

# OTAC Meeting Notes

**Oct. 1, 2015**

## **Attendees: 20 people**

- Scott Oviatt, NRCS
- Tom Watson, NRCS
- Marc Thalacker, Three Sisters Irrigation District
- Kathy Ferge, NRCS
- Benjamin Cate, Burns Paiute Tribe
- Jim Cathcart, ODF
- Craig Rowland, USFWS
- K.C. VanNatta, VanNatta Bros.
- Kelley Beamer, COLT
- Kelly Worley, FSA
- Fred Vosper, NW Energy
- Robert Wallace, WyEast RC&D
- Rick McMautgale, EMSWCD
- Loren Unruh, NRCS
- Tami Kerr, ODFA
- Jerome Rosa, OCA
- Koto Kishida, Oregon DEQ
- Ron Alvarado, NRCS
- Sara Magenheimer, NRCS
- Tracy Robillard, NRCS

### **Opening/Introduction – Ron Alvarado, NRCS**

- NRCS just closed out the fiscal year 2015 and today starts a new fiscal year (and a new water year). Congress passed a continuing resolution through December 11.
- Fire recovery has become a significant part of the NRCS workload this time of year. NRCS is working on post-fire recovery efforts throughout the state, using the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). At the same time, NRCS is doing multiple wildfire prevention projects throughout the state as part of its Strategic Approach to Conservation.
- There was very good news for sage grouse this year. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that the greater sage grouse is no longer warranted for protection under the Endangered Species Act. This is the largest land conservation effort in U.S. history. But in terms of conservation on-the-ground, this is just the beginning. NRCS and partners are moving forward with the Sage Grouse Initiative 2.0 and are committed to providing more funding and tools to Oregon landowners in sage grouse habitat areas.

### **Opening/Introduction – Kelly Worley, FSA**

- FSA remains very busy this time of year with post-fire and drought projects. Phil Ward was not able to attend the meeting, Kelly Worley represented FSA on his behalf. See more details in the FSA update portion of the meeting.

### **Water Supply: End of year wrap-up, Next Year Expectations – Scott Oviatt, NRCS**

- The 2015 water year had a lack of sustained storm impacts. Most of the precipitation fell as rain instead of snow. Major shortages in snowpack.
- Low elevation sites were very dry during the 2015 water year (Oct. 1 2014 through Sept. 30, 2015).
- April 1 is typically the time of year for snowpack peak. This year, during that peak time, it was very low throughout the entire state. The Willamette Basin had only 8 percent of normal of snow water equivalent.
- Water year precipitation was below normal throughout the year. We benefitted with a large snow event in November that carried us through a little bit, but the rest of the season was dry.
- We set historic lows for snowpack this year. We experienced very early snowmelt as early as January and February in some parts of the state. In the recorded history in SNOTEL sites, this was by far the lowest year on record for snowpack.
- It's possible that we could get cooler weather and snowpack development in the mountains this year with development of El Nino conditions.
- There is a trend of drought areas spreading across the west from 2012 through this year. Currently, 67 percent of Oregon is in an extreme drought, 100 percent of Oregon is in a severe drought.
- The Governor's Office has issued drought declarations for nearly all of the state (see map in the slide presentation). Secretarial drought designations from USDA cover nearly all of the West.
- The soil profile is so dry right now from several consecutive years of prolonged drought, that even if we get normal rainfall, it will not likely result in normal or above normal run-off because it will be absorbed into the soil profile.
- High water temperatures in the Columbia River are due to low streamflow and low snowpack, so the run-off water feeding into the river wasn't cold enough to sustain normal cooler temperatures for the Columbia.

