

Malheur County – NRCS Local work group meeting (LWG)

2/7/2019

Malheur Extension Office

Notes of LWG:

Mike Burton (NRCS DC from La Grande) facilitated the meeting and introduced Lynn Larson (Malheur NRCS DC).

Post introduction from attendees Lynn invited all to the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Soil Health Symposium on 2/14/19.

Lynn discussed upcoming NRCS deadlines: due to the new farm bill changes most deadlines have not been set.

- EQIP application deadline is set for 3/15/19 all others are TBD.

Lynn gave an update of current Malheur Co. NRCS programs

- Currently have 75 active EQIP applications
- Lynn ran through a description of Conservation Stewardship Program
  - Currently have 30 active contracts in the county
- For 2019 there is Sage Grouse Initiative funding available
- RCPP would be discussed later in the meeting
- Agriculture Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) is available to Malheur county
  - NRCS cannot take land out of production for hunting or other purposes
  - More information is available at Malheur Co. NRCS office
  - Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) are available for innovative farming techniques in Malheur Co.
- Several initiatives including:
  - Sage Grouse Initiative
  - High Tunnel Initiative
  - Organic Initiative

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)

- Riparian area enhancement to improve water quality including:
  - Fencing out livestock, planting riparian plants, etc.

Lynn then discussed the Malheur NRCS long range plan

First, the resource concerns within the county that have been identified are:

- Human
- Water
- Soil

- Air quality and energy
- Plants and Animals

The main concerns are:

- Range Health
- Water Quality and Quantity/Irrigation induced Erosion

Lynn asked attendees if they had any changes or additional concerns to add to the list:

A representative of Pheasants Forever (Dave Stiefvater) voiced concern about the corners left to weeds after syphon tube/ flood irrigation is converted to pivots. He suggested planting in plants conducive to pollinators in the area.

Mark Carpenter of Owyhee Irrigation District explained that often when the pivots are installed the landowners water rights must be shifted around to fill in gaps within the pivot's track. So, the corners often get left without water rights.

Note: many pollinator plants need significant water to take hold and compete with weeds.

Lynn described the current Conservation Implementation Strategies going on.

- Range health
  - Focus on SGI
  - Lots of Juniper removal
  - Seeing Sage Grouse move in almost immediately after the cut
  - Many landowners seeing more water
  - See Science to Solutions article on how grazing an area helps produce more of the insects that sage grouse chicks feed up on.

A question was asked: Where did the juniper come from, and how do we keep it at bay post treatment?

Lynn answered by discussing how juniper has always been in our ecosystem only it has been forced to stay on rocky outcrops due to fire. There are options to keep it at bay, but that may be fire. With the SGI burning sage brush is prohibited because of its affect on Sage Grouse habitat.

Dave Bunker added that when the homesteaders where present they also did their best to use the standing juniper and that use kept the juniper away from homes and other structures.

Lynn went on to discuss how next we need to start improving wet meadows that will increase young Sage Grouse food sources.

Jon Gutcher with Fish and wildlife confirmed that at a young stage Sage Grouse mostly feed on small insects and soft greens.

Next Lynn discussed how cut banks and down cuts in several streams are preventing these wet meadows from occurring. What are the best ways to improve flood plain capacity? Beaver Dam Analogs or BDA's might address the concern. There was a large project on Bridge Creek in Wheeler county that was very successful.

Bunker added he has seen the success of a BDA done on Little Jack's creek.

Other ideas to improve wet meadows include: fencing, stock water tanks, wells, spring development...

## **Water Quantity and Quality**

Lynn discussed Jacobsen gulch water quality initiative (future project area)

Will have funding for 2019

- Irrigated farm ground
- Center pivots, linears, and pipelines
- Goal is to reduce soil erosion due to irrigation

Already pressurized pipe done by the Owyhee Irrigation District

Hoping for large success like the Fletcher gulch project. We had large success converting to sprinkler.

Issues with this is the removal of upland bird habitat that was created by leaking irrigation ditches.

Upcoming projects:

- Valley View Water Quality Improvement for 2020
- Overstreet Water Quality Improvement
  - Large 2000 ac area
- Other areas of planning
  - Several in N. Malheur Co.

