

2019 Harney County Local Work Group Meeting Notes

Tuesday, February 12, 2019

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 an update on progress made toward implementing the Long Range Strategy**
- 2. Provide an update on current staffing and workload considerations**
- 3. Discuss and receive input on FY2019 and FY2020 funding pools and future directions**

Opening

Zola welcomed everybody and reviewed the meeting purpose and agenda. She asked everybody to introduce themselves. Following introductions, Zola asked if anyone had any “burning issues” they came to the meeting hoping to discuss. Rusty said he wanted to talk about ODFW’s revision of the Red Band Trout plan and water quality. Brenda Smith said Roger Sheley would be arriving later and wanted to make sure there was a chance to talk about an idea for a Conservation Innovation Grant for native seed.

FSA Program Updates

Kellie Frank, County Executive Director for Farm Service Agency gave a brief update on FSA programs. Applications for the Livestock Forage Program are due February 28. The payments are smaller this year than they have been in the past, which has been raising concerns with some producers. Kellie said if you get questions about why the payments are smaller, to send people to her for answers. She also mentioned that FSA offers farm loans, insurance programs, and conservation programs including CREP and CRP Grasslands. An information packet, including a 2019 Customer Calendar, was distributed to the attendees.

FSA is no longer sending a hard copy newsletter but does send a newsletter via email. Producers can also subscribe to receive text message alerts from FSA.

Progress Report on Implementation

Each county in Oregon has an NRCS Long Range Strategy that was developed with input from the Local Work Group to identify the priority resource problems to be addressed in that county. The current Long Range Strategy for Harney County covers the year 2016-2020 and identifies the following 5 priority resource problems:

- Harney Basin Aquatic Ecosystem Function
- Medusahead Rye
- Riparian Condition in the Silvies Water Quality Demonstration Area
- Groundwater Availability
- Juniper Encroachment

Harney Basin Aquatic Ecosystem Function

The Harney Basin Aquatic Ecosystem Function priority covers two separate but related issues: (1) Aquatic Health and Carp Control, and (2) Flood Irrigated Meadows for Spring Migratory Bird Habitat. NRCS works collaboratively with the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative partners to address this priority.

Carp

A Conservation Implementation Strategy (CIS) for Harney Basin Aquatic Health Improvement has been developed to address the Aquatic Health and Carp Control issue. The goal of the CIS is to reduce and maintain carp populations at a level that allows for good water quality, healthy aquatic plants and animals, and adequate food for migratory birds. A basin-wide baseline inventory, funded by an OWEB grant, was completed in 2016-2018. Robert A. Esquivel, High Desert Partnership Aquatic Health Coordinator, wrote the Aquatic Health Basin-Wide Baseline Monitoring Report, 2016-2018 which presents the results. Copies of the report were available for participants to take with them. Carp were found in 4 locations in Silver Creek, Silvies, and Blitzen. These were in Moon Reservoir, Silver Creek just above Moon Reservoir, Blitzen near Grain Camp Dam, and Blitzen near Krumbo Reservoir Road. Environmental DNA samples were also collected but never processed by the lab and the lab has been non-responsive. The partners are not confident that the inventory results reflect the actual geographic distribution of carp within the system and are planning to do additional inventory work. Ben Cate stated that USGS will be collecting additional fish survey data starting this summer. In general, the fish, water quality, macro-invertebrate, and aquatic vegetation data collected indicated better aquatic health in Silver Creek than Silvies and in Silvies than the Blitzen. More importantly, the data serves as a starting point for monitoring the effects of aquatic health improvement projects going forward.

A carp biomass threshold study is taking place on the Refuge to determine how many lb/ac of carp can be in the system and still have a positive response in aquatic vegetation. This study will wrap up this summer and is expected to provide information to help the partners set carp population thresholds.

Lidar was collected for the Silvies floodplain and Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2014 and for Silver Creek in 2017. Visual products are being developed to help partners understand surface water connectivity under different precipitation scenarios and identify pinch points for stopping carp movement.

Malheur National Wildlife Refuge piloted a commercial fishing operation in Malheur Lake as a way to control carp while providing some economic benefit to the community. Chad Karges said that that experiment has ended and proved to be economically infeasible.

