



San Juan County Voluntary Stewardship Program Quarterly Work Group Meeting

Minutes

Wednesday, March 8, 2023

10:30-12 p.m.

Attendees: Pauline Chiquet, Laura Pitts, Paul Andersson, Dean Dougherty, Cathi Winings, Alex Richard, Faith Van De Putte, Bruce Gregory, Grant Carlton, Charlie Behnke

1. Introductions – Welcome and Introductions

2. VSP Joint Meeting (1/12) Recap

- Presentation Overview

Pauline Chiquet presented on behalf of the San Juan Islands Conservation District to report on the progress of the San Juan County Voluntary Stewardship Program. The presentation addressed state agencies and technical panel members to give an overview of monitoring efforts in place in the last year in preparation for the Five-Year Report due December 2025. San Juan County was one of eight VSP counties to present in person in Lacey. The county received very positive feedback on the presentation and the work of the county thus far. This was an important presentation following the Adaptive Management Process of 2020 to propel San Juan County forward in their implementation of VSP and demonstrates the improvements the county has made in the last few years.

The SJICD is working to include more county members into VSP conversations and has sent out resources for new planners at the county to begin to assimilate some of the information. Grant Carlton will act as a liaison between the VSP Work Group and the county.

- WSCC VSP Updates

WSCC will be requiring a monitoring plan for all VSP counties (to be submitted by January of 2024). Accompanying this request is a series of trainings in March in addition to a Monitoring Plan Guide to inform plan development. In light of the Five-Year Report, a new reporting app is being developed, allowing for more flexibility in submission format and accounting for the various Adaptive Management Plans. Field training sessions are being planned for Biology Technical Note 14, a habitat assessment tool used in the Adaptive Management Plan. Discussion surrounding an outreach symposium is also underway.

3. Adaptive Management Plan Progress Report

- Implementation: Individual Stewardship Plan (ISP) updates

Four ISPs have been completed this quarter (2 Orcas, 1 Lopez, 1 San Juan). One ISP on San Juan is underway. Fifteen landowners are on the waitlist for an ISP. Many of the current ISPs are centered on farms with livestock in priority watersheds, as the SJICD depletes a grant from DOH NEP focused on livestock.

Funding has also been acquired from the Sustainable Farm and Fields Grant (SFF), which will allow for technical assistance in relation to [climate-smart practices](#). These practices are being incorporated into current plans.

- GIS: GIS intern work

The main focus of GIS work recently has been to complete the baseline dataset using High Resolution Change Data (HRCd) provided by WDFW. Work has centered around identifying where areas of change intersect with agricultural lands and critical areas, as well as class 'e' soil intersections with streams and their buffers.

The District is working with an intern to facilitate this work, especially as new HRCd datasets become available. The goal is to incorporate the latest data into the upcoming Five-Year Report. Details on methods used for HRCd data sets can be found here: <https://hrcd-wdfw.hub.arcgis.com/pages/methods>

- Outreach: BMP survey results, raffle, and next steps

The BMP Survey came to a close at the beginning of the year. A raffle drawing was held for a water meter, soil tests, and pasture sticks. Winners have been notified, and awards have been distributed. The District will fill any known gaps in the survey by directly contacting producers. SJICD will populate an existing StoryMap website with BMPs from landowners who have expressed approval as an effort to highlight the work being done in the county.

- Monitoring/Reporting: HRCd data; acquisition of new CRM tool

The District has purchased a subscription to Quickbase, a data management software used to track contact information, BMPs, and monitoring assessments for landowners. This tool will be used to streamline reporting.

A plan for Stream Visual Assessment Protocols (SVAP) is underway for Spring 2023. The District has hired an intern to digitize the assessment through Survey123 to improve field accessibility, mapping, and monitoring/reporting for the future.