Keys to successful projects:

- Landowner driven projects
- Landowners spreading the word to neighbors and encouraging them to get on board

## **Partner Updates**

Linda Rowe

- New scope of area with ODA in Juntura
- Couple of focus areas in Fletcher, High bench
- Sage Grouse partners

Gary Faw

- Irrigation water efficiency drip water application
- Keep soil on field which will help keep water in the field
- Drive increase in water quality
- Benefit of added water in streams

Mike Greely (Landowner)

- Noticed more Sage Grouse
- Birds in places they haven't been in 30 years

David Stiefvater (Pheasants Forever)

- Teaches hunter education
- 20/100 kids are successful hunters
- He's looking for partners to increase bird habitat
- Big on pollinator habitat

Mike Burton asked about planting Great Basin Wildrye for habitat

Jon Gutcher ODFW

- Concerns same water quality and quantity
- All NRCS projects that are helping Sage Grouse are helping the other birds in the ecosystem
- Future project: Controlling invasive grasses

Eric Morrison (JVCWMA)

- Concerns:
  - Range and wildlife improvement
  - Keeping an active watershed
  - Issues with annual grasses
  - Restoration after fire

Kelly Weidemen (Malheur WC)

- 20 watershed sites several where DEQ noted

Roger Corigall (Landowner)

- Has pivots on lower quality ground and has seen an increase of water by at least ½

Duane Pearson (Idaho Power)

- ID Power is working on relicensing several dams
- After that water quality projects are planned for 2020-21
- Irrigation improvement

Ron Jacobs (OWRD)

- Snowpack on east side of OR is almost 100% average

Nicole Sullivan (Owyhee WC & Trout Unlimited)

- Project areas:
  - Twilight/Blackjack
  - High Desert

- Big Bend
- Riparian areas
- Medusa head projects
- Streambank projects

#### RCPP update

- Trout Unlimited
  - Salmon, frog, trout, sage grouse
  - 7 contracts in Oregon
  - Projects include: irrigation, riparian, beaver analog dams, livestock water

#### Harvey Manser (OID)

- FCA doing irrigation district plan
- Should be big grants
- 66,000 acres pipe whole irrigation district
- They are getting all the plan done now to be prepared for the funds to come through
- As of now most of the Malheur syphon project is mostly done
- They are moving to the Agri-Service building in Nyssa

#### Mark Carpenter (OID)

- Finished Twilight 387 lateral spring installation
- 56,200 feet of pipeline to install before water come on
- Vista view is planned, have the layout done just waiting for funding
- Concerned about the bird habitat being injured by all the irrigation improvements

#### Sergio Anspe (OSU Extension)

- Working on 3 Finger Allotment in Rockville, OR
- Goal: Reduce fuel loads with off season grazing
- Authorized to graze 1700 cows per pasture
- Long term goal is to increase germination rates of residual bunch grasses
- Project is looking at utilizing serval grazing systems
- 3 year project that could be extended to a full 10 years
- Current total biomass is mostly litter
- GPS tracking cattle to see where they graze

#### Corey Maag

- Willow creek pivots on HEL
- Noted higher yields
- Lower erosion

**Lynn introduced the RCPP idea:**

- Mix of AWEP and CCPI
- Program runs on more practices on a larger area than an EQIP contract would
- Regional Conservation Partnership Program
  - Mix of partners and NRCS

Mike Burton discussed his RCPP in la Grande on the Grand Ron river

- Mix of upland and river-based projects to benefit the steelhead and bull trout
- >20 practices used
- 5 year program
- He struggled with pipelines and Cultural resources
- Lots of partners involved

Lynn mentioned that OWEB funds can leverage RCPP

- Can be mixed with all kinds of funds
- Ex: Overstreet project
- How can we improve the proposal?
  - Possibly identify a specific watershed
  - Address several resource concerns
- Could do something in N. Malheur
  - Near Beulah revisor and add in a fish concern
- But no matter what a new project will take time to get done and funding

Mark (OID)

- Valley View 2.5-3 million in just materials what could be added with that?

Dave Bukner

- Suggested adding in fire suppression
- Cattle operation
- Invasive weeds

Mike Burton

- Made the connection adding fire suppression would be addressing air quality as a resource concern
- Said we need to stack up resource issues to get the funding from RCPP

Bishop Drain was suggested as a project area (1000 ac or more)

- Goes directly into Owyhee river with no filter or re-usage anywhere

North or South forks of the Malheur were suggested

PL566 was mentioned

Gary Faw

- Mentioned how Fletcher Gulch is a big bright spot for all partners
- Water samples are not based on concentration but lack of water for him to sample
- Less than 1-2 cfs
- Dumps into the Old Owyhee Irrigation ditch

Lynn asked what are we missing?

Wildlife habitat and recharge to water table loss

Possible CRP

Opportunity for LIDAR large acres need at least watershed size imagery

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.