The Harney Basin Wetland Initiative (HBWI) partners have broadened their scope in the last year or so to focus not only on carp as a contributing factor to poor water quality and lack of vegetation in Malheur Lake, but also to examine other possible contributors such as wind, lake-level fluctuations, and sediment dynamics. An ecosystem model is being developed for Malheur Lake to better understand each of these contributors and their cumulative effects, and to facilitate the evaluation of various management alternatives.

Meadows

NRCS developed a CIS for Working Lands Waterbird Habitat Conservation in the SONEC Region. The goal is to secure 10,300 acres of flood-irrigated habitat in Harney County through easements or through practices that improve management ability by September 30, 2020. This goal is broken down between 2 objectives: (1) 5,300 acres of easements, and (2) 5,000 acres of infrastructure/management

improvements. In addition to general EQIP funds, Intermountain West Joint Venture applied for and received a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) project which brought additional EQIP funds for addressing this priority. In FY2018, the Hines Field Office obligated 3 contracts for \$143,432 on 1,062 acres of flood irrigated meadows. This brought the total contracted acres to 1,900 acres, or 38% of the objective for infrastructure/management improvements.

No easements have been developed. There is very little landowner interest in easements and a lack of land trusts interested in holding easements in this part of the world. HBWI partners have been holding discussions with landowners and land trusts to better understand the perspectives of both, and NRCS and OWEB have also invested in finding solutions to these challenges to implementing easements in Eastern Oregon.

Medusahead Rye

NRCS has developed a CIS for Integrated Pest Management in the Stinkingwater Medusahead Management Area. The goal of the CIS is to contain, compartmentalize, and reduce the medusahead infestation within the 5 sub-units of the management area in a phased approach. The BLM and CWMA completed a helicopter inventory of Medusahead within the Phase 1: Beaver Table and Phase 2: Crane-Buchanan areas in 2015. In addition to general EQIP, the CWMA applied for and was awarded an RCPP for implementing the CIS. The CWMA also received an OWEB grant for the Phase 1: Beaver Table area.

Phase 1: Beaver Table

The 2015 inventory indicated medusahead on:

7,500 acres of private land

5,700 acres of BLM

3,300 acres of State lands

In FY2018 NRCS contract with 3 landowners to treat 2,517 acres of medusahead on private lands (\$169,644). BLM treated 5,280 acres of BLM ground in 2017. DLS treated 330 acres in 2018.

Phase 2: Crane-Buchanan

The 2015 inventory indicated medusahead on approximately 7,600 acres of private lands. Outreach has begun to landowners in the Crane-Buchanan area in 2019.

Rangelands App for Monitoring

Zola informed the group of the availability of a new product called the Rangeland Analysis Platform (or Rangelands App) found online at <https://rangelands.app>. This product was developed by researchers involved in the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Science Team using extensive data sets from NRCS (National Resource Inventory) and BLM, along with satellite imagery. Models have been developed to predict percent cover of annuals, perennials, shrubs, trees, and bare ground from satellite imagery. Zola said that while she has always been skeptical of these types of remote sensing products, she has been very impressed with what she has seen so far. She showed a screen shot of the cover of annual vegetation in the Stinkingwater area from 2017 and pointed out where you could see the boundaries of BLM annual grass treatments from 2015 as lower percent cover of annuals than on surrounding lands. She encouraged those in attendance to play around with the site and see what they think. She said she thinks there is a need for ground truthing but the potential for this to really help with effectiveness monitoring for the Stinkingwater Medusahead Management Area.

Riparian Condition in the Silvies Water Quality Demonstration Area

Harney SWCD and ODA have identified the Silvies Watershed as a demonstration area for demonstrating the impacts of water quality/riparian condition improvement projects. The focus area plan for the area lays out a plan to assess riparian conditions, conduct outreach and implement treatments to improve condition of degraded reaches, and document the results. The NRCS Long Range Strategy identifies supporting the SWCD in their implementation of this plan as a priority and sets a goal of 60% of stream miles on private ag lands in Ecological State A and 40% of stream miles in lower ecological states exhibiting improving trends.

