

## 2018 Harney County Local Work Group Meeting Notes

*Tuesday, February 27, 2018*

*1:00 pm – 4:00 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 FY2019 funding pools and future directions**

### **Opening**

Zola opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and thanking them for coming. She introduced two new employees in the Hines Field Office - Gail Beverlin and Carlton Strough – and asked each of them to tell the group a little more about themselves. Gail is a permanent Soil Conservationist for NRCS. She started in October. Her background is in range and she has a diverse work history, including private consulting, working for a Watershed Council, and teaching school. Carlton Strough is the new SONEC Partner Biologist. He is actually employed by Harney SWCD, but the majority of his work will be implementing NRCS Farm Bill programs related to improving flood irrigation infrastructure. Carlton is from Boise, ID and has a degree in wildlife management from the University of Idaho. He just started work on Monday.

Zola reviewed the agenda and then asked all of the Local Work Group participants to introduce themselves. Following introductions, she asked if there were any Burning Issues that people had come to the meeting hoping to discuss. These were written on the white board and she said they would look back at the list at the end of the meeting to make sure that everything had been covered.

Burning Issues:

- Water Issues
  - Ground water
  - Irrigation
- CCAA Practices – cultural resources
- Forest Health
- Flood irrigation for birds

### **FSA Program Updates**

Kellie Frank, FSA County Executive Director, was present to provide a brief update on Farm Service Agency programs. She pointed out that FSA has a variety of programs, including farm loans, conservation programs like CREP, and disaster assistance. She brought fact sheets for those who wished to take them. Anyone interested in farm loans should contact Patty Modey at the Hines Service Center.

Kellie said that she wanted to talk primarily about the disaster programs, particularly for drought, since we have had such a dry winter and it is anticipated that we will be in drought this summer.

Kellie also said that the Hines Office just received approval to hire another Program Technician and that announcement will be coming out soon, so if anyone is interested or knows someone who might be, please be on the lookout for the announcement and spread the word.

### **Revision of the Long Range Strategy**

Zola reminded the group of the process that they have gone through to revise the Long Range Strategy. The original Long Range Strategy went through 2015. In 2015, a special Local Work Group meeting was held to determine what the priorities in the new Long Range Strategy should be. In 2016, the Local Work Group reviewed and approved the revised priorities and desired future outcomes for each. In 2017, the Local Work Group reviewed and approved the objectives for each priority and decided to change from numbered priorities to bulleted priorities. Zola said that she had hoped to make the revisions to the actual Long Range Strategy document by this year's Local Work Group meeting, but she wasn't able to get that done. For now, the Powerpoint presentation she was presenting from basically is the Long Range Strategy.

She then reviewed the Long Range Strategy to refresh everybody on the priorities, desired future outcomes, and objectives.

### **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.

### **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.

### **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.

#### 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.

#### 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 and/or improve forest health.

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.

#### **Progress Report on Implementation**

Next, Zola provided an update on progress made toward addressing each of the five priorities.

#### Harney Basin Aquatic Ecosystem Function – Objective 1: Carp

A Conservation Implementation Strategy (CIS) has already been developed for this objective. It is the *Conservation Implementation Strategy for Harney Basin Aquatic Health Improvement*. Progress made to date includes:

- A Basin Wide Baseline Inventory was completed over the course of 2016 and 2017. The project was funded by OWEB through the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative Focused Investment. Data crunching and report writing have not been completed yet, but the general sense is that more data needs to be collected to get a true picture of carp distribution and pre-treatment aquatic health conditions.
- A Carp Biomass Threshold Study is in progress. This project is also funded with an OWEB Focused Investment grant. The purpose of the study is to determine what density of carp (lb/ac) can be tolerated and still have good water quality and vegetation. The major data collection effort will take place this year.
- Lidar was flown for the Silver Creek watershed last fall (2017). This Lidar will be combined with Lidar previously collected for the Silvies River floodplain and Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and used to identify where “pinch points” might exist, offering an opportunity to cut off carp movement between the lakes and their tributaries.
- Commercial fishing of carp continues in Malheur Lake.
- In January, the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative Aquatic Health Sub-Committee and Malheur Lake Work Group met for a “Malheur Summit” to brainstorm ideas for carp control in Malheur Lake and prioritize which alternatives to evaluate using the ecosystem model that is currently being developed by Ph.D. student James Pearson.