The first SVAP will be conducted in mid-March on a stream reach on Orcas at JB Farm. Charlie Behnke noted that the Land Bank is interested in collecting more water quality testing in the future, including testing at False Bay Creek. Paul discussed the District's history with conducting

these types of samples and mentioned the logic behind the District conducting such work again in the future, should funding become available.

A report on False Bay Creek water quality testing, conducted by Wendell Raymond, UW Friday Harbor Labs research scientist, is being finalized over the next few months and will be available for public consumption.

4. 2023 Biennial Report

- Review of 2021 Biennial Report in preparation for submitting 2023 report (due August 2023)

The 2023 Biennial Report will be the third biennial report, following a report in 2019 and 2021. The purpose of the report is to provide the status of plans and accomplishments to the county and to the WSCC. This report is different than the Five-Year Report, that specifically reports on progress towards goals, benchmarks, and metrics used in monitoring to determine if the county is meeting its goals of protecting and enhancing critical areas on farmland while maintaining agricultural viability. The biennial report asks VSP counties to report on eight metrics, which are:

- i. The protection and enhancement of critical areas within the area where agricultural activities are conducted;
- ii. The maintenance and improvement of the long-term viability of agriculture;
- iii. Reducing the conversion of farmland to other uses;
- iv. The maximization of the use of voluntary incentive programs to encourage good riparian and ecosystem stewardship as an alternative to historic approaches used to protect critical areas;
- v. The leveraging of existing resources by relying upon existing work and plans in counties and local watersheds, as well as existing state and federal programs to the maximum extent practicable to achieve program goals;
- vi. Ongoing efforts to encourage and foster a spirit of cooperation and partnership among county, tribal, environmental, and agricultural interests to better assure program success;
- vii. Ongoing efforts to improve compliance with other laws designed to protect water quality and fish habitat; and
- viii. A description of efforts showing how relying upon voluntary stewardship practices as the primary method of protecting critical areas does not require the cessation of agricultural activities.

This Work Group meeting is the second to last meeting before the report is due. The SJICD will take the first steps by the next meeting to put together an outline based on the 2021 Biennial Report.

Action Item: Pauline to publish a collaborative document outline with the above eight questions to gather initial feedback from the Work Group. SJICD to initiate next steps in populating responses to all prompts, internally among staff and through other local committees and work groups.

- Ag Viability Study: Updates on survey

A large component of the 2023 Biennial Report is Ag Viability. Questions from previous agricultural viability surveys (2017 and 2020) were reviewed in preparation for a new survey to take place this spring. Input was requested from several organizations including the SJICD, the Ag Guild, ARC, and the Food Systems Team. Faith Van De Putte is in contact with a consultant who will publish the survey questions and conduct a report based on results.

Action Item: Faith to send final questions to the Work Group and coordinate with the consultant to publish the survey.

- Climate Change Reporting: Synching with county's larger efforts

The SJC Climate Sustainability Committee is meeting to develop a climate change plan for the county. The VSP Work Group will utilize many of the recommendations developed in this plan as part of VSP reporting efforts. Many of these efforts will be combined with work being done through the District with climate-smart practices through SFF.

Data pulled from the ag census is also being used to develop a greenhouse gas (GHG) inventory. The Climate Sustainability Committee is seeking more data to assess climate change and agriculture. Faith asked the group if questions specifically related to climate change could be added to the Agricultural Viability Survey. The group decided to add two questions asking the impacts and challenges of climate change on farms, in addition to specific practices being used to mitigate these effects.

Action Item: Pauline and Faith to meet to refine these new question additions to the survey.

5. Budget Updates/Funding Outlook (Paul)

- VSP budget depletion schedule through June 30, 2023 and budget revisions for new grant cycle beginning July 2023

The VSP contract is up for renewal in July for \$234,000 over two years. The CD has begun discussions on budget and specific line items to determine which line items can be removed, consolidated, or changed to reflect program needs this cycle. The District anticipates proposing an increase in ISP development, an addition of biennial and monitoring report-writing funds, an increase in Work Group coordination, an increase in outreach, a reduction in some county line items, and a removal of VSP Capital Funds (to avoid redundancy with larger VSP funds available through the Commission). The VSP Work Group will be meeting once more before the VSP budget is finalized with the county. The budget will not exceed \$234,000, so all changes will take place within that amount.