Harney SWCD has completed the riparian condition assessment within the Demonstration Area. 130 miles of stream crossing privately owned ag lands were assessed. Of these, 105 miles (81%) were classified as Ecological State A, 11 miles were Ecological State B, and 14 miles were Ecological State C. Carlton Strough stated that these numbers are based on the assessments completed in 2017. Additional assessment work was done in 2018 and these numbers have been adjusted slightly based on that work. He stated that he could get the updated numbers to anyone who wanted them.

Note: Updated numbers from Carlton Strough are inserted here for convenience. 115 miles of stream crossing privately owned ag lands were assessed in 2018. Of these, 91 miles (79%) in Ecological State A, 14 miles in Ecological State B, and 10 miles in Ecological State C.

Harney SWCD is currently conducting outreach to landowners with riparian areas in States B and C and offering assistance in implementing riparian improvement projects.

Rusty Inglis asked if this information has been shared with ODFW. He said that the primary focus of the Red Band Trout plan which is currently being revised is the Silvies River Watershed and that ODFW should be made aware of these results so they can be incorporated into their plan. Rusty said that ODFW is relying on water quality data that is old and a lot of work has been done to improve conditions since that data was collected. Carlton was asked if any water chemistry data was collected as part of the riparian assessment. He responded that only riparian vegetation is assessed. No water chemistry data has been collected. Carlton asked if David Banks would be the appropriate ODFW contact to get ahold of and discuss the riparian assessments. Several people agreed that would be the appropriate contact.

Groundwater Availability

The goal for this priority in the NRCS Long Range Strategy is to ensure the continued availability of ground water for sustainable beneficial use in the Harney Basin. NRCS has been involved with the Harney County Community Based Water Planning process which is funded by OWRD's Place Based Planning Grant. The process is convened by the Harney County Watershed Council and Harney County to collaboratively gather information and develop and implement an Integrated Water Resources Strategy for Harney County.

In 2018, NRCS worked with a sub-committee of the Local Work Group to develop a CIS for Saving Groundwater in the Harney Basin Using Efficient Irrigation Technologies. The CIS lays out a plan for NRCS to provide technical and financial assistance to convert irrigation systems from mid-elevation sprinkler (MESA) systems to low elevation sprinkler (LESA) systems on 6,243 groundwater irrigated acres now (2019 – 2023) while creating a placeholder for NRCS to implement additional structural and management practices to reduce water use identified by partners in the Community Based Planning process.

Zola asked Roger Sheley if he would like to speak to the Local Work Group about his idea for a Conservation Innovation Grant to help producers begin growing native seed as an alternative crop with reduced irrigation requirements. Roger said that as part of the Community Based Water Planning process folks are looking at various alternative crops that producers in Harney County might be able to grow that use less water. One potential alternative crop would be native seed, such as native grasses and forbs, particularly those needed for local restoration projects. Native seed could be grown with little to no irrigation. Roger and others are in discussions about forming a cooperative that would help coordinate between growers and customers (such as BLM, Forest Service, and others doing restoration) to grow the right species to meet the demand. Also, there is the potential for the cooperative to purchase the specialized equipment that would be needed for harvesting seed and make it available for use by members. Roger has begun discussions with NRCS about the potential for a CIG grant to help get this idea off the ground. Anyone who is interested or wants more information should get ahold of Roger.

Zola said that another idea that is being floated is development of a new CREP program for converting irrigated acres to dryland. Mark Owens called Zola last week to discuss the idea since he would not be able to attend the LWG meeting. CREP stands for Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a federal program administered by Farm Service Agency. States have the option of “enhancing” the federal program with additional funding for specific priorities. When this happens, the program is called CREP. Oregon already has a CREP program that is used to establish riparian buffers. This proposal would be to create a new CREP program where producers would take some land out of irrigation, establish some sort of conservation cover, and receive an annual rental payment on those acres. There is a meeting planned later this month with folks from the state offices of NRCS and FSA as well as OWEB and OWRD to discuss the idea. Chad Boyd asked if Zola could give some idea of what types of management practices would be allowed on enrolled acres. She responded that she really couldn’t because the program doesn’t actually exist yet, so there are no details about what it might look like. Kellie Frank added that Mark had spoken with her as well and that he said it would likely be at least two years before the program became available if they are able to come up with something.

