



*Columbia County Local Work Group Meeting  
January 31, 2019 St. Helens USDA Service Center*

MINUTES

The meeting was called to order by Don Mehlhoff at 1:05 p.m. Self-introductions followed. Those in attendance were:

Don welcomed everyone to the meeting and stated that the purpose of this meeting is to provide a forum for partners, farmers, ranchers, and forestry representatives and conservation groups to share conservation activities and discuss natural resource problems that should be prioritized. The group assists in guiding NRCS where to use farm bill funds for technical and financial assistance in the future. Don stated his appreciation of everyone in attendance for coming and volunteering their time to participate. We (NRCS) have the ability to target specific resource issues that are important to the county.

Don presented a PowerPoint presentation explaining the Local Work Group process, our current Conservation Implementation Strategies (CIS's), Farm Bill Programs, and showcased conservation practices that have been implemented throughout the county through various NRCS Programs.

The Annual Local Work Group meetings are required by NRCS policy as a way to obtain local input on ways to make Farm Bill programs work locally, assist with establishing local resource priorities, and identify practices needed to address resource concerns in the county. Although we meet only once each year, comments or suggestions are always welcome throughout the year. Feel free to call or email any time.

Farm Bill Programs in Columbia County include EQIP, CStP, CRP/CREP, RCPP, and WRE

EQIP - Environmental Quality Incentives Program -

- Purpose – To solve priority natural resource problems on agricultural lands such as soil, water, wildlife and related resource issues.
  - Assist farmers, ranchers and forest owners in complying with federal, state and local regulations
  - Encourage environmental enhancements
  - NRCS's bread and butter conservation program. Most flexibility to address local resource needs on a county level
  - Past 10 years, 225 contracts have been funded
- Current EQIP Conservation Implementation Strategies in Columbia County:
  - Forest Diversity – year 7 of 7. This has been very successful! We received a two-year extension that will take us through 2019.
  - Columbia Corridor Soil Health – Year 1 of 5
  - Upper Nehalem Floodplain Recovery – Year 1 of 5

- Organic Initiative – National initiative where applications are ranked for a state-wide pool of funds rather than a local pool of funds
- Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative – National initiative where applications are ranked for a state-wide pool of funds rather than a local pool of funds
- Energy Initiative - National initiative where applications are ranked for a state-wide pool of funds rather than a local pool of funds

#### CSStP – Conservation Stewardship Program

- Annual payment for conservation - 5 year contract
- Includes both crop land and forest land
- We have had 25 contracts in last 10 years, 7 currently active
- Designed for operations that are already functioning at a higher level of conservation and are willing to adopt enhancement activities that make additional improvements

#### CRP/CREP – Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (administered by FSA)

- We have 7 contracts that cover 305 acres of riparian forest buffers
- All located in the Mist/Birkenfeld area
- 10-15 year rental agreements that pay an annual payment to maintain riparian areas

#### ACEP – Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

- ALE – Agriculture Land Easement  
NRCS purchases easements on land used for agriculture to reduce conversion of those lands to non Ag uses
  - No current ALE easements in the county
- WRE – Wetland Reserve Easement  
Previously known as WRP. NRCS purchases easement on ag land to restore wetlands. We have 3 permanent easements in Columbia County that covers approximately 480 acres.

#### RCPP – Regional Conservation Partnership Program

- Unlocking Carbon Market for NIPF in the Pacific NW
  - New in 2015 – NRCS grant to Pinchot Institute for Conservation
- Bring funds into a few counties in Northwest Oregon and Southwest Washington for forest practices, forest plans and carbon inventories plans. Program offered 2015 – 2018.
- Columbia County had 17 contracts, addressed 570 acres of forestland, 7 contracts still active
- Lower Columbia Watershed Partnership
  - New in 2017 – Grant from NRCS to Columbia SWCD

- Uses watershed authority to implement practices that address water quality and fish and wildlife habitat in the Clatskanie – Rainier regions of the county. NRCS funds are combined with matching funds from the SWCD and other partnering agencies. 2019 will be the first year of implementation

Don showed several pictures of successful conservation projects in the county. High tunnel installed, pre-commercial thinning, cavity nesting boxes on forestland, rainwater harvest collection tanks, white-tailed deer fencing, hedgerow, cross fencing for livestock use exclusion, brush management, tree/shrub plantings, pollinator enhancement plantings, grass seeding, hedgerows, streambank stabilization/protection using bio-engineering, culvert replacement for fish passage, wetland restoration within WRP program, and riparian forest buffer.

Overview of NRCS Strategic Planning Process – NRCS focuses on developing long range plans that will address local-based issues that are identified by partners and landowners so we can all work collaboratively to get the most conservation on the ground.

Summary of Program interest in Columbia County:

2015 – Received 30 EQIP applications and funded 12

8 for forest diversity practices within the conservation implementation strategy target area.

2 for Columbian white-tailed deer improvements within the conservation implementation strategy area.

1 for Organic initiative

1 for Seasonal High Tunnel initiative

Funded 12

6 applications for RCPP – funded 2

5 CStP Renewals – all funded

2016 – Received 14 EQIP applications and 6 RCPP Applications

11 for forest diversity

1 CWTD

1 high tunnel

1 Organic

6 RCPP funded

4 CREP Renewals

1 CStP Renewal

2017 – Received 19 EQIP applications (funded 14) and 7 RCPP applications (funded 5)

8 for forest diversity

4 high tunnel

2 for CWTD

1 WRE funded

1 CStP (cancelled)

5 RCPP funded

2018 - Received 27 EQIP applications and 4 RCPP applications (funded 24)  
15 for Forest Diversity  
2 CWTD  
5 High Tunnel (2 funded)  
2 Energy (1 funded)  
1 WRE  
0 CStP  
4 RCPP

2019 – Received 16 EQIP applications (to date)  
4 – Forest Diversity  
5 – High Tunnel Initiative  
1 – Energy Initiative  
1 – Upper Nehalem Floodplain Recovery  
5 – Columbia Corridor Soil Health

Cutoff date for submitting applications for 2019 EQIP funding is March 15, 2019.

