

## NRCS Harney County Local Working Group Meeting

February 20, 2024

12:00pm

Community Meeting Room

484 North Broadway, Burns OR

Attendees: Rachel Beaubien (NRCS), Damon Brosnan (NRCS), Andrew Donaldson (NRCS), Sam Artai (NRCS/IWJV), Danielle Reynolds (NRCS/SWCD), Barbara Pearson (SWCD/NRCS), Jason Kesling (SWCD), Marnie Woodbury (ODF), Dustin Gustaveson (ODF), Kara Docscher (ODF), Austin Reimer (ODF), Matthew Brown (ODF), Ashley Tunstall (Ducks Unlimited), Dustin Johnson (OSU), Katie Baltzor (Harney County Cattlewomen/Rancher), Patty Dorroh (Harney County), Karen Moon (Harney County Watershed Council), Chad Boyd (ARS), Brenda Smith (High Desert Partnership), Josh Hanson (High Desert Partnership)

Rachel called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone, reviewing housekeeping items and agenda. Introductions were made around the table and an ask for any additions to the agenda or topics anyone wanted to be sure to cover. HDP provided boxed lunches.

Rachel presented NRCS accomplishments from 2023. This included work in the Stinkingwater Medusahead Management RCPP, Northern Harney Range and Forest Health CIS, Groundwater Availability CIS, Working Lands Waterbird Habitat Conservation CIS, Stinkingwater Medusahead Management RCPP, and North Steens RCPP; as well as Sage Grouse Initiative and Small Farms/Organic work.

### Discussion:

~Much discussion around the seemingly low interest in the Groundwater Availability CIS and why; it was pointed out that many of those who would qualify may have completed their work through other routes prior to NRCS having the CIS and that upcoming OWRD Rules changes should be monitored to determine new needs to help water users.

~Discussed great amount of juniper encroachment work that has been completed; well above the goals set. It was asked if it is best to continue going above the goal or change/reassess goals. It seems that addressing juniper encroachment is still a high priority so increasing the goals vs. overachieving existing goals gets to the same results overall.

~It was asked if there will be funding to address surface water in relation to juniper encroachment. The Range and Forest Health CIS does tie into this, also there are some partners discussing was to address this further, potentially through an RCPP. With the water collaborative and OWRD still in flux there is much discussion still to be had.

~A question was asked if juniper cuts that the BLM is completing are accounted for in the number shown in the slide show. No, these numbers only show what NRCS has contracted for. Damon asked if SWCD was capturing the BLM acres through their work; Jason said yes SWCD does generally have those number though they don't go into a public report necessarily. It would be interesting to compile total acres completed to see more true totals.

~Jason brought up HB2010 which assisted in juniper treatments to address water supply and that information would be helpful toward a new CIS to address juniper in relation to water availability and on

down to migratory bird habitat.

~Damon pointed out Jason/SWCD had the excellent idea to install mid-low elevation snotel sites (NRCS snotel sites are all high elevation and are missing out on collecting the mid-low elevation data). The snotel sites are to be installed this spring and hope to collect data that will be useful in seeing the results of cutting juniper and other work happening at the mid-low elevations.

FY 2024 offerings and FY 2025 Planning: Rachel reviewed the existing funding pools for FY 2024.

~County Level – Working Lands Waterbird Habitat Conservation CIS, Saving Groundwater in the Harney Basin CIS (not putting funds here as there were no applications this year), Northern Harney Range and Forest Health CIS, Stinkingwater Medusahead RCPP, and North Steens RCPP.

~Basin level—Food Security Initiative. Damon reviewed this. Jen Eatwell is the lead for the food security programs/funding. These programs are working to address food deserts trying to get rural communities more food safe; for example: high tunnels, soil health, micro irrigation. There are also organic and small farms specific aspects. One thing that has recently come up in working with high tunnels is that many people irrigate them using a domestic well, by state water policy/law there must be a water right in order to irrigate when growing a commodity (anything being sold) so there will need to be some further planning done in order to figure out details on this point.

Discussion: A fair amount of people trying to produce food in HC; how will this work if they can not use their domestic well? Another example is with pivot irrigation; many growing alfalfas exceeding their daily rate based on the water right. NRCS can't legally design something that is outside of the law, legislative action would be needed to amend the law; Representative Owens is pursuing this. You can grow off a domestic well as long as it's not a commodity/not being sold. As soon as you begin to sell, it's commercial and would then require the water right. NRCS will continue discussing this topic. The legal dynamics were discussed, such as one farmer donate food, one food bank providing funding for farmers to donate to food bank.

