

**2017 Harney County Local Work Group Meeting  
Meeting Notes**

*Wednesday, February 22, 2017*

*9:00 am – 12:00 pm*

*Public Meeting Room, Harney Educational Service District*

*25 Fairview Heights, Burns*

**Purpose: To build alliances and strategically invest to effectively solve natural resource problems in Harney County.**

**Objectives:**

- 1. Provide a status update on the revision of the Long Range Strategy**
- 2. Provide an update on progress made toward implementing the Long Range Strategy**
- 3. Receive input on proposed FY2018 funding pools and future directions**

**Opening**

Zola Ryan called the meeting to order and reviewed the meeting objectives which were to provide an update on the revision of the long range strategy, review progress on implementing the long range strategy, and discuss Farm Bill program funding pools for fiscal year 2018 and beyond. After all participants introduced themselves, Zola asked if anyone had specific topics they had come to the meeting hoping to discuss. These “burning issues” included:

- Irrigation efficiency
- Ag water use
- Water conservation
- Private landowners spraying BLM
- Sage grouse listing review
- Spraying initiative

**Revision of the Long Range Strategy**

Zola provided a quick overview of the process for revising the Long Range Strategy. The original Long Range Strategy was for FY2010 – 2015. In 2015, NRCS held a special Local Work Group meeting to gather input on what the priorities for FY2016-2020 should be. In 2016, NRCS presented the revised priorities and draft desired future outcomes at the Local Work Group meeting for review. Zola explained that since the 2016 meeting, she has made some revisions to the desired future outcomes based on input received last year, and also has drafted objectives for each priority. The goal for this meeting was to review those changes and hopefully finalize the priorities, desired future outcomes, and objectives. With that done, she will be able to move forward with writing the actual revised Long Range Strategy.

The Priority Resource Problems identified for the FY2016-2020 Long Range Strategy are:

1. Harney Basin Aquatic Ecosystem Function
2. Medusahead Rye
3. Riparian Condition in the Silvies Water Quality Demonstration Area
4. Ground Water Availability
5. Juniper Encroachment

**Harney Basin Aquatic Ecosystem Function**

Desired Future Outcome: To improve and maintain aquatic health and the condition of flood-irrigated habitats in order to improve habitat conditions for migratory birds in the Harney Basin.

Objective 1: Reduce and maintain carp populations at a level that allows for good water quality, healthy native aquatic plant and animal communities, and adequate food resources for migratory bird populations.

Objective 2: Secure 10,300 acres of flood-irrigated habitat in the Harney Basin through either conservation easements or through practices that improve management ability and reduce the incentive for converting to other uses by September 30, 2020.

- Improve management ability and reduce the incentive for converting to other uses on 5,000 acres.
- Secure 5,300 acres of privately owned wet meadow habitat under working land conservation easements.

Discussion:

- Objective 1 is basically the goal statement from the existing Conservation Implementation Strategy (CIS) for Harney Basin Aquatic Health Improvement (carp plan).
- Objective 2 is basically the goal statement from the existing CIS for Working Lands Waterbird Habitat Conservation in the SONEC Region. This CIS covers Harney and Lake Counties, but the acreage objective of 10,300 acres is for Harney County specifically.
- There was discussion of whether the objective of 5,300 acres of easements is reasonable. Zola said that there is a lot of uncertainty about whether this objective will be met. There are two primary constraints. The first is that currently there are very few, if any, land trusts that are interested in holding easements in Harney County. For working land easements (ACEP-ALE) NRCS does not hold the easement. NRCS provides funding toward the purchase of the easement, but a third party entity is needed to actually hold the easement. The second constraint is landowner interest.
- Zola was asked if the easements don't materialize, will that be considered a failure or can the acres be shifted to the infrastructure improvement sub-goal. In other words, if we meet 10,300 acres through working on infrastructure and management changes, will that be considered acceptable success? She responded that yes, that would be acceptable.
- Zola explained that the easement objective comes primarily from the SONEC RCPP. Part of the ranking for RCPP proposals is the diversity of Farm Bill Programs (EQIP, CSP, ACEP) requested. The SONEC RCPP includes easements. However, the RCPP also covers Harney and Lake Counties as well as part of Northeast California. There is clear interest in easements in California, so if we can't find a land trust willing to hold easements and/or landowners simply aren't interested, there is the potential to shift those acres to California.
- Rusty asked how many acres of flood-irrigated meadows are in Harney County. Zola said that these acreage goals come from a study by USGS where they tracked radio tagged northern pintail ducks to determine which areas they were using the most and what they were eating. As part of that study USGS also quantified how many acres of wet meadow habitats were available on private lands. The acreage estimate in that document for the Malheur Lake Basin is 15,500 acres. The document also says that 5,300 acres need to be maintained in order to continue to provide adequate habitat for the northern pintail population goal. So that is where the 5,300 acres for easements comes from. The additional 5,000 acres for infrastructure and

