

STAC Meeting Minutes

February 6, 2025

Hybrid Meeting

Olympic National Forest Headquarters

Meeting Opened at: 9:30 AM

Introduction: Nick Vira, NRCS State Partnership Liaison

Attendance:

15 Attendees in Person: Roylene Comes At Night, NRCS; Nick Vira, NRCS; Keith Griswold, NRCS; Robert Evans, NRCS; Jacob Shaffer, NRCS; Dave Hedrick, Ferry CD; Angie Reseland, WDFW; Peter McBride, NRCS; Matt Warbritton, SNOTEL; Chris Clark, NRCS; Heather Wendt, WACD; Jennifer Boie, Palouse CD; Linda Lyshall, Snohomish CD; Mary Root, USFWS; Nick George, USFWS.

27 Attendees Virtual: Aubrie Hoxie, NRCS; Kristina Peterson, NRCS; Mike Baden, WSCC; Cameron Stoflet, Spokane Tribe; Carrie Brausieck, Agroforestry Northwest; Kelsey Ketcheson, DNR; Derek Marin, NRCS; Allan Warren, Bonneville Environmental Foundation; Kelly Singer, Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation; Ron Cummings, Ecology; Don Larsen, Kitsap CD; Alicia McCarthy, Dairy Federation; Rebecca Anderson, NRCS; Erin Eaton, Trout Unlimited; Kritina Peterson, NRCS; Randal Chipman, Northwest Horticultural Council; Lee Hemmer, Foster Creek CD; Joanalle Squeochs, Yakama Nation; Rebecca Rollins, Quinault Indian Nation; Scott Scroggie, NRCS; Levi Keesecker, SCC; Daryl Williams, Tulalip Tribe; Max Ross, NRCS; Stuart Crane, Yakama Nation; Emmett Wild, Skagit CD; Michelle Hennings, Wheat Growers; Dean Hellie, Stevens County CD.

Opening Remarks: Roylene Comes At Night, NRCS State Conservationist

- NRCS is working hard with the change in the administration.
- NRCS has the green light to move forward with Farm Bill programs.
- Agreements with Inflation Reduction Act funding are currently on hold.
- NRCS WA is unsure of the effect of the deferred resignation offer, two staff have chosen early retirement.
- Roylene is extremely proud of her staff; they had obligated almost 10 million dollars by January.

- A lot of what is happening is typical when a new administration takes over, this time it is just more public. Partners are encouraged to contact NRCS staff to let them know they are appreciated.

SNOTEL Update: Matt Warbritton, NRCS Supervisory Hydrologist

- Matt provided an overview and history of the SNOTEL Program.
- The program maintains a series of networks comprised of Snow Light stations, Snow Courses, Aerial Markers, and SNOTEL stations. The data from these different stations are used to create a seasonal water supply forecast from January through June.
- In 2023 additional funding was received to expand the program in partnership with Snohomish PUD, Okanogan CD, Chelan PUD, Yakama Nation, and USACE.
- The program is also adding and replacing soil sensors at various sites.
- Conditions update: The weather pattern is similar to last year with a snow drought in the mountains. Last year the snow drought was more pervasive. With the warmer fall temperatures, much of the early precipitation fell as rain. The water year to date shows widespread deficits in precipitation. The Cascades are not expected to reach normal precipitation levels.

Riparian Subcommittee Findings: Nick Vira, Partnership Liaison

- The Riparian Subcommittee was convened to assess barriers to EQIP riparian program enrollment rates and to develop strategies to increase adoption rates across the state.
- The 11-member committee identified the following barriers to program participation: NRCS provides limited services, there are significant out-of-pocket costs and reimbursement liability, the payment rate does not always reflect true project costs, programs are not well understood in communities, difficulty obtaining trees, and concerns around land-use restrictions such as spraying and mowing.
- Recommendations included: creating a partnership coalition that would create a joint factsheet on the various programs available, breaking project components out by task (site prep, installation, etc.), collaborating to identify priority areas and creating an incentive ranking, riparian easement programs, tax-exempt buffers and the potential for Riparian RCPP projects were also discussed.
- STAC members discussed the possibility of using existing tools like the [Conservation Program Explorer](#) to advertise funding programs for riparian projects.

Urban Conservation Opportunity: Rebecca Anderson, NRCS

- The proposed Urban Agriculture grant opportunity has been rescinded. However, NRCS offers several practices that can be utilized to assist urban producers through existing farm bill programs.

- Rebecca Anderson will be hosting a listening session for community members to help prioritize and identify practices important to urban ag producers.

Action Item: Reach out to [Rebecca Anderson](#) by **February 20th** if you would like to participate in a listening session.

EQIP Act Now Update & General Program Contracting Status: Keith Griswold, ASTC for Programs

- Anything IRA is currently on hold.
- NRCS WA was able to obligate almost 10 million dollars by January because of Act Now.
- With Act Now the date of the application is more important than the ranking score.
- There are a significant number of EQIP and CSP contracts in eastern Washington.
- NRCS has over 500 CSP applications in the system.
- NRCS WA's total funding allocation, including IRA, is over \$88 million.

