

Columbia County Voluntary Stewardship Program
Work Group Meeting Minutes
May 12, 2022 ~ CD Boardroom

I. Call to Order

Work Group Chair Rick Turner called to order the regular meeting of the Columbia County VSP Work Group at 10:19 a.m. on May 12, 2022.

II. Attendance

Attendance: Rick Turner, Joy Eckhoff, Roland Schirman, Tom Schirm (WDFW), Marty Hall (BOCC), Aneesha Dieu (Conservation District Staff), Val Turner (Conservation District Staff), Dena Martin (County Planning Staff).

III. County Updates

- The first quarter 2022 Quarterly Report was submitted on April 8.
- Martin provided a budget update through March, 2022.

IV. Discussion/Action Items

- **Touchette Phase 2 Forest Restoration Budget Review**
 - Val Turner presented an updated budget for Phase 2 of the Touchette Reforestation project.
 - The anticipated budget is \$6350 for 3,000 plugs, deer deterrent, planting and mechanical scalping.
 - This is less than the previously approved total budget of \$7080 so no action was necessary.
- **Review VSP 2022-01 Truesdale/Bishop Streambank Stabilization:**
 - Dieu presented an application, budget and plans for a streambank stabilization/habitat restoration project
 - The project is located approximately one mile west of Starbuck, WA on the north bank of the Tucannon River. During the 2020 flood, the river eroded a significant portion of the bank, which is now encroaching on the farm irrigation pivot. A temporary, emergency stabilization measure was permitted in 2021. Stabilization plans would mitigate erosion to protect the farmland and the existing irrigation pivot while improving water quality, erosion, and fish habitat.
 - The work group discussed the project merits as related to the evaluation questions in the Cost Share Policy rubric.
 - Eckhoff asked about project monitoring Dieu responded that the CD would perform implementation monitoring to include checking the structures annually for damage and monitor erosion control. The CD would not perform habitat/biological monitoring but Dieu noted that there is a PIT TAG array station nearby that could possibly provide fish data.
 - Schirm commented that if a USACE permit is required, it will be important to submit that ASAP as they are taking more time than usual to process. He noted that the rock volume table in the plan

appears to show a smaller volume of rock as opposed to the “rip rap” shown on the plans.

- Rick Turner asked if there is a maintenance schedule for Cost Share projects. Martin said that the current approved Cost Share Policy doesn’t address maintenance. Dieu said she expected that if maintenance is required for a project, the applicant would re-apply for that as if it was a separate project. Turner asked if there was anything stating that VSP funds cannot be used for maintenance. No one is aware of any such stipulation.
- *Roland moved to approve the Tucannon River Streambank Stabilization Project. Eckhoff seconded. No further discussion. All in favor, motion carries.*

V. Joint VSP Technical Panel and Statewide Advisory Committee

- The entire work group attended the joint meeting via Zoom to take advantage of time set aside for Columbia County. Dieu wanted to address several items, including:
 - Gaining a better understanding of the focus of VSP, especially as related to Program Implementation vs. Monitoring
 - Addressing the burden of county-required WRIA-wide monitoring as opposed to project monitoring, and possible alternatives
 - Simplification and increasing user-friendliness of the 5-year report
- The questions resulted in robust conversation between State Advisory Committee and State Tech Panel members as well as other attendees. Some main discussion points are below:
 - Bill Eller stated that the focus should be on monitoring to be sure goals and benchmarks are being met.
 - Brian Cochrane stated that what makes VSP unique in the conservation world is that we’ve said that individual voluntary practices work at a parcel/site level and if we do enough of these that we will have a watershed scale effect. VSP, in statute, says “prove it.” “This is a super important and super critical part of VSP.” Statute also states that VSP was never intended to be an implementation program; it was intended to leverage implementation from other programs and then focus on showing that we are protecting or enhancing critical area functions and values. Showing that the program is successful is having the monitoring to show that we are having the desired effect.
 - Eller commented multiple times that VSP was not intended to be a source of money to be used for projects on the ground. Rather, it is intended to leverage other sources and funds to do that. The Commission has always recommended that funding be used to establish a full time employee at the County or District to meet the statutory and contractual obligations that the County must meet. He said some Counties have carved out some money for small projects, but that is secondary to the reporting and monitoring obligations and

- deliverables. He suggested attending the Supplementary Budget Webinar which may allow for additional project funding.
- John Stuhlmiller stated that it is acceptable to use extra resources for ground projects, but that is not the prime directive for the VSP funding.
 - Sean Williams said that guidance is available in the newly approved Monitoring Guide as well as through the monitoring symposiums.
 - Dieu shared that producers may respond negatively to increased monitoring efforts for fear of more regulation.
 - Cochrane said that Growth Management requires agriculture to protect critical areas and values and we have a choice in how, either through VSP or through a regulatory program. We are in a regulatory program, voluntarily, until we're kicked out because it is not working. In order to show that it's working we have to be able to monitor. Producers have control over what BMPs to use and where. The reality of VSP is that we show it works or we go back into a regulatory context. I know that's not popular with those we work with, but it's the reality.
 - Stuhlmiller - Commented on the flexibility in the VSP program that allows for innovative ways to meet requirements. There is lots of flexibility and VSP requires that we "do our best."
 - Cochrane – Reiterated that we have external pressure to show the program works and to show that public funds should have a public benefit.

VI. Comments, concerns, items not listed on the agenda

- Dieu shared that funding will be coming available that may allow the Conservation District to create its own portal that would gather spatial data and monitoring efforts of multiple agencies all in one place. The portal could gather voluntary practices and monitoring efforts that could be linked to from the 5-year report.
 - There was some discussion around the fact that some producers are reluctant to give agencies information that could potentially be used in a regulatory fashion. The consensus was that if we don't share and defend voluntary practices, we will be forced in a more regulatory direction.
- Dieu, Martin and Schirm will meet with Sean Williams (WDFW) on the morning of June 1 for a County tour and VSP update.

VII. Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held at 8:30 a.m. on June 16 at the Conservation District boardroom and via Zoom.

VIII. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 12:07 p.m.