management improvements is an acknowledgement that we don't want to simply maintain the minimum.

- The group was ok with this priority, desired future outcome, and objectives as presented.

#### Medusahead Rye

Desired Future Outcome: Land managers adopt and implement integrated pest management (IPM) methods in order to reduce and maintain medusahead populations to levels that are economically and ecologically sustainable.

Objective: Work collaboratively with private and public land managers in the Stinkingwater Medusahead Management Area to contain the medusahead infestation, compartmentalize treatment areas, and achieve a significant reduction in the amount of medusahead infested acres.

#### Discussion:

- Zola explained that NRCS has been working with the CWMA for quite a few years on medusahead management. Work in the last medusahead focus area in Riley has finished up, and the CWMA has identified the Stinkingwater area as the next focus area. However, for this effort, the CWMA has identified a large Medusahead Management Area and then divided it up into 5 sub-areas to be treated in 5 phases. NRCS has a draft CIS in support of the Stinkingwater Medusahead Management Area, and that serves as the basis for the objective identified above.
- The group was ok with this priority, desired future outcome, and objective as presented.

#### Riparian Condition in the Silvies Water Quality Demonstration Area

Desired Future Outcome: In 5 years, 60% of stream miles on private agricultural lands in the Silvies watershed are in Ecological State A, and 40% of stream miles in lower ecological states exhibit improving trends in ecological condition.

Objective 1: Assess riparian conditions on private agricultural lands in the Silvies watershed.

Objective 2: Conduct outreach and education to inform landowners of regulatory requirements and benefits of functioning riparian systems.

Objective 3: Conduct inventories on degraded riparian areas to document pre-treatment conditions.

Objective 4: Implement treatments to improve riparian condition.

Objective 5: Conduct monitoring to document results of treatments and track progress toward achieving the desired future outcome.

#### Discussion:

- This priority is linked to the Silvies Water Quality Demonstration Area. Harney SWCD is the local lead for Oregon Department of Agriculture's (ODA) Ag Water Quality Management Plans. Several years ago, ODA implemented a new requirement that each Ag Water Quality Management Plan identify a focus area. Within the focus area, there needs to be an assessment of riparian conditions, outreach to landowners with potential water quality issues, projects implemented, and reporting on the effectiveness of those improvement projects. For Harney County, the focus area is being called a demonstration area and the Silvies watershed has been selected.

- Zola explained that the Desired Future Outcome had been changed since it was presented at the last Local Work Group Meeting. Previously it stated that 15% of stream miles in the watershed would exhibit improving trends in ecological condition. Zola had asked Marty (Harney SWCD) whether it was reasonable to expect that in 5 years the SWCD would be going back and doing trend assessments on all 130 stream miles. The decision was that that is not very likely. Instead, it makes more sense to set a goal related specifically to improvements for those stream miles that are identified in the pre-assessment as being in lower ecological condition. They further discussed what would be a reasonable percentage of these degraded stream miles to expect to improve in condition in 5 years, and settled on 40%. For perspective, the pre-assessment of riparian condition for the demonstration area is complete, and 25 miles of stream were identified as being in lower ecological states. So 40% equates to approximately 10 stream miles to be improved.
- The group was ok with the priority, desired future outcome, and objectives as presented.

