

Lake County Local Work Group Meeting Minutes

March 3rd, 2021

Lakeview, OR

Held through Zoom

Attendance:

Autumn Larkins/Lake County W.C.

Brandi Neider/Lake County W.C.

Marti Petersen/Farm Service Agency

Kasey Johnson/ODF

Dustin Gustaveson/ODF

Kaitlin Hasler/NRCS

Chris Colson/DU

Kate Yates/BLM

Les Boothe/BLM

Cody Hamilton/NRCS-IWJV

Stephanie Payne/NRCS

Jay Lysne/BLM

Introductions and Meeting Purpose:

Kaitlin started the meeting and welcomed everyone, then stated the reason for the meeting, reminding those attending that they are the advisory body for NRCS to help determine priority resource concerns and how best to utilize Farm Bill programs. The resource concerns listed in the 2010 Long Range Plan (LRP) were discussed and it was mentioned the need for a new LRP in the next year or two.

Resource Priorities and Accomplishments:

Kaitlin presented an update of Lake County Conservation Implementation Strategies (CIS), including numbers of new contracts and acreages added in 2020. NRCS resource priorities were habitat enhancement for sage grouse, mule deer habitat improvement, waterbird habitat conservation, North Warner forest health and fuels reduction, and North Lake irrigation conservation and pivot upgrades. It was mentioned that during the coming years the SGI focus is going to be shifted to work in the mesic habitats.

Two of these priority strategies sunset in 2019. The mule deer habitat improvement strategy has active contracts, so work completed in 2020 under this CIS was reported. The North Warner Forest Health project completed its 3-year cycle of Joint Chief's Initiative funding, although work completed in 2020 was just over 1,200 acres.

Kaitlin reported that through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) Grassland Conservation Initiative, NRCS obligated funds to two new 5-year contracts, along with one CSP-Classic contract in 2020.

Kaitlin reported that already in FY 2021 we have three contracts obligated to address the aftermath of the Brattain Fire. It was mentioned that work was almost complete and that the work was in partnership with the Watershed Council, OWEB and the SWCD. The total amount spent was \$350,000.

NRCS continues outreach to landowners for enrollment in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) for technical and financial assistance.

The discussion was then turned over to Stephanie Payne from the Redmond Field Office.

Small and Organic Farms Outreach: Stephanie Payne

Stephanie Payne from the Redmond Field Office, where she is basin staff, introduced herself as the “Small and Organic Farms specialist.” She gave a run down of the programs she works with and the services she hopes to provide. She then discussed a CIS that she is developing for the High Desert Deschutes Basin with the working title of the Food Security Initiative CIS. She mentioned she would put her contact information in the chat and encouraged those with questions, or those wanting more information to reach out to her.

The discussion was then turned back over to Kaitlin Hasler to discuss the FY 22 priorities.

Conservation Strategies – Group Discussion:

To seek advice for future strategies in 2022 and beyond, Kaitlin invited the working group to openly discuss each of the following topics. She shared opinions of NRCS for continuing, revising, or discontinuing related implementation strategies in the future.

- **SONEC Waterbird Habitat Enhancement:** The Southern Oregon-Northeast California (SONEC) region of the Pacific Flyway provides critical habitat for spring-migrating waterfowl. Max confirmed with Cody Hamilton, NRCS Partner Biologist, that there are currently fifteen applications on file that will be ranked for 2021 contracting. With the interest that is still shown from NRCS customers, Max the Lake County DC will request funds for FY2021 through this local implementation strategy to continue assistance for surface irrigation systems improvements, along with incentive payments for early season watering of native pasture and hay lands.
- **Irrigation Water Conservation – LESA/LEPA:** There was minimal interest from irrigators for this new CIS in 2019 as well as in 2020, with only one contract (2020; three total) being obligated to convert existing sprinkler irrigation pivots in the Summer Lake Basin to Low Elevation Spray Application (LESA) or Low Energy Precision Application (LEPA) systems. It was stated the strategy was revised to include additional areas in the county (Goose Lake and Warner basins) where irrigation water and energy conservation will benefit from system conversions. With help from SWCD Directors, outreach efforts will increase to encourage landowners to apply for the program. NRCS currently has 4 applications for this CIS for 2021.
- **Grazing Land Health vs. Mule Deer Habitat Enhancement:** With the Mule Deer Habitat Enhancement strategy ending in 2019, Max and Kaitlin worked together to submit a proposal to NRCS Leadership for a new Grazing Lands Health CIS again for 2021. It is unsure at this time why leadership did not accept this proposal for 2021 but it may be due to the large number of CIS's the

county already has. Kaitlin stated they will potentially revise the strategy for submission this year and implementation in FY2022. Rather than being species centric, a grazing lands strategy will benefit wildlife habitats, control invasive juniper and noxious weeds, and benefit livestock production. The group expressed this to be a favorable alternative CIS.

- **Forest Health - Thomas Creek Watershed:** Lake County NRCS staff along with various partners, especially the USFS, were successful in being awarded another Joint Chief's (JC) project and applications are currently being taken for the FY 2021 application process. Kaitlin discussed that the state had yet to provide a deadline for JC applications, but had expressed that the April 16th deadline would not apply. It was asked by Autumn Muir and Kasey Johnson if there was any idea of when the deadline will possibly be, however there is not. It was also discussed that North Warner projects can still apply under this JC CIS, however based on the current ranking criteria, they will automatically fall into the medium priority category.
- **Sage Grouse and National Initiatives:** NRCS is currently working on 2 SGI applications for the funding FY2021 cycle; these contracts are applicants who were involved in the Brattain Fire and would like to do some more work this fall after the success of the Wildfire EQIP contracts is evaluated. Although tens of thousands of acres of juniper control has occurred through past contracts, annual grass control is becoming a major concern for improving sage grouse habitat under SGI in Lake County. National would like to see more focus put into mesic habitat work as well. Autumn Muir asked what specifically the projects would entail for this work. Kaitlin mentioned it would most likely be targeted grazing and/or fencing, some minor in-stream type work, potentially beaver analog dams or some type of streambank stabilization. Kaitlin will research the question further and reach out to her with a more refined answer.
- **Other Resource Concerns:** It was opened for discussion and Dustin Gustaveson from ODF mentioned he would like to see if there was a potential for a forest replanting CIS, following events such as the Brattain Fre. Kaitlin mentioned Marti Petersen with the Lake County FSA has a program, EFRP, for these times. Marti mentioned that the program has not been widely accepted in the past due to the ten-year grazing restriction that comes with the project. Kaitlin discussed that NRCS would likely have similar restrictions, but a CIS could be an option if the state staff were in support, which is unlikely due to FSA having a similar program. More research will be conducted to understand what a CIS similar to this would entail.

Closing Remarks and Adjournment:

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