

Minutes of Columbia County VSP Meeting June 8, 2016

Meeting open: 5:30 P.M.

Present: Thorn, Schirman, Dave Frame, McLain (WSDA), Schirm, Mead, Hall, Bruegman, J.Howard, D. Howard, Robanske, Evan Sheffels (WSFB), Steve Martin
Staff: Brigham, Lyonnois, Abramson

Introductions were made.

Chairman Roland inquired about the group's preference on the length of our meetings and the consensus was that sessions will end at 7:00 PM. He said at the end of each session he will ask two questions: What did you hear tonight? What is your assignment?

Motion was made to approve minutes for April 13 meeting by Thorn, second by Hall. Passed.

Brigham asked if there were any concerns or issues? Seeing none, we moved on.

Brigham mentioned the upcoming Shorelines Master Program public hearing on Monday and invited folks to attend. He said that our Columbia County website is up and running and looks great. He exhibited the site live and explained some of the website features.

Roland introduced the Work Group timeline.

Brigham explained the timeline for the various tasks. The work plan needs to be developed by June, 2017. Our current tasks include looking at viability of ag, intersection of ag and critical areas.

Kelly McLain stated that she is the WSDA Director's designee to Technical Panel and she is here to provide information to ensure success of our local efforts. She said that VSP has the twin goals of protecting critical areas and enhancing ag. The funding was provided in 2015, even though the VSP program was given legislative approval in 2011. The Tech Panel can only approve or deny. Denial must be accompanied by a rationale, which then goes to a Technical Advisory Panel. Steve Martin asked about the two counties that have been involved in the pilot projects for 18 months – are they setting the template? Or cookbook? Kelly said that the idea is to use existing data to the extent possible, but every county has a different ag structure. Agency wants to give as much advice and guidance as possible.

Brigham noted that VSP allows funds can be used for equipment purchases to aid process. Therefore, we have bought a new projector and screen which will be permanent additions to library building.

Brigham introduced the topic of Agricultural viability in Columbia County with a Power Point presentation. There are dual goals: Protect Critical Areas and improve long-term viability of ag. A review of the five critical areas was given. He then provided sample goals and benchmarks. The historical perspective of agriculture in the state was given by referencing "Future of Farming" report. Key points in that report include:

1. Make agriculture a priority
2. Eliminate regulatory barriers
3. Protect resources
4. Strengthen support services
5. Harness emerging opportunities

Some notable changes in Washington show that between '88 and '07, the size and number of farms fell. Schirman asked what is definition of a "farm"? to which Kelly replied that the definition is from the ag census, it has to have income from farm activity. Martin said that since 2007, the number of farms in the state had to have risen. Kelly said that actually, the number has dropped some. Martin asked if this based on ownership? I.e, one person leasing five fields, to which Kelly said that is likely, yes.

Brigham said this helps put this issue in perspective. Does number of farms show viability? The size of farms in Columbia County has dropped since 1997, though size is not necessarily relevant. The large drop in total farm acreage in 1954 was due to soil bank. The ag census shows that productivity has improved over the years; cattle numbers fairly constant since 1997; wheat farm numbers and acreage have fallen since 1997; and the value of ag products have risen steadily over last 20 years. Is it possible that a dramatic fall in value of ag products screw up benchmarks? Kelly said, No. Try to use data that is not subject to outside factors, such as tracking agricultural land.

Brigham introduced the door prize: a live tomato plant. Door prize won by DF.

Kelly noted that concerning the farm acreage slide, Columbia County has about 200,000 acres, not 300,000 acres of ag land. Total acreage may not account for range land. There was some discussion of methods of surveying ag land and products. Kelly said that every county determines what criteria and benchmarks they will use. Brigham asked if our Work Plan goals and benchmarks should use county-wide info or watershed specific info. Kelly replied that the State is struggling with appropriate G&B in counties. Brigham asked why would we NOT want to use a similar template for every county? Kelly replied that the State doesn't want a "check the box" type of process. They desire for the plans to show what is unique about each county.

Brigham led a discussion of the threats/roadblocks to ag viability. There are Big Picture impacts – these are generally out of local control. Then there are local picture impacts – things which we may have some level of control over. Martin asked if we have an issue, such as sprawl, are we looking at measures that would prevent that?

Brigham replied that if we provide info to producers on a roadblock, we may see how to mitigate it. An example is the County Comp Plan, which has specific goals to prevent conversion of ag land, one such tool and benchmark.

Hall said that in Garfield County, an acquaintance got public land acreage from Forest Service. No Columbia County cattlemen graze on public land. Hall said that land in recreation designation produces more tax revenue. Kelly said that conversion of ag land to public land effectively takes it out of production. Hall said that you have to graze on their land in order to pay taxes. Brigham asked Hall if he sees a trend in land going into public ownership? To which Hall replied that yes, DWF is buying up land. Martin said that tax dollars are being used to buy private land. Thorn said he agrees that conversion is a threat. Brigham asked if conservation easements also a threat? Martin said that most easement allow for continued ag uses. Kelly asked if there is a land trust here? Robanske said Yes. Hall said that easements could be an asset. Martin said that Ag ecosystems can be a benefit to natural environment. Ag can be difficult to ascertain ecosystem services provided by farms. Kelly said that Ag depends on a healthy ecosystem to produce healthy crops. VSP is first attempt to allow counties to use ecosystems at a local level to review ag. Martin said that an increase in farmland acreage would be a benefit to ecosystems.

Brigham asked if educating local population a valid benchmark? Kelly said, Yes. Chelan is using it. Schirman said there are some things that are already known, such as amount of erosion. Need to look at soil health. Economic realities prohibit some measures that would improve soil health. Hall asked if we are getting too far afield? Brigham replied that no, this is perfect. Ag viability is key subject. Martin said regulation, at all levels, will take ag out of production, needs to be addressed. Thorn stated that we should also like to bring in new federal regulations on Waters of the United States. Also, there is a lack of young people going into farming. Brigham noted that the average age of a Columbia County farmer is 57. Younger people are afraid of the regulatory structure and do not go into farming.

Martin said that climate change is also a problem. Kelly said that these programs can inform state agencies about the effects of their regulations. Brigham said that in a workplace is there value in stating threats, regardless of nature. Evan stated that Thurston County plan is a five element plan: Water rights, regulatory issues, hard infrastructure, soft infrastructure. Helps identify who's already doing things to improve ag viability. Brigham asked for clarification regarding ag viability goals: Under the statute, do we need to have verifiable goals and benchmarks? Evan replied that VSP has to show that it enhances ag viability and protects critical areas. Kelly added that it's more about identifying threats, such as infrastructure or erosion.

Schirman called for an end to discussion. Pull up website-frequently asked questions. He requested members to call those who did not attend our meeting.

Brigham reminded everyone that the next meeting will be July 13th. Robanske asked that the Planning Dept. try to group text everyone regarding meetings.

Schirman asked, "Marty, what did you hear tonight?" Hall replied, "I'm thinking about how you quantify ag viability." Schirman asked Brigham to give everyone an assignment for next time? Brigham said that we should list roadblocks that we can influence. Robanske said that it's great that a member of the Farm Bureau is on board, to help with identifying threats. Martin asked if Bruegman has looked at any reports regarding soils loss? Brigham noted that all programs done since 2011 provide credit towards our VSP goals. Bruegman said that one thing that will impact us is re-enrollment in CREP. Smaller landholders may not enroll. There will be a decline from 2011.

Schirman asked if there were any additional burning questions?

Meeting adjourned 7:11 PM.