#### Harney Basin Aquatic Ecosystem Function – Objective 2: Meadows

A CIS has already been developed for this objective as well. The *Conservation Implementation Strategy for Working Lands Waterbird Habitat Conservation in the SONEC Region* covers both Harney and Lake Counties. Progress made to date includes:

- Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) has been working on a project to analyze 30 years of Landsat imagery in the SONEC region, as well as old General Land Office survey maps, to look at how the footprint of seasonal emergent wetlands has changed over time. Their analysis includes looking at trends in flood-irrigated acres over time, annual and seasonal variability in flooding, and regularity of flooding. This work is currently in the hands of several NRCS staff for review prior to being released to the public.
- Esther Lev of the Wetlands Conservancy is working on a project to learn which land trusts might be willing to consider holding easements in Harney County and what conservation values are important to them. The project also involves talking with Harney County landowners to find out what the interest in easements is and what types of easements would be palatable. The goal is to match up the two pieces, so that there are land trusts willing to acquire conservation easements that will meet the needs and interests of Harney County landowners.
- Funding is available for securing easements through the SONEC Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) agreement and the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative Focused Investment.
- Funding is available for infrastructure and management improvements through:
  - EQIP – Working Lands Waterbird Conservation
  - SONEC RCPP – EQIP
  - SONEC RCPP – CSP
  - HBWI Focused Investment
- NRCS funded 2 EQIP contracts in 2015 and 5 contracts in 2016. No contracts were funded in 2017, but there are currently 4 FY2018 applications and Zola said she expects that 3 of those will probably be funded. The 7 existing contracts cover 838 acres, or 17% of the objective for infrastructure/management improvements.

### Medusahead Rye

A CIS was developed and submitted for approval last year. Cyndee Hill developed the *Conservation Implementation Strategy for Integrated Pest Management in the Stinkingwater Medusahead Management Area*, which was extremely well received by the Oregon NRCS reviewers. The CIS divides the Stinkingwater Medusahead Management Area into 5 areas to be treated in a phased approach.

Progress made to date includes:

- Phase 1 is the Beaver Table area. The CWMA and BLM completed a helicopter inventory of the Phase 1 area in the fall of 2015. 85,615 acres were inventoried. 16,500 acres of medusahead were identified. Of those 7,500 acres were located on private lands. The other acres were on BLM and DSL lands.
- BLM has been spraying the road network throughout the Stinkingwater Management Area to contain and compartmentalize the infestation.
- In FY2018, NRCS is offering EQIP funding for treatment to landowners within the Phase 1 area. 6 applications have been received so far.
- The Harney County CWMA has also received an OWEB grant for treatments within the Phase 1 area. This will be used to match NRCS funds and hopefully get all private lands treated at one time.
- BLM and DSL are also treating their acres.
- The CWMA applied for an RCPP project for the Stinkingwater Management Area, which has been approved and the agreement is currently being developed. This will bring in additional \$800,000 in EQIP funds to fund treatments. Zola said that she thinks the current FY2018 EQIP funding and the CWMA's Beaver Table OWEB grant are probably going to take care of the treatments needed on private lands in the Phase 1 area. So the RCPP funds will likely be spent on treatments in the Phase 2 area. The phase 2 area is the long, narrow strip between the Crane-Buchanan Road and the Stinkingwater Access Road. Most of the Phase 2 area has already been inventoried.

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

No CIS has been developed for this priority yet, although the SWCD does have an Action Plan. Progress made so far:

- SWCD have completed the initial assessment of riparian conditions. However, due to time constraints, some areas were assessed aerially rather than on-the-ground. The SWCD will be working to get access to those areas to ground truth the aerial assessment. In the initial assessment:
  - 158 stream miles were determined to be "Non-Ag" and were not surveyed.
  - 130 stream miles were surveyed.
  - 105 miles were in ecological state A (81%)
  - 11 miles in ecological state B
  - 14 miles in ecological state C

Zola explained that later in the meeting, she would be asking the group for input on what new CISes should be developed and considered for funding in FY2019. She said that there are three priorities to consider, but due to staffing and funding limitations, we will probably need to pick just one for now. Another consideration will be that any new CIS for funding in FY2019 will need to be finalized and submitted to the State Office for review and approval by April 20.

Riparian Condition is one of the three priorities to be considered for funding in FY2019. A CIS would need to be developed to define NRCS' role. Zola and Marty have had some preliminary discussions about including cutting of Phase 3 juniper out of riparian areas and funding livestock wells for off-stream water.

#### Ground Water Availability

No CIS has been developed for this priority yet. Progress made so far:

- Zola has been participating in the Harney County Community Based Water Planning Process, including participation in the Ag Work Group and the Vegetation Management Work Group.
- Last year several people (Mark Owens, Shane Otley, Rob Sharp, Dustin Johnson, Karen Moon) volunteered to participate in a committee to provide input on a CIS for Ground Water Availability, focused in irrigation technologies that "force" conservation. Zola apologized because she has not convened that committee.

This will be the second proposal for consideration for FY2019 later in the meeting.

