

Lake County Local Working Group Meeting Minutes
March 9, 2018
Paisley, OR

Introductions and Meeting Purpose:

Following introductions by all in attendance, Max Corning welcomed everyone and stated the reason for the meeting, to gather advice from these conservation partners on what resource concerns NRCS should be focusing on and how to best allocate Farm Bill program funding in Lake County.

Resource Priorities and Accomplishments:

Corning gave a presentation on the current NRCS resource priorities in the county; Sage Grouse Initiative for habitat enhancement, mule deer habitat improvement, SONEC area waterbird habitat conservation, and North Warner forest health for resistant and resilient stands to wildfire. This presentation included an update of new contracts and acres added in 2017, and total acres contracted for each resource concern from the beginning of each Conservation Implementation Strategy (CIS).

NRCS has continued outreach to landowners to enroll in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) funding is available for the Sage Grouse Initiative to prevent conifer encroachment and other threats to sage grouse habitat, and RCPP funding is also available for the SONEC waterbird habitat improvement program.

Conservation Strategies – Group Discussions:

- **SONEC Waterbird Habitat:** Corning stated he will propose to NRCS Leadership to continue this CIS in 2019 due to landowner interest and RCPP funding secured through that fiscal year. Ed Contreras stated the importance of the surface irrigated hay and pasture lands to spring migrating waterfowl, and the funding that will be available through 2020 to enter into CSP contracts, as well as, Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) long-term easements to prevent conversion to non-ag uses. Justin Ferrell expressed his concern that NRCS doesn't provide any financial assistance to sprinkler irrigation landowners that experience considerable stand losses to migratory waterfowl when in the small grain hay phase of their alfalfa/small grain rotations on cropland. He wanted to know why NRCS pays an incentive to surface system irrigators for early watering, and does nothing to compensate the sprinkler irrigators for their crop losses when they provide early feed for migrating geese. Marty St. Louis explained the importance of the native meadows is for dabbling ducks as the birds migrate in spring; the primary purpose of the existing CIS. Corning and Kaitlin Hasler explained that the incentive payments for early watering will be phased-out of new contracts, and financial assistance will only be available for surface irrigation system infrastructure improvements.

- **Mule Deer Habitat Enhancement:** Corning will resubmit this CIS for additional funding in FY2019 due to a backlog of applications and lack of outreach to Fort Rock Wildlife Management Unit

(WMU) landowners in 2018. Mary Jo Hedrick gave an update of projects she has worked on, both technical and financial assistance, in 2017 with landowners in the Fort Rock WMU. She apologized for not directing these landowners to NRCS for financial assistance in 2017, but Corning and Hedrick will collaborate in the future to involve more landowners in the EQIP signups.

- **North Warner Forest Health:** Corning stated the Joint Chiefs Landscape Initiative proposal for funding for NRCS and USFS that was approved in 2017 is supposed to continue into 2019; he will resubmit the CIS for 2019 for technical and financial assistance. He stated NRCS will continue working with non-industrial forest landowners on private lands for stand improvement. NRCS will collaborate with ODF, Lake County Watershed Council, and OSU to carry-out this multi-partnership effort to create wildfire resistant landscapes. Jim Walls reported the Lake County Resources Initiative is working on efforts to convert more forest slash into biochar for soil amendments on other land uses.
- **Sage Grouse and Other National Initiatives:** Corning stated there are unanswered questions at this time about the continuance of the Sage Grouse, Organic, High Tunnel, and On-Farm Energy national initiatives in the 2019 Farm Bill. Although, NRCS is currently working on funding 2018 contracts under these initiatives, and he believes there may be enough interest nation-wide for these programs to continue. NRCS will continue to work with SWCD cooperators that have site-specific plans for sage grouse habitat enhancements through RCPP-EQIP financial assistance contracts.
- **Irrigation System Conversion/Water Management:** Corning reported on receiving written correspondence from the Fort Rock-Silver Lake SWCD following the 2017 LWG meeting in which the Directors expressed concerns over NRCS financial assistance being diverted more to other areas of the county instead of assisting landowners in their District. Specifically, they were seeking assistance to irrigators in the Fort Rock-Silver Lake SWCD. Corning stated that after attending the OSU/SWCD Irrigation Workshop in February 2017, he was inspired with the idea of converting existing pivot irrigation systems to LESA or LEPA types to conserve water and energy. Corning said he will be formulating a new CIS for 2019 to propose converting North Lake pivots to LESA or LEPA systems. Ferrell was very much in favor of this proposed CIS and provided Corning with some research information he had accumulated on LESA and LEPA. St. Louis stated he and ODFW would favor this type of water conservation because of the link between the Fort Rock Basin groundwater aquifer and water levels in the Summer Lake area and water availability for the ODFW Summer Lake Wildlife Management Area. Contreras reported that the Harney LWG had discussed this same subject at their meeting which he attended recently, and he recommended Corning contact Harney County NRCS to discuss CIS development. Hedrick suggested to Corning that he present the LESA/LEPA conversion concept at a Lake County Hay Growers meeting, which Corning agreed would be a good way to determine the potential participation level in such a CIS.

Closing Remarks and Adjournment:

There being no further discussion on the identified priority resource concerns and existing and proposed implementation strategies, Corning adjourned the meeting after thanking the participants for attending and providing valuable insight and advice.