#### Ground Water Availability

Desired Future Outcome: To ensure the continued availability of ground water for sustainable beneficial use in the Harney Basin.

Objective 1: Complete a ground water assessment to identify aquifer boundaries, recharge sources and rates, and quantify water demand.

Objective 2: Identify aquifers that are currently being depleted or face imminent risk of depletion.

Objective 3: Identify opportunities to reduce water withdrawals from depleting or at risk aquifers while still allowing for beneficial use.

Objective 4: Implement structural and management practices to reduce water use.

Objective 5: Establish a monitoring program to continue to evaluate the status of water aquifers.

#### Discussion:

- The desired future outcome and objectives are the same as what was listed in the original Long Range Strategy.
- There was discussion about whether NRCS would have to wait for the completion and results of the ground water studies (Objectives 1 and 2) before they are able to offer funding for irrigation improvements or other water conservation projects. Zola responded that the study doesn't have to be complete, but she needs to have enough information to defensibly say that there is an issue, where the issue is, and that any proposed practices are actually going to be effective.
- Rusty said he thought at the 2016 meeting that Zola had said she had enough information to be able to start implementing some things. Zola said that she thinks she is close. The Watershed Council's Aquaveo study provides good evidence of three specific areas in the Harney Basin that appear to have ground water depletion, and the Water Resources Department's decision to not accept any new irrigation well applications for 5 years provides some certainty that water that would be conserved through efficiency improvements won't just be sucked up by a new pivot going in next door. Zola also said that she's still hesitant to move forward too quickly, because she still needs information or input on where to draw the boundaries around a focus area as well as not wanting to run too far ahead of the Community Based Water Planning process and risk going in a different direction or getting cross-wise with that group.

- The group was ok with the priority, desired future outcome, and objectives as presented.

#### Juniper Encroachment

Desired Future Outcome: To improve ecological condition and wildlife habitat by removing encroaching western juniper on 30,000 acres of private land in Harney County by the end of 2020.

Objective 1: Treat 20,000 acres of Phase 1 and 2 invasive juniper on private lands in high priority sage grouse habitat.

Objective 2: Treat 5,000 acres of Phase 1 and 2 invasive juniper on private lands to improve mule deer habitat by restoring aspen, bitterbrush, and mountain mahogany stands.

Objective 3: Treat 5,000 acres of Phase 3 invasive juniper on private lands to improve range health, reduce erosion, and improve surface water quality.

#### Discussion:

- The objectives presented are the same as the objectives given in the original Long Range Strategy.
- Zola asked specifically for input on Objective 2. In the 2016 meeting notes, there was a comment that treating juniper for forest/mule deer is still important. So in drafting up objectives for the 2016-2020 Long Range Strategy, Zola was unsure whether the 5,000 acres of Phase 1 and 2 juniper should still be targeted specifically to mule deer, or if there should be more of a forest health spin, or some combination.
- The original Objective 2 was written specifically with the ODFW Mule Deer Initiative in mind. At that time the ODFW Mule Deer Initiative (MDI) identified the Steens Wildlife Management Unit as a priority. The original MDI project has been completed. ODFW has developed a new MDI plan, which for Harney County identifies the Beulah/Malheur River Units as a priority. Zola only became aware of this the day before the Local Work Group meeting and has not had a chance to consult with ODFW about what assistance might be useful.
- There was discussion about whether the way the objective is currently worded would preclude NRCS from offering funding outside the Beulah/Malheur River units. It should not. This is the way the objective was worded in the previous Long Range Strategy. The details were then laid out in a Conservation Implementation Strategy, which identified the MDI unit as the highest priority location for funding, then projects located in winter range, and then other projects with juniper encroaching into aspen, bitterbrush, and mountain mahogany stands. So projects throughout the county were eligible funding, but those located in the Steens unit received the highest priority. Zola said that she would envision a similar approach in the next CIS, only with the Beulah/Malheur River units receiving the highest priority.
- Later in the meeting, Kirk Ausland asked if there was an option of adding forest health as a priority. Zola responded that the challenge with adding priorities is that through several meetings now the Local Work Group has identified the current 5 resource problems as the priorities and there currently isn't enough capacity to make as much progress as everyone would like with those priorities. So there isn't really capacity to add an additional priority. However, within the current priorities, juniper encroachment would be a logical place to also look at a forest health component. Specifically, Objective 2 could be changed if the Local Work Group was interested in seeing that changed from a mule deer focus to a forest health focus.