#### Juniper Encroachment – Objective 1: Sage Grouse

This priority is covered by the *Sage Grouse Initiative Oregon Implementation Strategy (2014-2019)*.

Progress made to date:

- Funding for juniper treatments in sage-grouse habitat is available through the following EQIP funding pools:
  - SGI-Conifer Encroachment
    - Drewsey and Burns PACs are High Priority
    - Other PACs are Medium Priority
  - SGI-All Threats
    - Must have an approved plan to address all threats to sage-grouse.
  - RCPP – The Oregon Model to Protect Sage Grouse
    - Approved CCAA Site Specific Plan – High priority
    - Letter of Intent and cutting juniper – Medium priority
- In 2016 and 2017, NRCS contracted a total of 9,697 acres of juniper treatments in 16 contracts. These figures include contract from all three funding pools listed above. This represents 48% of the objective for juniper treatments in sage-grouse habitat.

#### Juniper Encroachment – Objective 2: Mule Deer and/or Forest Health

No CIS has been developed for this CIS yet.

One idea for a CIS is to develop one in support of ODFW's Mule Deer Initiative which is currently focused in the Beulah and Malheur River Wildlife Management Units. Zola said that last year she had a very brief conversation with Rod Klus about that and at that time he said that they felt with all the SGI and mule deer work that has already happened in the Drewsey area, there isn't a whole lot left to do. But it's been a year since that conversation and it was very brief.

Another idea for a CIS is to convert the Lone Pine RFPA Fire Prevention and Management Plan into a CIS. Zola explained that NRCS entered into an agreement with Oregon Department of Forestry to have ODF develop fire prevention plans with each Rangeland Fire Protection Association (RFPA) in sage-grouse habitat in Oregon. Most of those plans were pretty bare bones, but Zola had contacted the Lone Pine RFPA to see if they were willing to serve as a pilot project to work through what those plans should look like. The landowners in the Lone Pine RFPA had a significant interest in the development of a plan. The

plan has been drafted and is nearly complete. While it was developed with sage-grouse habitat protection in mind, the Lone Pine RFP is located in important mule deer habitat and on the forest fringe, so the plan could be a good fit under this objective.

This will be the third priority to consider later in the meeting.

#### Juniper Encroachment – Objective 3: Phase 3 Juniper

No CIS has been developed for this objective. At this time Zola is thinking that it might be incorporated into the Riparian Condition CIS when that is developed.

### **Farm Bill Program Offerings**

#### Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – FY2018

Currently, NRCS is offering EQIP funding through the following funding pools in Harney County.

- Working Lands Waterbird Habitat Conservation
- RCPP – SONEC Working Wet Meadows
- Sage Grouse Initiative – Conifer Encroachment
- Sage Grouse Initiative – All Threats
- RCPP – The Oregon Model to Protect Sage Grouse
- IPM in the Stinkingwater Medusahead Management Area

NRCS accepts EQIP applications in batches. The Batch 1 application deadline was in November. The Batch 2 application deadline is March 16.

#### Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – FY2019

Expiring funding pools:

- RCPP – The Oregon Model to Protect Sage Grouse
  - Zola said that while the RCPP actually goes through FY2019, she anticipates that the balance of the EQIP funds available through the RCPP will likely be expended this year. If not, then this funding would continue to be offered in FY2019.

Continue the following funding pools:

- Working Lands Waterbird Habitat Conservation
- RCPP – SONEC Working Wet Meadows
- Sage Grouse Initiative – Conifer Encroachment
- Sage Grouse Initiative – All Threats
  - Zola said that SGI funds are not guaranteed to continue next year. A lot will likely depend on what happens with a new Farm Bill. But she is planning as though the funds will be available.
- IPM in the Stinkingwater Medusahead Management Area

New funding pool:

- RCPP – Stinkingwater Medusahead Management

Proposed new CIS:

- CIS for Ground Water Availability

- Technologies that force conservation
- CIS for Riparian Condition in the Silvies Water Quality Demonstration Area
- CIS for Juniper Removal to improve mule deer habitat and/or forest health
  - Mule Deer Initiative
  - Lone Pine RFPA

Zola said that there is the option of adding a new CIS for funding next year from the list above. Due to time, staff, and budget restrictions not all of these can be developed and funded in 2019. Any new CIS for funding in FY2019 needs to be finalized and submitted to the State Office by April 20. Zola asked the group for input on which CIS, if any, should be developed. Zola said that if a CIS is not developed for a certain priority this year, that doesn't mean it won't happen ever, just that it will be delayed to 2020 or later.