Juniper Encroachment

The Long Range Strategy establishes a goal of treating 30,000 acres of juniper by 2020. This goal is split between three objectives:

- Treat 20,000 acres of Phase 1 and 2 juniper in high priority sage grouse habitat.
- Treat 5,000 acres of Phase 1 and 2 juniper to improve mule deer habitat and/or forest health.
- Treat 5,000 acres of Phase 3 juniper to improve range health, reduce erosion, and improve surface water quality.

Sage Grouse

This objective is being addressed through the Sage Grouse Initiative and through an RCPP project (The Oregon Model to Protect Sage Grouse) requested by the Oregon Association of Conservation Districts. The RCPP-EQIP funds have been expended, and were used to fund practices identified in approved CCAA Site Specific Plans as well as cutting juniper on lands covered by a Letter of Intent to participate in the CCAA. Two SGI funding pools are offered in Harney County. The SGI-Conifer Encroachment funding pool is specifically for cutting juniper out of sage grouse habitat, with highest priority given to projects within the Drewsey and Burns Focus Areas. The SGI-All Threats funding pool is for addressing any identified threat to sage grouse, with highest priority going to projects identified in an approved plan that addresses all threats to sage grouse (typically a CCAA Site Specific Plan).

In FY2018, NRCS obligated 6 new EQIP or RCPP-EQIP contracts that included 2,706 acres of juniper treatments in sage grouse habitat. This brings the total acres of juniper removed from sage grouse habitat since 2016 to 12,403 acres, which is 63% of the objective. More than 42,000 acres of juniper removal has been contracted in Harney County since 2010.

Mule Deer/Forest Health

NRCS provided funding to ODF to assist Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs) with development of fire prevention and management plans. In 2018, NRCS adopted the Fire Prevention and Management Plan for the Lone Pine RFPA as a CIS. The goal of the plan is to reduce the risk and loss from rangeland fires to life, property, and resources. Objectives identified by members of the RFPA are to promote native grass growth, preserve Greater Sage Grouse habitat, treat fuels to reduce the rate of fire spread, and establish strategic fuel breaks. The plan identifies three priorities:

1. Lone Pine Road Fuel Break
2. Landing Creek Fuel Break (to be completed by BLM)
3. "The Package" – Fine fuels/grazing management, water developments, conifer treatments, other fuel breaks, and annual grass treatments.

1,945 acres of conifer treatments, including juniper cutting and forest thinning, are proposed.

Phase 3

No CIS has been developed to address this objective.

Staffing and Workload Considerations

Staffing

Zola said that back when the Community Based Water Planning was getting started, the Hines Field Office staff consisted of herself and 2 other permanent, full time employees as well as the SONEC Partner Biologist who is an SWCD employee but spends 75% of their time on NRCS programs. When the Community Based Water Planning started up, Zola expressed to Kevin the need for additional staff to maintain existing efforts and priorities and add ground water. At that time, Kevin agreed that it was important and made the decision to move a vacancy in the Klamath Field Office to Hines. That would have brought the Hines Field Office up to 4.75 FTE (counting the Partner Biologist). Unfortunately, due to staff turnover for a variety of reasons, the Hines Field Office has never actually had all those positions filled at the same time and currently, as of January 4, only Zola and Carlton (Partner Biologist) are still here.

Kevin Conroy said that there are approximately 30 vacancies state-wide within NRCS. Two positions in the Hines Field Office are in the top 5 of that list. Hiring has gotten complicated. Oregon NRCS is only allowed to advertise a certain number of vacancies in a given time period, and the Human Resources Department was recently nationally centralized and only advertises certain types of positions (e.g. Soil Cons or Wildlife Biologists) in a given time period. Kevin said he expects to advertise 1 Soil Conservationist position in the Hines Field Office in February. He and Zola are evaluating what position description might be most advantageous (Range Management Specialist, Soil Con, Biologist, etc.) for the second position in light of current priorities, timelines for advertising each position type, and getting qualified applicants. However, he hopes that the second position will also be flown in the next couple months, possibly March.