- After discussion, the group would like to see Objective 2 changed to allow for treatment of 5,000 acres of Phase 1 and 2 juniper to improve mule deer habitat and/or forest health. The details of how those 5,000 acres are then broken up between mule deer and forest health can then be addressed in individual Conservation Implementation Strategies as they are developed.
- The group was ok with the priority, desired future outcome, and objectives 1 and 3 as presented. Objective 2 will be revised as described in the previous bullet point.

### Prioritization

There was discussion about whether the 5 priority resource problems are listed in priority order, how they had been prioritized, and whether the Local Work Group had had an opportunity to discuss the prioritization during the revision process. Zola explained that the 5 priorities are listed in priority order. The priority order was determined during the development of the original Long Range Strategy. At that time, after the Local Work Group had brainstormed a list of resource issues, they were asked to fill out a matrix with all of the identified issues listed. For each issue, they assigned a ranking of 1-5 for how important the problem was, how urgent the problem was, whether there were tools available to solve the issue, whether there were existing efforts in progress, whether there was community support for addressing the issue, etc. After the matrices had been completed, Zola looked at how the issues ranked out based on all of those factors, and then at how the issues ranked out based only on importance and urgency. The top 5 priorities were basically the same either way, but with a slightly different order of priority. In the end she determined the top 5 priorities based on importance and urgency.

Zola went on to say that during the 2015 and 2016 Local Work Group Meetings, while there had been discussion about whether these 5 priorities were still the top priorities, she did not believe there had been discussion about whether the priority order was still appropriate. She said that the group could discuss changing the priority order today. She said she would like to couch the conversation with an explanation that while the 5 identified priorities are listed in priority order, the reality of day to day operations is that the actual amount of progress made on any given priority is influenced by many factors, including existing efforts and momentum within NRCS as well as with partners, whether sufficient information is available to point NRCS in the direction of an appropriate solution, etc. She has considered all 5 resource problems in the Long Range Strategy to be a priority and has looked for opportunities to make progress on all of them. Some just naturally move forward more quickly and easily than others.

Rusty said that he felt the priority should be based on where there is the most economic benefit to the county. This led to a brief discussion of how that would be determined. It is difficult to accurately quantify the economic benefits of these efforts and both economic profits and economic losses would need to be considered. There was also discussion that there should be flexibility to shift within the list based on changing situations and opportunities.

In the end, the group decided that they would like the priority order to be removed entirely. All 5 priority resource problems should be identified simply as a priority, with no one taking priority over the others.

### **Progress Report on Implementation**

Zola provided an update on the progress that has been made on each of the 5 priority resource problems over the past year.

### Harney Basin Aquatic Ecosystem Function

The High Desert Partnership convenes the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative (HBWI), a collaborative group of partners and stakeholders with interest in working on controlling carp and maintaining flood-irrigated wet meadows for bird habitat. HBWI has developed a strategic action plan that lays out the partnership's objectives and plans for these two issues and was successful in receiving OWEB Focused Investment Partnership (FIP) funding. OWEB's Focused Investment Partnership program encourages groups of partners working on a given resource concern in a given geographic area to request significant funding over a 6 year period to be set aside specifically to address that resource concern.