Multiple participants spoke in strong support of developing a CIS and offering funding in 2019 for ground water conservation. Some points raised during the discussion:

- Lots of domestic users in the Basin are having their house wells dry up.
- Irrigated hay is one of the biggest contributors to the economy of Harney County.
- We can't wait for the ground water study to be done to take action.
- Roger Sheley volunteered to assist with the development of a CIS prior to the April 20 deadline.
- It seems like a CIS to address the ground water issues would be pretty complicated to develop. Can it really be done by April 20?
- Not expecting this CIS to be the only and final CIS related to groundwater. But want to get moving on some simple solutions that can start making a difference. Changes can be made later or new CISes can be developed.
- Consider including proven technologies that conserve ground water regardless of application – i.e. not just irrigation, but livestock or domestic applications as well.

Marty said that the SWCD would assist NRCS in developing a CIS for riparian condition. Zola asked if it could wait for funding until 2020. Marty said yes.

Ron Whiting said that he understood the importance of the issues the county is facing with water availability, but he hated to see all the work that was done on developing the Lone Pine RFPA fire plan be for naught. Zola asked if he thought it would be a problem to hold off on funding until 2020. Ron said yes, because if a fire starts between now and then, the whole area could burn up and the plan won't mean much. Zola said that was a good point. She is nervous that this summer is going to be a huge fire season with the high productivity last year and the dry winter this year.

Zola said that after discussion, she was thinking that maybe CISes could be developed for both ground water and the Lone Pine RFPA by April 20. There is a committee that has offered to help with development of the ground water one and the Lone Pine RFPA plan is nearly done and wouldn't take much work to convert to a CIS. Zola asked for a show of thumbs – up for good, down for bad, sideways for don't really care – to see if participants were ok with that idea. Mostly thumbs up, a couple sideways, and no thumbs down.

Zola said she will call those people who originally volunteered for the ground water committee, as well as Roger Sheley and Pat Sharp who volunteered today, and hopefully get a meeting scheduled within

the next 2 weeks. She said she would also follow up with Ron Whiting on finalizing the Lone Pine RFP plan and developing a CIS.

#### Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) – FY2018

The following CSP funding pools are being offered in Harney County in 2018:

- General – Oregon Zone 2 (Eastern Oregon rangelands)
- General – Oregon Zone 5 (Private Forest)
- Sage Grouse Initiative
- RCPP – The Oregon Model to Protect Sage Grouse
- RCPP – SONEC Working Wet Meadows

Applications are due this Friday, March 2.

#### Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Ag Land Easements (ACEP-ALE) – FY2018

Easement funding is available through:

- General ACEP-ALE
  - Ranking points are given for being in SONEC Spring Waterbird Priority Areas or Sage Grouse Habitat
- RCPP – SONEC Working Wet Meadows
- RCPP – The Oregon Model to Protect Sage Grouse

#### Closing

Zola pointed the group's attention back to the Burning Issues list and asked if the items on the list had been adequately covered. The group agreed that they had, with the possible exception of CCAA practices. Carol Dunten has placed this item on the list and she had to leave the meeting early, so she wasn't present to say whether it had been adequately addressed. However, earlier in the meeting Carol had asked if NRCS can fund fuel breaks. Zola said yes. Right now, if the fuel break is identified as a conservation measure in a CCAA site specific plan, then NRCS can fund it through the SGI-All Threats funding pool or the RCPP. If the Lone Pine RFP Fire Management Plan is written into a CIS, then fuel breaks identified in that plan could be funded. Zola said that there is a question about how they would get those fuel breaks designed since no one in the Hines Field Office has that expertise and the NRCS State Forester left and the position hasn't been filled. But, she said they would figure out where to get that technical assistance when the time came.

Earlier in the meeting Carol had also said that she had heard that NRCS was having issues with cultural resource clearances and had been experiencing significant delays in getting the clearances. Is anything being done about that? Zola responded that NRCS only has three archeologists in Oregon – the State Cultural Resource Specialist plus one in Pendleton and one in Klamath Falls. The State Cultural Resource Specialist position has been vacant for a long time, and the other two have been taking turns detailing into the position. On top of that, around the time the previous State Cultural Resource Specialist retired, the MOU between NRCS and the SHPO expired. This MOU spells out how NRCS and SHPO work with each other and included certain provisions that helped the process go more quickly. These factors have resulted in significant delays in cultural resource clearances, sometime waiting a year to get the survey done.

Zola said that a new MOU has been developed between NRCS and SHPO and is supposed to be finalized at any time. NRCS staff have been told that this should help significantly. In addition, this summer NRCS

is planning to bring on two summer technicians to assist with cultural resource surveys. One of those technicians is slated to be housed in the Hines Field Office.

The other SWCD representatives present – Marty and Pat – did not have any additional questions related to CCAA practices or cultural resources.

Zola thanked everyone for coming and adjourned the meeting.

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