Chad Boyd asked if there was any way that stakeholders could help. Kevin said that the best way to help is to send interested, qualified applicants our way when the positions are advertised. He said that Hines

has historically been a difficult location to fill and retain employees and that employees with a ranching background tend to be a better fit. Chad asked if folks could write letters or otherwise help convey the message that filling these positions is critical. Zola said that it is always good to let leaders know what is important to you as a stakeholder.

Cultural Resources

Zola said that another issue that had been impacting workload and causing delays in implementing contracts is cultural resources. Oregon NRCS has 3 archeologists; a state archeologist and 2 field staff. However, the state archeologist position is vacant and has been for some time. It was recently filled but the person left after a very short time. Kevin recently worked with the 2 field archeologists to conduct a workload analysis, which showed that in 2018 there was approximately 2,000 hours of CR work to be done and only 780 hours of staff time potentially available. NRCS has employed various alternative strategies to try to address this backlog in the last couple years; including contracting out part of the work and supporting seasonal partner technicians this past summer to accelerate surveys. NRCS is also looking at how we handle cultural clearances to make sure that we are fulfilling our responsibilities and meeting requirements, but not creating further delays by doing significantly more than is strictly necessary. Zola added that NRCS policy is to avoid impacts to cultural resources if possible. For example, if a site is found in an area planned for juniper cutting and piling, a polygon is drawn around that site and those acres are removed from the project (i.e. not cut).

Kevin said that there is an upcoming opportunity for SWCDs to apply for grant funding through the National Association of Conservation Districts to provide additional technical assistance capacity for NRCS. One idea that is being explored in Oregon is for one or more SWCDs to apply for this funding to hire archeological staff to help with the cultural resource backlog.

Engineering

Zola said that there are currently 4 Basin Engineers. When the waterbird CIS first started there was only one. None of the engineers were very experienced in designing the types of water control structures that NRCS is working on and the Harney Basin is a very unique hydrologic system, so there has been a learning curve for the engineers. Over the past year, field staff and the engineers have held several meetings to talk about the projects, develop a shared vocabulary, and agree to procedures. For a couple years engineering has been a significant delay, but now things are starting to run more smoothly and engineering is going much more quickly.

Zola added that new screening criteria have been put in place for the flood irrigation funding pool, requiring that the engineering designs be done before the project is funded. The way this is being managed is that all applications received are run through the screening and ranking criteria that will eventually be used for funding decisions and placed on an application list in priority order based on how they would score. Staff are then starting at the top of that list and working on developing the conservation plans and engineering designs for the top scoring applications before moving down the list.

2018 Farm Bill

A new Farm Bill was passed in December. Currently, NRCS National Office staff are reading through it, figuring out what has changed, and preparing policy and implementation guidance. In the meantime, application and obligation timelines are somewhat fluid as we wait for this guidance. Oregon NRCS had established a March 15 due date for EQIP applications, but that was recently pulled back and right now the due date is "to be determined." What we do know about the Farm Bill is that the conservation

programs in the previous Farm Bill were reauthorized (EQIP, CSP, RCPP, ACEP, CIG). However, there will be some changes to how those programs are implemented, and this is the guidance we are waiting on.

Farm Bill Program Offerings

FY2019

The following EQIP funding pools are available in Harney County in FY2019:

- Working Lands Waterbird Habitat Conservation
- IPM in the Stinkingwater Medusahead Management Area
- RCPP-Stinkingwater Area Medusahead Management Plan
- Saving Groundwater in the Harney Basin (MESA to LESA)
- SGI – Conifer Encroachment
- SGI – All Threats
- Fire Prevention in the Lone Pine RFPA

A couple of weeks ago Kevin and Zola met to discuss priorities in light of the staffing and workload challenges discussed earlier. Based on that conversation, they developed a proposal for prioritization of the current funding pools.