Objective 1: Carp - NRCS has an existing CIS for Harney Basin Aquatic Health Improvement with a goal of controlling carp and implementing habitat improvement projects to improve water quality, aquatic plant and animal communities, and migratory bird populations. Progress made toward implementing this CIS in 2016 includes:

- Basin Wide Baseline Inventory
  - This project is funded through an OWEB grant under the FIP.
  - The project involves collecting data on the number and distribution of carp, as well baseline aquatic health data to document conditions prior to implementing projects to control carp.
  - Data collected includes:
    - Environmental DNA (e-DNA) – testing for the presence of carp DNA in water bodies.
    - Electro-fishing – fish assemblage, including carp
    - Water Quality
    - Macroinvertebrates
    - Aquatic Vegetation
    - Bird Counts – not collected directly. Partners will pull relevant data from existing annual bird surveys.
  - Good data already exists for the Refuge, Diamond, and the Blitzen River. For this study, data is being collected in the Silvies River and Silver Creek.
  - 2016 was the first year of data collection. Additional survey work will occur in 2017.
- Carp Biomass Threshold Study
  - This project is funded through an OWEB grant under the FIP.
  - The project involves installing enclosures in Windmill Pond on the Refuge and stocking the enclosures with various densities of carp to see what the water quality and vegetation response is. The goal is to determine how many lb/ac of carp you can have and still maintain aquatic vegetation.
  - In 2016, various materials and designs for the enclosures were tested. In 2017, the full study at Windmill Pond is scheduled to occur.
- Harney Basin Lidar Analysis
  - This project is funded through an OWEB grant.
  - The project involves ground truthing Lidar that was flown in Fall 2014 for the Silvies River floodplain and Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, and then developing visual products from that Lidar data to help understand surface water connectivity in the basin in high, average, and low water years.
  - One primary purpose is to identify locations where there is the greatest opportunity to stop carp movement.
  - In 2016 the ground truthing was completed. Work on developing visual products is now underway.

- Silver Sub-Basin Lidar
  - A grant proposal has been submitted to the OWEB FIP.
  - This project will involve flying Lidar for the Silver Creek watershed in Fall 2017 and then doing the ground truthing and visual product development. This data for Silver Creek will be combined with the data already collected for the Silvies and Refuge to allow the partners to evaluate the Harney Basin as a whole.
- Commercial Fishing in Malheur Lake
  - Malheur National Wildlife Refuge has a 5 year agreement with a commercial fisherman to harvest carp from Malheur Lake for use as organic fertilizer. Commercial fishing has been occurring.
  - In addition, in the recent drought years, Malheur Lake has greatly reduced in size which has resulted in significant die-off of carp in the Lake.

Objective 2: Meadows - NRCS also has an existing CIS for Working Lands Waterbird Habitat Conservation in the SONEC Region. The CIS covers both Lake and Harney Counties, but for Harney County the goal is to secure 10,300 acres of flood-irrigated habitat through easements or through practices that improve management ability. Progress made toward implementing this CIS in 2016 includes:

- Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) has analyzed 30 years of satellite imagery for the SONEC Region (Southern Oregon and Northeast California) to assess habitat loss and better understand spatial and temporal shifts in habitat availability. Patrick Donelly is the one who has been doing the work. Individual fields have been digitized, and the report will include an analysis of trends in flood-irrigated acres, annual and seasonal variability of surface water distribution and primary productivity, and regularity of flooding. The study was funded by NRCS and the report is in draft. Once the report is complete, NRCS will be given an opportunity to do a technical review, and as long as the review goes well, the report will be distributed along with webinars, presentations, etc.
- The Wetlands Conservancy received funding through the OWEB FIP, as well as at least one other grant, to conduct outreach to land trusts to recruit willing and able easement holders in the area. In addition, Esther Lev of The Wetlands Conservancy will be conducting outreach to local landowners to discuss what the level of interest in easements is, what easement terms might be most attractive to landowners, and what the obstacles or constraints to easements might be. This work will be occurring in 2017.
- Funds are available for securing conservation easements through:
  - SONEC RCPP (ACEP-ALE)
  - HBWI Focused Investment
- No conservation easements have been secured to date.
- Funds are available for flood-irrigation infrastructure and management improvements through:
  - EQIP – Working Lands Waterbird Habitat Conservation
  - SONEC RCPP (EQIP)
  - SONEC RCPP (CSP)
  - HBWI Focused Investment
- In FY2016, NRCS obligated 5 contracts for a total of \$136,244 to implement irrigation infrastructure improvements on 395 acres. Together with contracts obligated in FY2015, this brings the total acres of infrastructure and management improvement projects to 838 acres, or 17% of the 5,000 acre target for this objective.

### Medusahead Rye

NRCS has a draft CIS for Integrated Pest Management in the Stinkingwater Medusahead Management Area. The goal for this CIS is to contain the medusahead infestation within the Stinkingwater Medusahead Management Area, compartmentalize the infestation into 5 separate treatment areas, and reduce the acres of medusahead in each treatment area using a phased approach. Progress to date:

- BLM is spraying the road network throughout the Stinkingwater Management Area to contain and compartmentalize the infestation.
- Steph Bonson, CWMA Coordinator, conducted a helicopter inventory of Phase 1: Beaver Table in Fall 2015. The inventory was funded by BLM.
  - 7,500 acres of medusahead on private lands
  - 5,700 acres of medusahead on BLM
  - 3,300 acres of medusahead on State lands

### Riparian Condition in the Silvies Water Quality Demonstration Area

There is currently no CIS for this priority. However, the first objective for this priority in the Long Range Strategy is to assess riparian condition. Harney SWCD has completed riparian assessments on all private agricultural lands in the Demonstration Area. A total of 130 stream miles were assessed. Of those, 105 miles were in Ecological State A. This equates to 81% of private ag stream miles being in State A and exceeds the goal in the Long Range Strategy of 60%. 11 stream miles were in Ecological State B and 14 stream miles were in Ecological State C. This means there are 25 miles of stream needing some improvement in riparian condition. To meet the Long Range Strategy goal of 40% showing an improving ecological trend, approximately 10 miles of stream would need to demonstrate improvement in 5 years.

NRCS is planning to begin working with Harney SWCD on developing a CIS in 2017. Harney SWCD will remain the lead on addressing riparian condition in the Silvies Demonstration Area, but there may be opportunities for NRCS to assist and contribute. In preliminary conversations with Marty, off-stream water developments and treatment of Phase 3 juniper to improve riparian condition have been identified as potential practices for NRCS to fund. In particular, OWEB is no longer funding livestock wells. NRCS does have the ability to provide financial assistance for livestock wells. The earliest that Farm Bill program funding would be offered in support of this CIS is FY2019.

### Ground Water Availability

There is currently no CIS for this priority. NRCS has been participating in the Harney County Community Based Water Planning process and is planning to rely on this process to guide CIS development.

### Juniper Encroachment

Objective 1: Sage-Grouse – NRCS' efforts to address juniper encroachment in high priority sage-grouse habitat in Harney County area guided by a state-level Sage Grouse Initiative 2.0 Business Plan and by The Oregon Model to Protect Sage Grouse RCPP strategic action plan. Currently, there are three EQIP funding pools available in Harney County that provide the opportunity to fund juniper removal for sage-grouse habitat.

- SGI – Conifer Encroachment – This funding is specifically for removing juniper in sage-grouse habitat. Highest priority goes to projects in the Drewsey Focus Area. Projects located in other sage-grouse core areas are given medium priority.
- SGI – All Threats – This funding for applicants who have an approved plan to address all threats to sage-grouse on their property. The funds can be used to implement the practices identified in that plan, including juniper treatments.

