservation practices that have been implemented throughout the county through various NRCS Programs.

The Annual Local Work Group meetings are required by NRCS policy as a way to obtain local input on ways to make Farm Bill programs work locally, assist with establishing local resource priorities, and identify practices needed to address resource concerns in the county. Although we meet only once each year, comments or suggestions are always welcome throughout the year. Feel free to call or email any time.

Farm Bill Programs in Columbia County include EQIP, CStP, CRP/CREP, RCPP, and ACEP.

EQIP - Environmental Quality Incentives Program -

- Purpose – To solve priority natural resource problems on agricultural lands such as soil, water, wildlife and related resource issues.
- Assist farmers, ranchers and forest owners in complying with federal, state and local regulations.
- Encourage environmental enhancements.
- NRCS's primary conservation farm bill program in Columbia County.
- Most flexibility to address specific local resource needs on a county level.

- Conservation Implementation Strategies (county and basin competitive)
 - Columbia Corridor Soil Health
 - Soil Health Restoration and Management (new)
 - Forest Management Planning
 - Forest Resiliency in the face of Climate Change
 - Lower Willamette/ North Coast Animal Feeding Operations
 - IRA and CIC
- National Initiatives (State competitive)
 - High Tunnel
 - Organic
 - On Farm Energy

EQIP CIC – EQIP Conservation Incentive Contracts

- New Program released in 2022 to address concerns with drought in cropland
- Oregon participated in the pilot in 2021 which was open to all land uses
- Uses both practices and enhancements
 - Prescribed grazing vs mineral movement
 - Precommercial thinning and Slash treatment vs biochar

- Single species cover crop vs multiple species targeting a specific concern

CStP – Conservation Stewardship Program

- Designed for operations that are already functioning at a higher level of conservation and are willing to adopt enhancement activities that make additional improvements
- Provides an annual payment for 5 years to maintain enhancements activities, with potential to renew for an additional 5 years.
- Uses enhancements rather than practices.
- NRCS may provide a minimum annual payment of \$5,000 in any year the Chief determines the total contract payment amount is below a base level.
- Sign-up deadline is March 29, 2024

CRP/CREP – Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (administered by

- Farm Service Agency program with NRCS technical assistance.
- 10 to 15 year agreements to pay an annual payment to maintain riparian areas and other crucial areas.
- Can be restrictive on allowed activities once the property is in contract, i.e. can't do EQIP or other programs on same CRP land, and certain farming practices are restricted.

ACEP – Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

- Permanent Contracts (no expiration date)

Agricultural Land Easement (ALE)

- NRCS purchases easements on land used for agriculture to reduce future conversion of those lands to non-Agricultural uses.

Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE/WRP)

- Previously known as WRP. NRCS Purchases easement on ag land to restore wetlands and associated uplands.
- WRE – Wetland Reserve Easement
Previously known as WRP. NRCS purchases easement on ag land to restore wetlands and associated uplands. We have 3 permanent easements in Columbia County that cover approximately 480 acres.

RCPP – Regional Conservation Partnership Program

- A partner run program with NRCS matching funds
- A way to work with entities other than private landowners
- Had a previous agreement with Columbia Soil and Water Conservation District.
 - Clatskanie PUD restoration
 - Perkins Creek
 - Carr Slough/ Prescott Beach

Hannah showed several pictures of successful conservation projects in the county including high tunnels installed, cover crops, grass seeding, rainwater harvest collection tanks, brush management, mulching and hedgerows, heavy use areas, livestock troughs, grazing management, and tree planting.

Commonly Used Practices

Roof runoff structure (clean water diversion/catchment)
Forage and biomass planting
Livestock pipeline
Watering facility (livestock/wildlife troughs)
Cover crop
Conservation crop rotation
Mulching
Reduced tillage
Soil health testing
Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan
Forest Management Plan
Fence
Tree and shrub site prep and establishment
Herbaceous weed treatment
Brush management and removal
High Tunnel
Hedgerow planting
Pre-commercial thinning and tree release
Waste Storage
Residue Management in forest
Heavy Use Area

Current Columbia EQIP CIS's -

Forest Diversity: Focus is on fuels reduction, mainly precommercial thinning, brush management, access roads, etc. Hannah showed a map of the Forest Diversity CIS Area, and a list of practices. This area for Forest Diversity CIS covers 4 watersheds in the South Scappoose and Milton Creek area. This CIS is nearly identical to our previous Forest Diversity CIS, just different targeted watersheds. Our county is approximately 75% forest land, so it is crucial to continue to provide assistance to our private forest land operators. This is a Basin-Wide CIS that we joined in the middle of its lifespan. The target area for this CIS will be moving in the coming years to accommodate where the greatest need is.

Columbia Corridor Soil Health: Goal is to improve soil health of the Columbia River Corridor farmlands through management improvements on pasture and cropland and encourage improvements to water quality and fish habitat to assist with salmon recovery. Practices include fencing, cover crop, high tunnel, conservation cover, crop rotations, pollinator habitat, hedgerows, heavy use protection, forage planting, tree planting,

mulching, brush management, weed control, rotational grazing. Very good interest with more people enquiring all the time. Main resource concerns being addressed are soil health and water quality. Targeting small market garden producers and livestock operators.