### **Post Fire Rehabilitation Work – Jay Gibbs, NRCS**

- Jay Gibbs manages NRCS activities in the John Day Umatilla and Snake River Basins.
- NRCS is taking signups for post-fire rehab conservation practices. The sign up period ends Oct. 16 for Baker, Grant and Malheur counties. Additionally, NRCS is doing a sign-up for post-fire recovery for the Stouts Creek Fire in Douglas County. The deadline to apply for that sign-up is Nov. 20. NRCS is working closely with ODF, FSA and other partners to determine the needs locally.
- NRCS' focus for this signup is erosion control and seeding. Long term, NRCS is looking at future investments in reforestation.
- NRCS has been involved in investing in non-industrial private forest lands for several years and is invested in a number of forested landscapes in the state of Oregon. One of the challenges is how to focus our investment with what our applicants and customers need.
- Our fire prevention strategy is a three legged stool focused on 1) prevention, 2) serving as resource advisors and 3) installing multi-purpose ponds. The overall result of these three focus areas is to build a fire resilient landscape.
- As resource advisors, NRCS and ODF have combined resources to target priority treatment areas across private and state forestland. NRCS technical staff would serve as advisors to provide information about fire breaks, fuel breaks and slash treatments on private lands. This information is of great value to incident commanders who are making decisions to manage a wildfire recovery operation. NRCS is in the early phases of developing this strategy. We hope to execute this on-the-ground by the end of the 2016 fire season.
- Multipurpose ponds provide many benefits, such as wildlife habitat, livestock water, and a source of emergency water supply for rural fire districts. This is the part of our strategy that is still under

development. There's a lot of factors to consider with water rights and water rules. We need to get our heads together with partners. There's tremendous interest in this from the local producers and from partners in the state. It will require a concerted effort.

- Will the impoundments become a priority for Oregon NRCS? We have the ability to establish priorities locally through the local working groups. We are seeing a lot of demand in the field from our applicants and customers for these ponds. If it's a priority, that will be determined by the local working group. But we're going to need help from state agencies to make it happen. We can offer the financial and technical assistance programs, but we need buy in from other state agencies to get it on-the-ground.

#### **Save Water, Save Energy. VFD Optimization Program – Robert Wallace and Fred Vosper, WyEast RC&D**

- We're energy guys who work in agriculture. Robert works with farmers to help them make contacts with other agencies and groups to help them get the resources they need.
- WyEast RC&D has multiple grants that fund projects with variable frequency drives, or VFDs. They have a national grant from NRCS through its Conservation Innovation Grant program. VFDs allow farmers to set the exact pressures they need to move water through their irrigation systems. This saves significant energy, by an additional 10 to 30 percent in most cases.
- The VFD controls the speed of the motor. It's like having a throttle on your pump. Most of the pumps now are set on one speed. But the VFD allows the pump to speed up or slow down depending on what's needed. It works best on submersible and turbine pumps.
- From an energy standpoint, it's significant. And for farmers, it really improves their system operation. It makes it easier for them to turn things on and off and manage their irrigation.
- VFD wireless radio control systems use a wireless radio and transmitter to connect to the VFD on the irrigation system.
- In the future of irrigation efficiency, we predict the use of aerial drones will be more integrated to provide infrared and photography.
- There's a huge opportunity with wheel lines to save water through pressure regulators and flow control. Too much water reduces your yield. In some cases they are putting on too much water.
- Replacing sprinklers is key to reduce overwatering. Maintaining sprinkling hardware is imperative.

#### **Sage Grouse Initiative 2.0 – Jay Gibbs, NRCS**

- SGI was an unprecedented effort in scale and collaboration. NRCS focused heavily on juniper removal, with the mindset that "big problems need big solutions."
- Oregon NRCS invested \$18 million in SGI over the last five years. This focused on habitat restoration affecting 90 percent of birds in the state.
- In September, the USFWS announced that the greater sage grouse no longer warrants protection under the Endangered Species Act. This is a testament to the hard work of Oregon ranchers and many partners who have put conservation on-the-ground.
- NRCS Chief Jason Weller committed an additional \$211 million over the next five years for SGI 2.0. SGI 2.0 expands the breadth of programs we have access to. We will use not only the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), but we will also integrate the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). Our challenge is to expand on a strategy for Oregon, but maintain our core habitat focus areas so we can be successful in this next Farm Bill.
- Over the course of SGI 2.0 we will likely see a decrease in the investment of conifers and an increase in treating invasive and annual grasses, which are a big threat to the species. EQIP is the foundation program for SGI and that will continue, but then we add CSP, which will cover the monitoring and enhancement.