#### Current EQIP CIS's -

**Forest Diversity:** Improve the structure and composition of young monoculture, even-aged forest stands with closed canopies, trying to take these stands to the next levels – understory vegetation and mixed age stands. Don showed a map of the Forest Diversity CIS Area, and a list of practices.

Accomplishments: 180 contracts – 112 Forest Management Plans, 68 implementation plans. Addressed 12,555 acres. Provided \$1,149,478.00 in Farm Bill Dollars for conservation.

2019 is the final year for the Forest Diversity CIS as written. We are exploring options for moving this to another area in the county. Discussion about moving it to Nehalem Valley, Milton Creek, or Scappoose Area.

- Outreach letter was mailed to Scappoose Creek Watershed in Sept. 2017, and received limited response.
- Erin and Jim both suggested going to the Watershed Council's Landowner Meetings and present these ideas at those meetings to gauge interest if our programs were offered in their area. They have a large attendance at these meetings.

#### **Columbian White-Tailed Deer Habitat Improvements – CIS Completed**

- Success Story – Columbian white-tailed deer have recently been down-listed from endangered to threatened.
- Disappointed with the interest
- Recent outreach with fliers and mailers had limited responses.

- 11 contracts, addressed 300 acres, provided \$250,000 in Farm Bill funds for conservation to improve white-tailed deer habitat

**Columbia Corridor Soil Health:** Year 1 of 5 - New this year. Goal is to improve soil health of the Columbia River Corridor farmlands through management improvements on pasture and cropland and encourage improvements to water quality and fish habitat to assist with salmon recovery. Practices include fencing, cover crop, high tunnel, conservation cover, crop rotations, hedgerows, heavy use protection, forage planting, tree planting, mulching, brush management, weed control, rotational grazing.

**Upper Nehalem Floodplain Recovery:** Year 1 of 5 - New this year. Goal is to improve soil health of the Nehalem Valley grasslands through management improvements on pasture and hayland and encourage improvements to the riparian areas along the Nehalem River and its tributaries to assist with Coastal Coho salmon recovery. Practices include fence, forage biomass planting, prescribed grazing, trough, herbaceous weed control, obstruction removal, brush management, mulching, tree/shrub site prep and planting, early successional habitat management.

Discussion about how the RCPP program works, how to apply, plan, organize.

Setting priorities for Columbia County Resource Concerns for 2020 and beyond –

Previously Identified Resource Concerns in the County:

- Streambank Erosion
- Forest Road Erosion – Delivering sediment to nearby waterways
- Overgrazing of Pastures
- Mud and Manure Management – surface water quality
- Stream Habitat Condition – livestock management
- Pasture-Hayland Health and Productivity
- Flood Control Drainage District dike erosion
- Urban – Wildland Interface

Current Top Priorities in Columbia County in Order of Importance/Priority:

- Degraded Plant Condition – Forestland (CIS in place)
- Inadequate Habitat – Grassland/Cropland for CWTD (CIS in place)
- Degraded Plant Condition – Forestland Wildfire Hazard with Urban Interface
- Water Quality – Forestland/Private Roads Excessive Sediment in Surface Water
- Water Quality Degradation – HQ – Excess Nutrient and Organics in Surface and Ground Water from Small Animal Feeding Operations (New CIS in Place)

Discussion: Urban – Wildland Interface is becoming a huge hot topic throughout the county.

Discussion: Bishop Creek and fish passage impediments.

Discussion: Aquifer Studies? With increasing populations, we need aquifer studies more than ever. NRCS programs do not allow for domestic water studies.

## Potential New Priorities:

- Roads (sources of sedimentation, fish habitat)
- Invasive Species (reduction in native plant communities)
- Drainage Improvements in Flood Control Districts – tile line maintenance, ditch maintenance
- Local grown, food to table, economic barriers to farming

Discussion: Greenwood Resources looking to sell their property for Wetland Mitigation. How can we keep these acres in the county in farmland? It all comes down to economics. Very difficult for farmers to make a living off the land anymore. Markets not big enough in this small county to sustain farmers.

Alex suggested one way to preserve our ag community is to form a Co-op for farmers to ban together to market their products, rather than individually. The county no longer has a butcher, and mostly due to regulations. The Sauerkraut factory shutdown and moved to another location. Economics and Regulations.

Discussion: Crystalyn Bush is the Weed Coordinator for the Columbia SWCD. If you are interested in learning more ways to eradicate noxious weeds, please call. Knotweed is one of the hardest weeds to get rid of. There are several chemicals available on the market that are effective for killing knotweed.

Duane talked about public relations and Weyerhaeuser.

Jason mentioned the good work that Weyerhaeuser does that they don't get enough credit for with regards to wildlife habitat, aesthetics, stream corridor enhancements, etc.

Lona recommended that we use more native plants and shrubs, including wild flowers, in our restoration work, not just trees.

Jeff commented that there is still a splash dam on lower Milton Creek that blocks fish passage. Tide Creek, streambank management.

Tom mentioned that regulatory agencies are very fluid and always transitioning. Science is ever-changing. Asked if RCPP could be used to do riparian streambank projects.

Meeting adjourned at 2:45 pm  
Dee Robinson