- RCPP – The Oregon Model to Protect Sage Grouse – This funding is for applicants who are participating in Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAAs). Those with an approved site specific plan receive highest priority and funding is available to implement essentially any practice in the site specific plan. Applicants who have submitted a letter of intent to enroll in the CCAA but do not yet have an approved site specific plan are given a medium priority and may receive funding to treat juniper.

Progress made to date includes:

- In FY2016 NRCS obligated 9 EQIP contracts for a total of \$738,944 to remove 4,960 acres of juniper.
- This equates to approximately 25% of the 20,000 acre objective for juniper removal in high priority sage-grouse habitat.
- Over the life of the Sage Grouse Initiative (2010-2016), 34,569 acres of juniper have been treated in Harney County. Over 25,000 of those acres have been in the Drewsey Action Area.

Objective 2: Forest/Mule Deer – NRCS needs to develop one or more CIS to address this objective. There is potential to develop a CIS in support of the ODFW Mule Deer Initiative in Beulah/Malheur River units.

Objective 3: Phase 3 – NRCS needs to develop a CIS to address this objective. Zola said she thinks there is opportunity to incorporate this objective into the riparian condition CIS for the Silvies Demonstration Area.

### **Farm Bill Program Offerings**

#### FY2017

The following EQIP funding pools were available in Harney County in FY2017. The application deadline for this year was February 17. NRCS staff are currently ranking applications.

- Working Lands Waterbird Habitat Conservation
- RCPP – SONEC Working Wet Meadows
- SGI – Conifer Encroachment
- SGI – All Threats
- RCPP – The Oregon Model to Protect Sage Grouse

#### FY2018

For FY2018, NRCS is proposing to keep the existing funding pools and add 1 new CIS. The new CIS would be Integrated Pest Management in the Stinkingwater Medusahead Management Area. Funding in FY2018 would be for treatments in Phase 1: Beaver Table. The group was ok with keeping the existing funding pools and adding the medusahead funding pool for FY2018.

#### FY2019 and Beyond

Looking to the future, NRCS is planning to develop CIS for:

- Riparian Condition in the Silvies
- Juniper Removal to Improve Mule Deer Habitat and/or Forest Health
- Ground Water Availability

Discussion related to broadening the juniper objective to allow for targeting either mule deer habitat or forest health is captured earlier in these notes in the section titles Revision of the Long Range Strategy.

Zola asked the group to provide input on Ground Water Availability since it was evident that this issue was of particular interest to the group. The question was asked how soon NRCS would potentially offer funding related to ground water given that the slide was titled FY2019 and Beyond. Zola responded that the earliest NRCS could offer funding is FY2019. New CIS need to be submitted to the State Office for review by March 30 to be considered for funding in FY2018. She said she doesn't have the ability to develop a CIS for ground water availability in that time frame. But a new CIS could be developed by March of next year, which could then be funded in FY2019.

Zola said she would like input on where to draw the lines around the focus area – i.e. what areas would be eligible for funding – and in identifying what practices should be included. She said that her inclination would be to use the three areas identified in the Aquaveo study as having evidence of ground water lowering, but would need help in figuring out where to draw the line.

Rob Sharp asked what the purpose behind the NRCS funding for irrigation improvements in the past had been and how that area had been determined. Zola said that NRCS did offer EQIP funding from 2004-2009 for efficiency improvements to sprinkler irrigation systems. The purpose of the program was to address concerns about ground water availability. Although the program started prior to her tenure with NRCS, it is her understanding that the program was a response to reports of water levels dropping in wells, particularly in the Crane-Buchanan area. Because there was no data available on where the problem did or didn't exist, funding was available throughout the county. Priority was given to applications in the Crane-Buchanan area, but the actual boundaries of the "focus area" were always a little fuzzy. Several factors went into NRCS' decision to end the program in 2009. One was that the quality of applications had declined (expensive projects with little associated water savings). Another factor was that NRCS had no data to tell them how many systems they needed to upgrade or how much water needed to be conserved to alleviate the ground water availability problem. In addition, at that time there was no restriction on new well drilling and many new irrigation systems were being installed. NRCS was spending a lot of money on improving systems, but little confidence that the ground water availability issue was being addressed.

