

MEETING NOTES
Grant County Local Work Group Meeting

Tuesday, January 31, 2017
Oregon Department of Forestry Conference Room, John Day
1:00 – 3:00 pm

Purpose: Provide a forum for NRCS to work collaboratively with our partners so we can develop a plan that strategically utilizes limited resources in a way that benefits all of us.

Objectives: Confirm resource concerns identified from past local work group meetings and prioritize projects for Conservation Implementation Strategies (CIS) development.

2016 Farm Bill Update

Lorraine provided an update on the various programs and funding pools that were available in Grant County in 2016, and a report on what was accomplished through each. The table below shows the number of contracts, dollars obligated, and contracted acres for each funding pool under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

2016 EQIP Summary			
Funding Pool	No. of Contracts	Dollars Obligated	Acres
Drought- Stockwater	12	\$ 134,564.38	19,309
Future Directions Aspen	21	\$ 223,578.15	63.4
JDU Basin Forestry	5	\$ 74,156.80	175
Northside Juniper	7	\$ 121,828.58	643
Organic- Transitional	1	\$ 26,022.00	20
Post Fire Seeding	48	\$ 554,378.00	4,206
Totals	94	\$ 1,134,527.91	24,416.40

Grant County NRCS also developed 13 new Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contracts in 2016. These contracts cover 34,016 acres with contract payments of \$199,599 per year. In addition, there were 16 CSP contract renewals. (CSP contracts have a 5 year duration, after which the participants have the option for renewal, entering into a second 5 year contract.) These renewal contracts cover 49,368 acres, with annual payments totaling \$280,279 per year.

2017 Program Update

CSP

The Grant County NRCS office currently has 12 applications for the 2017 CSP sign up. The deadline to submit applications in February 3. CSP has undergone a significant revision, including development of a new tool for evaluating applications and a new enhancement list. Enhancements are now linked directly to NRCS conservation practices. The intent of the program revision was to make the program more transparent to landowners.

EQIP

The following EQIP funding pools are being offered in Grant County in 2017. The deadline to submit applications for these programs is February 17.

- Northside Mule Deer Habitat
 - Juniper removal and aspen restoration
- Forestry
 - A 1 mile buffer surrounding public lands in the Upper Main Stem John Day River watersheds and Upper Middlefork John Day watersheds.
- Kahler Basin
 - Forest thinning, juniper removal, prescribed burning, and aspen restoration within a 3 mile buffer of Forest Service ground
- Abandoned Field Restoration
 - Controlling weeds and established desirable perennial vegetative cover in old abandoned farm fields
- Statewide Initiatives
 - Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative
 - Energy Initiative
 - Organic Initiative

NRCS may offer a drought funding pool again this year, but will evaluate the situation at the end of April.

Another funding pool that had been proposed and approved was the Grant County Soil Bacteria CIS. However, after the CIS was approved for funding, the state of Oregon prohibited the use of the soil bacteria in the state. So this funding pool is on hold for the time being.

RCP

Grant SWCD was awarded a state Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) project in FY2017. The project will improve forest conditions, increase stream flows, and improve instream habitat for listed fish on private lands near the Malheur National Forest. Treatments will include juniper removal and forest stand improvements in the uplands of the Upper Mainstem John Day River. The total RCP award was \$1,196,000, with \$1,124,450 in EQIP funds and \$71,550 in CSP funds.

For partners who might be interested in submitting RCP proposals, preproposals for the FY2018 application cycle are due April 21, 2017. Under RCP, applicants can request funding through the EQIP, CSP, and ACEP programs. ACEP is the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. There are three different RCP pools: National, Critical Conservation Areas, and State. In Oregon, the Critical Conservation Area is the Columbia Basin. RCP applicants may only apply to 1 of the 3 pools.

Review of County Priority Resource Issues

The NRCS Long Range Strategy for Grant County identifies the following 4 priorities (in priority order):

1. Invasive species – includes juniper, annual grasses, and herbaceous weeds
2. Forest Health – includes aspen restoration
3. Grazing Management – includes stock water developments
4. Water Quality/Quantity – includes irrigation improvements, stock water

Participants were asked if these four priorities are still the top priorities. Bryan Vogt, Monument SWCD, stated that it can be very difficult to get funding for irrigation efficiency improvements and it would be

helpful to have EQIP funding available for these types of projects. He asked if maybe the water quality/quantity priority should be elevated to a higher priority on the list. There was general agreement that getting funding for irrigation projects is challenging, but also general agreement to retain the existing priorities for now.

Kirk Ausland, ODF, commented that the Forest Health priority should include fuels reduction projects.

Future Directions

FY2018

Lorraine stated that of the existing funding pools, the following three will continue to be offered in FY2018.