~IRA—climate smart practices. Damon for planning purposes we will get 3.5B in funding. State level typical EQIP funding additional \$6M IRA funds. Over \$9M in IRA funding. Next year expect to \$9-10M in IRA funding. Allows us to get a lot of work done on the ground; in Harney this will be a lot of forestry/range.

Discussion: It was asked if NRCS has the people capacity to utilize the funding being expected? It was pointed out the NRCS is benefitting from strong partnerships; for example the RCPPs currently existing with SWCD. There are many other agreements in the state. So, yes and no. Hiring wise, NRCS has increased staffing but a lot of this is done with agreements and partners (Ducks Unlimited, etc.). It was asked if there is \$9M worth of customer needs; yes, it's likely NRCS could double the amount. One thing holding us back now is the farm bill; landowners can only qualify for a certain amount (\$450,000) of program funding per farm bill and because this farm bill has gone extra years many landowners are reaching that limit and are unable to receive more funding until there is a new farm bill.

Is there an effort to publicize how this impacts the local economies? Damon spoke w/partners about this around the region. In depth economic analysis in Wheeler County and surrounding counties as to how

much a dollar brought in projects. We need to do this more here, to get a sustainable level it's important to tell.

~CSP – This is a good program, but intricate. In FY 2024 there is \$27M available in Oregon for CSP contracts. The ranking is broken out by region, so people in eastern Oregon aren't competing with other areas. General program points – a contract is up to \$200K over 4 years, \$40K per year, and they are renewable (a renewal is not re-ranked it is more or less an extension of the initial contract with new practices/enhancements). CSP is a lot of upfront work but can be a benefit for a farmer to do; a lot of lead up work in planning what landowners can/are willing to complete.

~Discussion on coordinating with adjoining public lands when treatments are being planned, for higher benefit.

~Question asked about the higher number of applicants for the Range and Forest Health CIS; did NRCS do something different with the outreach, were there just a lot of "hungry" landowners within that boundary, etc.? There was a lot of upfront work done in talking to landowners to find where the most need was, what areas were getting missed by other funding, etc. Further discussion on the lower numbers of applicants for the Waterbird funding – there are actually a decent number of applicants but also several other current routes for funding (OWEB grants etc) for those types of projects so some landowners have gone that route instead. There is also likely a need to open up the CIS area, adjusting the priority areas, as most of the projects in the highest current priority area have been completed.

~Discussion on upcoming possibilities for implementing prescribed burning. Much interest from ARS, and ODF as well as discussion happening within NRCS bot best make this a reality.

~Discussion (stemming from a non-attending landowner question) about being able to retreat juniper after 10 years through NRCS funding. There has been discussion on this at NRCS leadership levels discussing the need for retreatment assistance even when landowners have been working to maintain the original treatments.

~Outreach discussion – how do we do better, how do we better tell our story. Can better use our partners, agreements, etc. to "get the word out"; there are still a lot of folks out there who don't know of NRCS.

#### Partner Updates:

~Emma Gabriel – update on FSA programs: Currently behind in getting 2023 programs wrapped up as there were a lot of new programs and they have been consistently short staffed. National office is offering some flexibility to get these completed. Currently we are not in drought status so there is no qualification for 2024 programs; this could still change. In 2023 Harney county made over \$15 million in payments.

CRP – Sign up January 12<sup>th</sup>; regular CREP. The new Harney Valley Groundwater CREP – as of now there has been little interest. This CREP would be for landowners who relinquish the water rights on those acres, with a per acre payment. This is the only CREP in the nation that allows continue grazing. Landowners can contact the FSA office with questions. There is a lot of interest in this program at the national level (from the agency).

~Josh Hansen – Ecological Coordinator, HDP: Looking into submitting an RCPP proposal; still working through details on what that may look like.

~Jason Kesling – Harney SWCD: Continuing to work through spending grants SWCD has received and working on new applications.

~Brenda Smith – Director, HDP: BizHarney is working on branding and a branding plan; there's potential the discussion of needing to be better at "telling our story" could be assisted by this. Will discuss further as it develops.

Meeting adjourned at 2:02 pm