1. Medusahead (EQIP and RCPP-EQIP) – The Stinkingwater Medusahead RCPP is already approved and is only available for a 3 year period. Zola also explained that of all the contracts, these are the easiest to manage because there are no ground disturbing activities so no cultural resource surveys are required and no engineering is involved. Also, the CWMA provides a lot of assistance in communicating with the landowners, doing inventory, and coordinating treatments.
2. Working Lands Waterbird Habitat Conservation – NRCS and partners have invested in Carlton’s position specifically for delivering this funding. It is the only one of the funding pools that has dedicated staffing.
3. Fire Prevention in the Lone Pine RFPA – NRCS invested in the development of the plan and Zola and Kevin feel as though there is a certain level of commitment that has been made and needs to be honored. However, NRCS proposes to only fund high priority applications in 2019. That would be those applications which are for getting a TSP-written Forest Management Plan or include construction of the Lone Pine Road Fuel Break. There are only 2 or 3 landowners who might need a Forest Management Plan and those can probably be handled through an existing agreement that NRCS has with ODF. There are only 2 or 3 landowners that have portions of the Lone Pine Road Fuel Break on their property.
4. SGI – NRCS held a fall signup for a limited number of funding pools, including initiatives. Zola stated that there were 4 high priority applications that were received in that sign up that she would like to fund.
5. Saving Groundwater in the Harney Basin (MESA to LESA) – Zola said she only has a few applications on hand. She said the proposal is to only fund applications in this pool if time allows after the other funding pools have been addressed. She would like to use the applications on hand to work with the Basin engineers on laying out a process for working on these applications. For example, what inventory information to the engineers need, how are designs going to be developed? Hopefully, these applications would then be ready to go for funding next year.

Zola asked for feedback on this proposal. Rusty Inglis said that the proposal and rationale made sense. Roger Sheley asked if groundwater applications received in 2019 would receive priority over applications received in 2020. Zola said that they would not, except in a situation where two applications have a tied ranking score, the application date is used as a tie breaker. Roger asked if the 2019 funding for groundwater would roll forward to 2020 (i.e. twice as much funding available in 2020). Zola said that the funding decisions don't really work that way. Each year, the state receives an allocation of funds, which is divided up among Basins. The District Conservationist and Basin Team Leader then work together to decide how much of the Basin allocation to put in each pool, and extra funds from one pool can be moved to another as needed. Zola was asked how many years of funding were approved for the groundwater funding pool. Zola said she believed she had requested 5 years of funding – through 2023 – and that these dates could be flexible. A funding pool can wrap up early or be extended based on when objectives are met and/or participation levels. Ron Whiting said that he thought the proposal to fund the Lone Pine Road Fuel Break applications and stop there for this year made sense because that fuel break really was the top priority and BLM will be constructing their portion of it this year. There was general agreement that the proposed prioritization was acceptable.

Pat Sharp said she thought it was important to keep the term “water availability” in the name of the funding pool for converting from MESA to LESA in order to keep it front and center in people's minds that while right now we are only funding LESA conversions, the effort is really much broader and all practices that might help save water and keep it available for use need to be considered. Zola said that the name of the CIS is Saving Groundwater in the Harney Basin Using Efficient Irrigation Technologies and the name of the priority in the Long Range Strategy is Groundwater Availability.

Proposed FY2020 Funding Pools

Zola explained that in order to offer any new funding pools in FY2020, a CIS would have to be developed and submitted to the NRCS State Office for review and approval by March 31, 2019. She said that given the current situation she is not planning to submit any new CIS. She noted that there has been discussion at the Local Work Group meetings the last couple of years regarding developing a CIS for Riparian Condition in the Silvies Water Quality Demonstration Area. This has not moved forward and will need to wait another year.

Zola proposed continuing to offer the same FY2019 funding pools in FY2020. There was general agreement.

Closing

Zola reviewed the two items on the Burning Issues list and asked whether they had been adequately covered. Folks said that they had.

Zola encouraged folks to take a look at the What's Available in My County? feature of the Oregon NRCS website. The website can be found by doing a web search for Oregon NRCS. On the lower right hand side of the page is a link that says, “What's Available in My County?” Follow the link and select Harney County. This will take you to a page that has a link to the Long Range Strategy as well as a list of all currently offered funding.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 3:45.