Ecological Sciences

- **Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) Update:** Robert D. Evans, State Resource Conservationist
 - NRCS is working on a new SharePoint system for the FOTG. The broken links in Section 4 should be fixed soon.
- **Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Update:** Robert D. Evans, State Resource Conservationist
 - Continuous improvement of the CRP process is underway. In FY26 there is a significant workload with 1,269 CRP contracts expiring.
- **Technical Training Calendar:** Robert D. Evans, State Resource Conservationist
 - The training calendar has been updated. If anyone has questions regarding upcoming trainings please reach out to Josh Madison – Joshua.m.madison@usd.gov.
- **New State Soils Scientist:** Max Ross, State Resource Soil Scientist
 - The state wetland compliance instructions, FOTG, and JAA matrix were recently updated.
 - The backlog of wetland determinations is being actively addressed.
 - NRCS recently hired a West Area Wetland Specialist and plans to process future wetland determination requests within 30-60 days.
 - Max is also responsible for coordinating training and outreach, being the soil health point of contact as well as the lead instructor for the Soil Health and Sustainability Training.
 - As the liaison to the Soil and Plant Sciences Division he is reviewing the status of soil surveys in WA State. The Southeast Area needs to be updated as it has the largest number of conservation plans being developed utilizing the oldest soil surveys.

- WA NRCS will be looking at soil health beyond cropland in the future.
- WA NRCS is considered the Best in the West for our soil health efforts.
- **STAC Wildlife Subcommittee Updates**
 - Sage Grouse Initiative Proposed Boundary Changes: Scott Scroggie, NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative Coordinator & Peter McBride, NRCS State Wildlife Biologist
 - After the wildfires in 2020 the Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resiliency Initiative (WSRRI) was created.
 - WSRRI mapping and spatial analysis was used as the basis for the proposed Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Priority update. The SGI map was also updated based on current population data.
 - The update caused the proposed program area to shrink considerably, so much so that we may want to add a 4th tier to further support core habitat areas.
 - SGI is a national initiative; it was pointed out that if we shrink the eligible acres for program enrollment we may need to send money back. Historically all of the funds have been used. A 4th tier could be used to protect high-quality shrubsteppe.
 - Cameron Stoflet indicated that there might be areas with Sage Grouse covered by the Spokane Tribe not shown on the proposed map.
 - The group was encouraged to review the map and provide feedback.

Action Item: Send comments to [Nick Vira](#) by **February 20th**.

- Species Threatened & Endangered Listing: Peter McBride, NRCS State Wildlife Biologist
 - Suckley's Cuckoo Bumblebee & Monarch Butterfly
 - Suckley's cuckoo bumble bee (proposed Endangered) – comments due February 18:
The Service particularly seek comments concerning threats and conservation actions affecting the species; its biology, range, and current status; and reasons as to whether or not the designation of critical habitat for the species may be prudent. The proposed listing rule, supporting materials, and information on how to submit comments can be found on regulations.gov by searching for docket number FWS-R7-ES-2024-0117.
 - This species is associated with meadows and is parasitic, utilizing the nests of other bumblebees.
 - NRCS WA is working with Xerces to identify possible areas of concern.
 - Monarch butterfly (proposed Threatened) – comments due March 12:
The Service particularly seeks comments concerning threats and conservation actions affecting the species, and whether they should include an exception for the use of pesticides and, if so, what measures are reasonable, feasible, and adequate to reduce or offset pesticide exposure for monarchs. Information about how to submit comments can be found on regulations.gov by searching for docket number FWS-R3-ES-2024-0137.

- NRCS staff have already engaged Xerces on Monarch conservation. The state has a tech note available and NRCS staff have received training on monarch conservation strategies.
- **Non-Lethal Predator Control Practices:** Peter McBride, NRCS State Wildlife Biologist
 - Currently there are limited practices available in WA State including turbo-fladry and carcass management. In other states, they have range riding, electrified mats, and electric fences as BMPs.
 - The group's consensus was that there was interest in adding more BMPs to the allowed practices in WA State.
 - NRCS staff indicated we may need a NEPA document but that they could obtain a copy from other states that have added the BMPs already. There is a need for consistency amongst federal agencies in determining livestock losses by predators.

Action Item: Send comments to [Nick Vira](#) by **February 20th**.

Washington State Partners for the Fish and Wildlife Program Strategic Planning Process and Timeline: Nick George, Fish and Wildlife State Coordinator, USFWS

- The current strategic plan covers 2022 – 2026 and addresses species conservation, habitat connectivity, and resilient ecosystems.
- There are currently seven focus areas in WA State.
- USFWS would like to connect the dots between public and private lands to increase connectivity, address catastrophic wildfires, utilize low-tech nature-based solutions, respond to unique landscape needs, and build habitat to meet recovery goals.
- Most importantly, the agency seeks to build relationships and trust.
- As the agency works toward the creation of its next strategic plan (2027-2031) they are seeking feedback on where partner and agency programs and priorities overlap, what are the threats to wildlife in those areas, and what are the unique conditions and possible solutions.
- Partners are encouraged to reach out to Nick George for more information on their strategic plan update.

Partner Update, State Conservation Commission's Science Hub: Levi Keesecker, SCC Ecosystems Manager

- Levi provided an update on the Science Hub that was created to connect scientists with practitioners and researchers.
- The Science Hub has been working to develop a Conservation Effects Assessment Program using existing tools and research strategies that are open source. The goal is to support the monitoring efforts of the Voluntary Stewardship Program.
- The Science Hub is looking to operationalize data to decrease the ground workload for conservation district staff.
- Levi highlighted several planning/mapping tools including the Ag. Conservation Planning Framework, developed in the Midwest, which could be adapted for use in Washington State.
- In the future the Science Hub would also like to provide additional training opportunities.

Closing Remarks: Roylene Comes At Night, NRCS WA. State Conservationist

- Roylene thanked everyone for attending and for helping to keep NRCS WA on track.

Meeting Closed at: 3:45 PM