Soil Health Restoration and Management – new
Forest Management Planning
Lower Willamette/North Coast Animal Feeding Operations
IRA
CIC
High Tunnel
Organic
On Farm Energy

Setting Priorities for Columbia County Resource Concerns for 2025 and beyond –

Suggestions made so far:

Knotweed Management along Riverbanks

Small Farm Program with both agronomy and pasture management

More Farm tours and outreach events

Potential fish passage

New CIS being developed - Water, Fish, and Trees – multi-county – Michele Long, ODFW Liaison to NRCS, Tillamook. Nehalem CIS identified the Nehalem as an area of special interest to address salmon restoration and water quality. Temperature, dissolved oxygen and nutrients. 600 miles of potential usable salmon habitat. Need to focus on improving water quality. Address riparian areas. Hoping to get landowners and partners to help in this effort. Michele showed a map of where knotweed has been spotted in the Nehalem watershed. Knotweed is impossible to eradicate but can be managed. Practices that we can offer to help are heavy use area, other practices that can help reduce runoff, adding or replacing gutters and downspouts on farm buildings, underground outlets, keep direct runoff and sediment from going directly into the streams. Adding vegetation along riparian area. Still identifying practices to include in this CIS area. Looking at other practices that will help manage knotweed. Requesting assistance from Watershed Councils and SWCD's to help in this effort to create a successful CIS that will address multiple resource concerns.

Jasen McCoy, ODF – excited to announce that ODF hired a new Small Forestland Forester, starting March 11, that will be the main POC for Columbia County area, fish program, grants, etc. This is a new position and will really help with the local landowner workload.

Ben Cate, ODFW – potential practice, beaver co-existence strategies. Big push throughout the state promoting beavers to improve watershed health. Tree protection, pond levelers to prevent flooding, riparian plantings for beaver. Ben asked if we have many complaints about beaver in Columbia County? Hannah said the tide is turning from complaints to excitement about beavers. Wildlife habitat is becoming more popular. Elk damage situation is also big in the county. Elk fencing could really help these folks. New trees being damaged by elk. Tree protection would minimize elk damage. Had a call from small farm landowner, experiencing severe elk damage to hay land which is causing loss of production that is jeopardizing farm deferral status. Hannah stated that NRCS can work with landowner to help improve grass production to keep balance with higher yields while allowing for elk habitat.

Crystalyn Bush, Columbia SWCD – follow up on Beaver – SWCD is looking at how they can incorporate beaver techniques to raise the water table in certain areas, attracting beaver into the area. Nehalem area – one thing they see is severe streambank erosion, which makes it hard to maintain riparian plantings. Looking at the need for bio-engineered streambank erosion control, off-channel storage capacity for flood events. Flooding issues in the Nehalem is a big concern for landowners. SWCD has received a lot of enquiries about ponds – how to manage ponds for wildlife, why is water level so low, how to manage lily pads and other invasive species.

Amber Kester, Columbia SWCD – excited to assist with any outreach efforts and small farm tours.

Linda Zahl, Pollinators, Beekeeping Club, Friends of Liberty Field. Man-made ponds are great, but we also have natural ponds that are being destroyed because of lack of education of what vernal ponds are. Camas fields are dwindling in the county. Need incentives to keep the fields in Camas and manage the Scotch Broom. How do we keep our wildlife corridor, elk? How to incentivize farmers to keep a corridor open to allow elk to migrate from the coast to the Columbia River. We are Pollinator poor in the county. Need more pollinator habitat. Native flowering plants are not being supported. Encourage landowners to plant hedgerows. Are there any services for urban landowners to keep land for native habitat? Hannah said that NRCS can cost share for pollinator habitat on small acreages in urban areas if they are actively producing agricultural products for commercial use. We can help landowners in the city limits with native plantings, supporting urban agriculture, if the landowner is ag-based.

Michele Long, Tillamook – Nehalem CIS will include pollinator habitat practices. Will check into beaver habitat.

Ben Cate, ODFW – focusing on reducing beaver mortality. Trying to educate landowners to stop killing them, but rather work with them.

Mark DesJardin, ODF – Power companies, PUD's, wildfire reduction, fire breaks, how does that fit in with wildlife corridor – how can those benefit each other? NRCS does work to reduce risk of forestland wildfires through our Forestry CIS. Jasen is working with local PUD's to help with wildfire risk reduction. Fuel break scenarios – are they in

conflict with wildlife corridor goals? Ben stated that it depends on the species. Elk are going to be drawn to areas with new plantings as a food source.

Hannah took a moment to memorialize Don Mehlhoff, former NRCS District Conservationist in Columbia County, passed away in September, 2023. We recognize Don for the outstanding service he provided to the county for 22 years. Rest in peace, dear friend.

Marissa Theve, NRCS – Resource Soil Scientist, covers 9 counties in NW Oregon. Provides assistance with outreach and engagement in the use of soil data. If you are interested in having soil workshops, reach out to Marissa! X-ray fluorescent unit is coming to NRCS soon! Provides instant soil analysis. There is a surplus of biochar in the Clackamas Forest range that will be available soon in the Sandy area.

Jake Constans, OWRD - if any landowners have questions about the water rights form, feel free to reach out to Jake for assistance. Thank you, Jake!

Meeting adjourned at 10:44 am

Dee Robinson