

State Technical Advisory Committee Meeting
January 26, 2016

Hosted by Bonda Habets, NRCS State Resource Conservationist

Introductions/Attending:

Mark Clark, Ginger Phalen, Jeff Chan, Leslie Connelly, Catherine Gockel, Robin Slate, Mike Stamon, Doug Wood, Amy Hendershot, Jeff Harlow, David Hays, Leif Fixen, Ron Cummings, Ginny Prest, Jonalee Squeochs, Ray Ledgerwood, Megan Stewart, Patti Playfair, Terry Mansfield, Mike Kuttel, Jr., Ty Meyer, Russ MacRae, John Kendig, Roylene Rides at the Door, Linda Willand, and Bonda Habets. Others may have attended via webinar or teleconference as this meeting is open to the public.

Meeting materials are posted to the STAC Website

at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/wa/technical/stc/minutes/>

Welcome and Opening Comments—Agenda Review

Bonda Habets, NRCS

Bonda welcomed everyone and reviewed the agenda for any updates. Bonda noted Sherre was on vacation and will be back for the next meeting. She thanked everyone for their support and interaction on the STAC.

Endangered Species Act Overview & 4D Rule for Mazama Pocket Gopher

Jeff Chan, US Fish and Wildlife Service

Jeff gave a presentation on the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and 4D special rule for Mazama pocket gopher. Nationwide there are 692 species listed under ESA, 492 are listed as endangered, and 200 are listed as threatened. In Washington State, there are approximately 30 species listed by the USFWS under the ESA, including plants. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is the agency that is largely responsible for marine mammals and salmonids, however, USFWS and NMFS share responsibility for some marine mammals, sea turtles, and salmonids. Jeff described the different sections of the ESA and how they work, including Section 4, Listing Determinations; Section 6, Cooperation with States; Section 7, Federal Interagency Cooperation; Section 9, Prohibited Acts; and Section 10, Exceptions. Under Section 7 of the ESA, Federal agencies are required to undergo consultation with FWS (and/or NMFS) for any action that “may affect” a listed species or critical habitat. For non-Federal entities and persons, Section 10 provides exemptions to the prohibitions in Section 9, or agreements that can be developed by persons to ensure their compliance with the ESA. Section 10 describes permits needed for scientific study, where handling of a listed species might occur, and permits for Candidate Conservation Agreements, Safe Harbor Agreements, and Habitat Conservation Plans. These agreements or plans describe and assess impacts from actions, and result in a permit to the person that allows activities to move forward.. Roylene mentioned that NRCS and USFWS are working toward a joint plan to go forward with farm plans and ensure all is coordinated with Section 7 consultations, and other agreements with WDFW or others. . On Page 19795 of the Federal Register published on Wednesday, April 9, 2014, The Final Rule that determines threatened status for Mazama pocket gophers includes specific information in a special rule that describes what activities are allowed, or exempted from Section 9 prohibitions. The USFWS Washington Fish and Wildlife Office website has recently been updated, and includes information for Mazama pocket gopher in an accessible format. . Go to: <http://www.fws.gov/wafwo/articles.cfm?id=149489588>

Federal agencies are required to consult with the USFWS or NMFS if they are authorizing or undertaking an action that “may affect a listed species or critical habitat. . Ginger Phalen can help with any questions and Sherre and USFWS are working to develop a Section 7 Consultation training with NRCS.

Ray noted the social science aspect when working with land owners that may have ESA listed species on their property. We must follow the law and work on social aspect of outreach to farmers. There is a need for increased and improved communication between agencies and land owners. Terry Mansfield identified a need for further integration of the USFWS's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to increase proactive partnerships with land owners. Thurston County is working with USFWS to develop a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) that seeks to address Thurston County's permit process and provide coverage to any landowner who comes to the Thurston County Permit Center and applies for a permit for actions covered under the HCP. Outreach, and public meetings have occurred as the HCP is developed. In addition to covering impacts to Mazama pocket gopher, other recently listed species including the Taylor's checkerspot butterfly, the streaked horned lark and the Oregon spotted frog will also be covered by the HCP.

Revisions to the Priority Habitats and Species (PHS) Riparian Guidelines

Mike Kuttel, Jr, WA Department of Fish and Wildlife Service

Mike presented the revisions to the PHS Riparian Guidelines. PHS Riparian is a science-based document that establishes the best available science for riparian Areas in Washington. The updated guidance is not completed, but getting close. This first phase is focused on the aquatic values of riparian habitat. A second phase will focus on the terrestrial values of riparian habitat. The guidelines will not establish riparian management policies. It will be up to cities, counties, state agencies, federal agencies, tribes, agricultural producers, timber companies, and other interested groups to establish appropriate policies based on the science in the guidelines. Riparian management policies will likely vary based on geographic locations, management objectives, and socio-economic considerations. Eleven scientists, many PhD's, are helping to guide the process and provide sources of information. These scientists were selected because of their expertise and most are not DFW employees. The updated guidelines will not establish a numeric prescription for how much riparian buffer width is adequate or practicable. WDFW anticipates completing the updated guidelines by March or April 2016 and will provide an opportunity for public feedback.

Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) – some will opt out but 28 counties as of today. VSP is applicable to critical area ordinances affecting agricultural uses, not necessarily agricultural lands. Counties will have two years and nine months to complete VSP work plan. A five year check-in is built in to the program to assess if the goals of the plan are being achieved. Roylene noted we have the opportunity in VSP to bring this down to the county level versus from National. Man hours and staff to get this done is difficult to know and the impact on the program.

Ray added once we have a collective base line and then how do we monitor how the habitat changes and prioritize what moves the habitat; data stream miles, temperature change once we get the data set and public/private sector involved. The land owners are the "stars" and everyone else is the support.

Round Table Discussion

Fire updates are on the web page and a copy of our news release was posted on the STAC Webpage. Some of the funds are difficult to receive due to the budget needing to be projected three years in advance. We have difficulty hiring staff to fulfill the roles. We attempt to stagger sign ups, but must meet deadlines. Also, payment schedule must be 1 year in advance to obligate in time.

Has the RCPP funding recommendation been done yet? Not yet, new proposals are in the final stage. Roylene noted our State is waiting on the National to announce and we will then announce at the same time. Information will go out when it's available.

Terry Mansfield mentioned private land and priority habitats focus efforts use wetlands, habitats—welcome and deliver the farm bill.

Ty mentioned on Direct Seed, certification is moving forward, thanks.

Ray shared that VSP is high on the WSCC list of long-range planning Natural Resource data collection to assess priorities and what kind of training needs and task order. The LWG multi-country priorities

To note we'll need to update the new colonel at Joint Lewis McCord regarding Sentinel lands to ensure we keep relations going with the DOD and coordinate with all the agencies involved. The military is in need of applications.

Terry Mansfield shared he will go to DC in March and had an opportunity to talk about how we can help land owners to ensure we are all on the same page. He will visit with Chief Weller and discuss the need to deliver the programs to farmers and include some justification. Hearing from them should add value to discussion and help push progress.

Admin transformation is starting to work better. Need grants and agreements help to ensure they don't fail. No bumps need money on the ground.

Send Terry talking point so we are all on the same page on where "our" bottlenecks exist and he will share while in DC.

Ag is two percent of the population.

NRCS WA Shellfish Initiative – Native Olympia Oyster Restoration

John Kendig, NRCS

Olympia Oyster Restorage is under the EQIP program and \$100K was dedicated in the 2016 sign up. Location of the oyster restoration are in tideland of Puget Sound and 19 priority areas identified including Willapa Bay. Goal is to jump start of species that will eventually be a seed source for natural populations versus being harvested. Sign up is through March 2016.

Conservation Practice Update

Bonda Habets, NRCS

Bonda noted that every five years some conservation practices may change, e.g. Air Quality, No Till, Mulch Till, Soil Health, Residue and Management. These will come out in the Federal Register and this is where your comments need to be made on the proposed practice changes. We post the conservation practices on the STAC website. East and West may have difference on the technical note that gives state guidance and how to implement practices. For example, we do not pay for prescribed burning.

Process, standards and scientific review process asked for statement in writing to defend our decision to be in line with the national standard "all habitat is not created equal." A 50 foot minimum for adequate protection. Bio TechNote 14 which is the guide we use for our staff for the Riparian area assessment (science, policy, implementation and use). A final is expected in Fiscal Year 2017 (Oct 1, 2016). Bonda noted our program are voluntary at NRCS. Leslie Conley asked about open space tax act and if that is affected. Easement are 1,000 feet from a dike we don't want to prevent the dike if needed. Minimal effects on WA Wetlands Ag production available. Action can be approved on website. Policies are posted on the STAC website, too.

Minimal Affects on WA Wetlands

Bonda Habets, NRCS

Bonda shared EQIP is not an emergency response program; resource concern, conservation issue. We have to advertise for 30 days, etc.

Short list of what Partners can do such as what can we anticipate for fires next years and support “fire wise” designated area. Forage stewardship to be more proactive versus re-active.

EWP – DSR until it get funded other areas get funded first even if done a couple years ago. Droughts are another area.

Fire Assistance

Jeff Harlow, NRCS

Wildfire Assistance sign up began Jan 15 and through Feb 15 to assist landowners. Washington received \$400,000 for the program and may be able to ask for more. FSA will handle fencing. Five fund pools available for range planting, grazing, Tribal pools and forestry pool. Roylene noted that we submitted \$6 million for EQIP and \$4 million for EWP requests to HQ. When we show the need with the demand of Program applications, we may apply for more financial assistance needs to cover drought/fire.

ECP & FSA funding such as the Carlton fires funds was about 1 year behind in receiving funds. Washington has the most private acres affected. There is a two year process for planting for small forestry farms.

EQIP does allow for longer term projects and the ranking criteria takes some time.

Ray noted the commission is working the Governor to fund \$500K to purchase hay since so much of the grazing land is ash.

Jeff Harlow noted that NRCS website updates regarding the fires made a big difference, thanks to Gina Kerzman and her staff and the Ecological Sciences staff for the fact sheets and reference links.

Forest stewardship needs to be more proactive versus re-active. Maybe Partners can come up with a short list of what can we anticipate for fires next years and support “fire wise” designated area.

Additional Questions/Comments

Bonda Habets

Bonda thanked everyone from their time and the meeting adjourned at 12:30 pm. The next STAC meeting is scheduled for March 22, 9:30 am to 3:00 pm. Bonda requested the STAC to send agenda items to Sherre if they would like other subjects discussed.