ACEP-ALE (Agricultural Land Easements) is the pinnacle—this will address fragmentation through easements to protect our investments long term.

- Annual grasses will be the next big challenge for us going forward. We want to screen and rank the applications for annual grasses so that we address where the threats are. We want to be agronomically and economically sustainable. NRCS plans to work with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to find opportunities to collaborate on annual grass treatment.
- The CSP is the single largest conservation program in USDA today.
- Jay has had dozens of conversations with landowners across eastern Oregon who are interested in easements. It's a great opportunity, we just need to help them get the tools they need to pursue those. In some cases, the demand exceeds the supply.
- Oregon has a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) project for sage grouse. This project puts boots on-the-ground to provide assistance to landowners to help them develop their Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAAs). We work with a width and breadth of local, state and federal agencies to help them get the tools they need.
- If we give landowners the information, they will make the right decision. The SGI summit is planned in October with NRCS staff, the local SWCDs and landowners to help us be able to provide good assistance to landowners for SGI.
- Jerome Rosa of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association complimented NRCS for putting realistic numbers on the juniper problem. Over the next three to five years, NRCS aims to address up to 95 percent of that goal with conifer removal.
- USFWS commended NRCS on the habitat work in Oregon and for moving forward with CCAAs. Lawsuits are starting up on both side of the coin. Paul Henson, the USFWS state supervisor, is going to Eastern Oregon next month to meet with landowners and emphasize the message that we need to keep moving forward on sage grouse habitat conservation.

#### **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) Update – Loren Unruh, NRCS**

- It's time for an overhaul in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). NRCS nationally is combining feedback received from Farm Bill listening sessions, state tours with national program officials, and feedback from landowners.
- Nationally, we looked at the program to give it an overhaul. We are revamping CSP and going back to basics with the field office tech guides. EQIP has been our bread and butter for years, our partners and staff and customers understand it well. So we're going back to that same type of business process flow to adapt that to CSP. We are getting rid of the "CMT" – the conservation management tool we refer to as the "black box." The new CSP will get rid of that option and instead we will tie enhancements to our conservation practice standards.
- For example: Irrigation water management would be the basis of the enhancement. Then if you want to do additional enhancements on top of it, you could add a variable frequency drive and some monitoring, which you can tie that to our payment schedules.
- The ideal process flow is to: 1) identify resource concerns and develop a conservation plan, 2) address those concerns and fix them with EQIP or other programs to meet the baseline need, and 3) for continuous improvement, then you take it to the next level with CSP by incorporating additional enhancements and monitoring.
- NRCS plans to go live January 1 with a phased roll out. We are doing internal training in November with our staff to go over the new screening and ranking process.

#### **FY15 Programs Update – Loren Unruh, NRCS**

- In fiscal year 2015, we had 3 applications funded for Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) covering more than 16,000 acres with an investment of \$2.5 million.
- For the Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE), we have 2 applications covering 1,300 acres and \$3.7 million funded.
- For the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), we awarded 501 contracts, covering more than 500,000 acres. The EQIP investment was \$16 million. Many of these EQIP contracts involved special emphasis initiatives, such as sage grouse, air quality, water quality, drought, and the two chief's initiatives.
- For the Conservation Stewardship Program (CS), we had 125 new contracts and 214 contract renewals.
- The NRCS Oregon public affairs team is working on a comprehensive annual report to highlight the NRCS program portfolio for fiscal year 2015. Look for that information soon.