Mark Owens given the current state of the knowledge and the scope and scale of the Oregon Water Resources Department's ground water study, he feels the program should be available basin wide. He also said that as the Community Based Water Planning Process moves forward, he believes NRCS should consider expanding the priority from Ground Water Availability to Water Availability (all water). He said that when talking about improving irrigation efficiency, we should really be talking about water conservation, because an irrigation system can be designed and upgraded to be able to be more efficient, but may not actually result in water conservation based on how the system is operated and managed. He said that there are irrigation technologies available now that are actually designed for lower flow rates, which actually force conservation. And these technologies have been demonstrated to result in sustained or improved yields. Finally, he said that he believes that within a year or a year and a half, the Community Based Water Planning process will result in the development of an MOU stating shared objectives and support of certain practices to conserve water.

Zola said that the concept of irrigation systems that are designed for lower flow rates and therefore force conservation interests her. When NRCS offered irrigation funding in the past, they would design a system to be more efficient and would develop an Irrigation Water Management plan to be used in the operation of the system, but enforcing the management piece was always a challenge. She said that she

would feel much more comfortable moving forward with a CIS if funding was limited to only those systems where water use is limited by the design of the system.

Zola asked if there were volunteers willing to form a sub-committee to meet separately in the coming months specifically to provide input on the development of a CIS for Ground Water Availability. Mark Owens, Shane Otley, Rob Sharp, Dustin Johnson, and Karen Moon volunteered.

## **Closing**

### **Burning Issues**

Zola revisited the list of burning issues identified at the beginning of the meeting to ensure that all had been adequately covered. Matt Obradovich had brought up private landowners spraying on BLM ground. He said that he had heard that Harney SWCD might have the ability to provide financial assistance to private landowners to treat weeds (particularly) annual grasses on their BLM permits in situations where the BLM has identified the need and has clearance for treatment but does not have funding available to do the treatment. He was wondering if that was true and if NRCS had the same ability. Marty said that the SWCD can do that and already has some plans and agreements in place to do just that, particularly in association with the OWEB FIP for sage-grouse and the BLM's Otis-Moffett Table and Merlie Table projects in the Drewsey Area. Zola said that NRCS does have the ability to contract practices on public lands through a contract with the permittee as long as those lands are part of their ag operation. However, in practice, she tries to limit the extent to which she exercises this option, primarily because there is so much work to be done on private lands and that is the primary mission of the NRCS.

Mitzi Defenbaugh had asked about a possible bill in the state legislature to prohibit spraying weeds. Rusty Inglis said he was not aware of any bills currently being considered related to weed control, but there is an initiative in a coastal county (he thought Lincoln) to prohibit aerial spraying in that county. He said that Farm Bureau and other industry groups are aware of the initiative and are fighting it and that he hopes that it fails as it will affect all counties, once they get their foot in the door with one county.

All other "burning issues" had been adequately addressed during the course of the meeting.

### **FSA Program Updates**

Kellie Frank of FSA was present to provide a few brief program updates from that agency. She said that FSA has a program available to help producers who have needed to purchase emergency hay due to the severe winter weather. Also, many people are anticipating potential flooding this spring and FSA has programs available to assist with losses from flooding. She encouraged producers to contact the FSA office with any questions about programs available, including insurance, farm loans, the Emergency Conservation Program, the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, and others.

### **Evaluations and Adjourn**

Zola distributed meeting evaluation forms and voluntary demographic information forms and asked that participants fill those out before leaving. The meeting was adjourned.