- Sustainable Farm & Fields (SFF) grants received - \$26,000 for technical assistance in prescribing climate smart practices and \$17,000 in developing a climate-smart farm plan template

The District received awards for two subgrants as part of the Sustainable Farm and Fields grant, one for technical assistance and another for the development of a climate-smart template in conjunction with Snohomish CD. These grants will allow the incorporation of NRCS climate-smart practices into current and future plans. Climate-smart plans will either serve as a stand-alone plan or may be incorporated into ISPs.

6. VSP Project Funding

- VSP Cost Share Project approval request: Minnow Creek Hay Farm Bridge

The project was proposed and received unanimous approval from the Work Group to move forward in the application submission process.

An update was provided on a previous project proposal (Lopez Hill Farm). Contractor issues have delayed this project, but the application may still be considered for future funding rounds.

- Formation of a subcommittee for approval of VSP projects

Given the increased interest in cost share and VSP funds, specifically, the CD proposes the formation of a subcommittee to approve project proposals. The CD is developing an internal system for project prioritization and ranking and is asking for Work Group members to join a subcommittee to assess projects that have gone through this process and may require additional input before being put forth to the larger Work Group for approval. The CD proposes meeting once a quarter before Work Group meetings.

Charlie Behnke expressed interest in joining the subcommittee, if his staff resources allow, and cited the potential need to recuse himself of any voting on projects that may concern the Land Bank.

Action Item: SJICD staff to begin developing VSP-specific scoring criteria to share to the group. Pauline to send an email to the Work Group requesting additional members for the subcommittee.

7. Action items from previous meetings

- San Juan County Council presentation – VSP update and new Work Group member appointment

Paul Andersson presented an overview of VSP to the county council and sought approval for four new Work Group members and one role change for an existing member. All members were appointed, and the presentation was very well received. Additional VSP resources are being sent to county members to further engage planners with the VSP process. The 2023 VSP Work Group roster is approved as follows:

Cathi Winings, SJI Conservation District
Charlie Behnke, SJC Land Bank
David Williams, San Juan County Planning Department
Faith Van De Putte, Midnights Farm
Kathy Morris, West Beach Farm
Paul Andersson, SJI Conservation District
Vicki Heater, SJI Conservation District Board

Byron Rot, San Juan County Resident
Dean Dougherty, San Juan Preservation Trust
Grant Carlton, San Juan County Manager's Office
Laura Pitts, SJI Conservation District
Pauline Chiquet, SJI Conservation District

- Riparian shovel-ready project updates

Charlie Behnke spoke on behalf of the Land Bank for the False Bay Preserve project. The Land Bank will likely be declining funds for fencing along False Bay Creek. Conversations surrounding the recent CWAC letter to the Land Bank are taking place. The Land Bank is aware of ongoing issues and will work to give the current lessee one year to find another property to graze. Further discussions and decisions will continue to take place.

8. Other updates and next steps

- Ag Summit Recap

Over 150 attendees gathered at this year's Ag Summit on March 3rd and 4th. The CD hosted five workshops, centered on rotational grazing, wetlands grazing, soil health, managing water, and irrigation. Positive feedback has inspired continued conversations.

- Beginning Farmer and Rancher Grant Report

This was not discussed due to a lack of time.

- April 11th VSP advisory member site visit

SJICD will be hosting four members of the Technical Advisory Committee on April 11th. Members will have a chance to visit three projects on San Juan Island in conjunction with the Land Bank and Preservation Trust.

- VSP 101

The WSCC will be hosting a VSP 101 symposium on May 4th for Work Group members interested in learning more about the program. There will be a stipend available. Please contact Pauline Chiquet if you are interested in attending.