#### **Farm Service Agency Update – Kelly Worley, FSA**

- FSA has updated the CRP Grasslands Program. The program highlights three main practices – 1) permanent introduced grasses and legumes, 2) permanent native grasses and legumes, and 3) pollinator habitat.
- The CRP Grasslands Program is a national program. People can submit offers continuously. It's also a very competitive program. Applications are ranked with a potential for 120 total points.
- FSA has established a CRP Grassland Zone. Those zones are Yamhill, Polk, Benton, Lane, Lake, Harney, and Baker counties. Lake, Harney and Baker were selected because of SGI. On the Western side of the state, Yamhill, Polk, Benton and Lane were included because of Fenders Blue Butterfly. People who apply in these counties get an extra five points on their application ranking. Others can still apply who are not located in these counties.
- FSA held CRP training with employees. All states are preparing to give that information to the county offices.
- The emergency haying and grazing program allows producers other options without increasing their grazing prices and water hauling.
- Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) – see handout with details on signups and funding. We got a lot of requests in September and more will be coming in. Funding is very competitive.
- The original 1998 CREP agreement prevented the re-enrollment of irrigation rates—this is tied in with water rights and in-stream leases in Oregon. We are working on updating that agreement within the next few months. The FSA national office set those rates on not more than 75 percent of the grazing value.

#### **NRCS Basin Team Leader Update – Jay Gibbs, NRCS**

- The NRCS sign-up closes Oct. 16 for fire rehabilitation funding. There's an increase in people who have never worked with NRCS who are applying for this funding. There's also underserved clients in these areas. This presents a new opportunity for NRCS and FSA to work with new customers.
- NRCS is providing technical assistance through Emergency Conservation Program.
- The first quarter of the fiscal year is the busiest for certifying practices.
- We continue to work on our Conservation Implementation Strategies (CIS) to define targeted conservation approaches throughout the state. We moved up our timeline for FY17 CIS, so you may see NRCS staff reaching out to partners to determine what the needs are for the following program year.

## Closing Comments

- K.C. Van Natta voiced comments about the impacts that geese have on agricultural operations. He cited that 1 goose eats 2 to 3 pounds of green material a day, and most of that green material is coming from our farms and ranches. This is a growing concern that needs to be looked at across the state.
- Jim Cathcart provided an update from the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF):
  - Sign up period for forest management planning cost-share assistance is open (October 1, 2015 through January 31, 2016). Eligible landowners are non-industrial private forestland owners (aka family forestland owners) and local and regional (including County) government forestland owners (including Soil and Water Conservation Districts) that have a fee title interest in the land. [Apply](#) through local [Stewardship Foresters](#). Plans are written according to [Oregon's Forest Management Planning Guidelines](#).
  - Post-Fire Rehabilitation and Resource Restoration. Thanks to NRCS for current sign-up period under Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Kelly Worley (FSA) and I are starting coordination with ODF field units and FSA County Executive Directors about sign-ups through the [Emergency Forest Restoration Program](#). Challenges for reforestation assistance are available seedlings as well as lost soil productivity due to wildfire damage to the soil. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is piloting its Hazard Mitigation Grant Program for post-fire restoration work on FEMA declared fires (those with significant loss of property or threat of loss of property). Eligible practices for cost-share assistance are infrastructure repairs or replacements (roads, culverts, bridges) and emergency erosion and stream bank stabilization measures. Roughly \$450,000 available for each FEMA large fire incident. Oversight and coordination is be run by the Oregon Office of Emergency Management. Governor's Office is interested in knowing about unfunded gaps and may consider using the Governor's Strategic Reserve Fund or make a request to the State Legislative Emergency Board.
  - Governor Kate Brown stopped by the Department's Leadership Team meeting to say thanks for all the good work the Department does in fighting wildfire.
  - Oregon/Washington is hosting the National Forest Stewardship Program & 25<sup>th</sup> Year Celebration Meeting, October 20-22, 2015 in Vancouver, Washington. See attached agenda. Oregon is hosting the October 21<sup>st</sup> field trip to the Columbia Gorge. Thanks to Jay Gibbs for being part of the program on October 20<sup>th</sup>.
  - Oregon Tree Farm System Annual Forest Landowner Workshop and Tree Farmer of the Year Recognition Luncheon is Monday, November 23<sup>rd</sup>, World Forestry Center, Portland. See attached registration brochure.
  - The Oregon Department of Forestry has a new website. Check it out - <http://www.oregon.gov/ODF/pages/index.aspx>.