- Northside Mule Deer
- Kahler Basin
- Forestry

However, for the Forestry funding pool, Lorraine anticipates that the remaining acres in the current focus area will be covered in FY2017. So a new focus area will need to be identified for FY2018. A brief discussion regarding the next focus area was held. Sideboards for selecting a focus area are basically that private lands within a 1 mile buffer of public lands would be eligible for funding. The group discussed that the Upper Main Stem area is covered by the Grant SWCD RCPP project which is closely aligned with current Forest Service work. Bear Valley/Canyon Creek was a focus area in 2010-2012 and has been treated. It was mentioned that the Forest Service is starting to do planning for the Murderer's Creek area. Lower Middle Fork and Upper Cottonwood Creek were also brought up as a potential places to go next.

At current staffing levels, NRCS does not have the capacity to add any additional funding pools (beyond the 3 listed above) for FY2018.

FY2019 and Beyond

The group brainstormed ideas for funding pools to develop for FY2019 and beyond.

- Juniper removal
- Forest thinning
- Weed control – annual grasses, others
- Stock water development and riparian fencing on Forest Service and BLM allotments
- Easements
- Irrigation improvements
- Border and cross-fencing for private lands bordering federal ground

Related to easements, the question was asked if there was an opportunity to develop a strategy or priority for ACEP-ALE at the county level. Lorraine explained that ACEP is managed and priorities are set at the state level. Priorities in Oregon for ACEP-ALE currently are (1) the rural/urban interface, (2) sage grouse habitat, and (3) Columbia Basin. The only opportunity to develop local easement priorities is through the RCPP program.

After brainstorming, each of the identified items was read off and participants were asked to raise their hands if they felt that item was a priority item. Juniper removal, Forest thinning, and Weed control had

unanimous or nearly unanimous support as priority items. Irrigation improvements and fencing for private lands bordering federal ground were both strongly supported with approximately ¾ of the participants showing support. Stock water/riparian fencing on allotments and easements received significantly fewer votes than the other items.

Juniper removal, Forest thinning, Weed control, and Irrigation improvements were selected as priorities for the group to work on fleshing out during the remainder of the meeting. The participants were asked to divide into 4 groups – one for each priority – to discuss specifics for each priority, including

- Specific treatments/practices needed
- Where the focus area would be
- Why

Juniper

The group discussing juniper removal identified the Ritter/Lower Middle Fork area as a potential focus area. There is an established landowner collaborative in this area that has developed a strategic action plan. That action plan identifies juniper removal as the #1 priority. There are 30+ landowners willing and able to move forward with juniper removal. In addition, a feasibility study is underway in this area to explore the potential for putting in a mill that would process juniper logs. The area is also part of the Heppner Management Unit, which is an ODFW Mule Deer Initiative unit. A question was raised regarding the resource concern that would be addressed by removing juniper. Habitat for steelhead was listed as one resource concern that would benefit.

Forest Thinning

The group discussing forest thinning identified the “Izee Country” as a potential focus area. Reasons given were that there has not been much recent work in the area, there are private lands bordering Forest Service land, there are higher productivity sites in this area that would benefit greatly from treatment, and group members believe there are landowners who would participate. In addition to forest thinning, there are opportunities in this area for juniper removal and aspen restoration; therefore, opportunity to address multiple resource concerns simultaneously.

On a related note, Kirk Ausland shared that Malheur Lumber Company is in the process of getting a new SWAG mill, which is a small diameter mill that can be used to mill juniper and small diameter Ponderosa pine. The project is being supported by Sustainable Northwest.

Weeds

The group discussing weeds identified four weeds as being the top priorities for treatment:

- Yellow starthistle
- Whitetop
- Knapweeds
- Annual grasses

In the limited time available, they were not able to identify a specific focus area, but were able to identify that limiting expansion of weeds is a top priority. Keeping whitetop out of the upper mainstem valley was mentioned as one specific area of concern.

Irrigation Improvements

The group discussing irrigation improvements further defined this priority as improvements to existing irrigation systems to improve efficiency, which would in turn positively impact water quality and quantity. Specific practices would include piping open ditches and upgrading delivery systems (e.g. converting from flood to sprinkler). Potential focus areas identified by the group were Upper mainstem tributaries and the Fox and Cottonwood watersheds. Groups interested in seeing irrigation improvements include tribes, ODFW, and Monument and Grant SWCDs.

Closing

Before adjourning, participants were given an opportunity to share any additional comments or informational items with the group. Monument SWCD recently acquired a range drill which is available for rental. Use is not restricted to the boundaries of the Monument SWCD. The drill has a single hopper and a 5 foot planting width. Anyone interested should contact the Monument SWCD.