



San Juan County Voluntary Stewardship Program Quarterly Work Group Meeting Notes

Tuesday, December 5th, 2023
10:30-12 p.m.

Attendees: Pauline Chiquet, Maggie Long, Paul Andersson, Vicki Heater, Faith Van De Putte, Charlie Behnke, Dean Dougherty, Grant Carlton, Roger Bairstow, Jessa Madosky, Susan Eshelman

Absent: Kathy Morris, Cathi Winings, Laura Pitts

1. Welcome – Welcome and Introductions

- The group welcomed Roger Bairstow, owner of 4th Seeds Farm on Orcas; Jessa Madosky, land use planner at the County Department of Community Development; and Susan Eshelman with the County Department of Environmental Stewardship, filling in for Tyler Davis.
- Pauline directed new members to the Work Plan, Adaptive Management Plan, and 2020 5-year Report on the District's webpage.

2. Work Plan & Adaptive Management Plan Progress Report

- Implementation:
 - 3 ISPs were completed this quarter, two on San Juan and one on Orcas with additional plans in progress on Orcas.
 - 22 Landowners are on the waitlist to receive an ISP.
 - 14 ISPs have been completed in 2023 covering 340 acres and recommending 176 best management practices, this exceeded the district's goal of 12 ISPs per year.
 - 41 unique landowners received technical assistance this year.
 - 6 cost share projects implementing 7 BMPs were funded with over \$100,000 awarded this year.

- Monitoring:

Effectiveness monitoring looks at how practices are protecting or enhancing critical areas and takes place at the watershed and county levels. A monitoring plan is a new VSP requirement and will identify when data is gathered by who and how often, and how the monitoring data relates to the goals and objectives in the Adaptive Management Plan.

Current tools for effectiveness monitoring include two field-based measurements and one remote method:

- NRCS Biology Technical Note 14 is a field tool that evaluates wildlife habitat quality in various agricultural land use types.
- The Stream Visual Assessment Protocol (SVAP) is a rapid field assessment tool that uses visual indicators to assess riparian habitat and water quality .
- Remote methods use GIS as a tool for effectiveness monitoring, and include the use of High Resolution Change Detection data to detect land cover change, and the use of aerial imagery to measure changes in stream buffer widths on “class e” soils.

Vicki asked if GIS data or new tools can be used to analyze wetland health. Susan noted that the County is working to update maps but that we don’t have the data for such assessments yet.

3. Monitoring Plan

- WSCC Monitoring Plan Overview:

The commission will be requiring monitoring plans from all VSP counties by July 2024. Monitoring plans were not required previously and there is a lack of consistency across VSP counties with regards to monitoring. The mandate comes with additional funding for the development and implementation of long-term monitoring plans.

Pauline briefly went over the commission document for what is required in a monitoring plan. The district has already begun putting together an outline, which will be shared at the next work group meeting in March, and a full draft for discussion at the July meeting. The plan will outline what tools will be used, who will collect data and how often, and how monitoring data relates to the goals and objectives outlined in the adaptive management plan. The District has been in discussion with agency partners on how best to use these tools.

In the first 5-year report submitted in 2020, the county determined that it did not have the monitoring capabilities or sufficient baseline data to determine if we were meeting the goals and objectives outlined in the original work plan. This triggered an adaptive management revision to the Work Plan and puts us in a better position moving forward. The next 5-year report is due December 2025. The District anticipates additional adaptive management may be needed as we develop the monitoring plan and identify new tools.

The data suggests that we are making improvements in the second 5-year period and are not at risk of failing out of VSP. The voluntary approach is well received by landowners and we still feel that VSP is a good fit for San Juan County.

Roger asked how impact to critical areas is considered when determining which projects to fund. Impact to critical areas is one factor determining which projects to fund but is not the only deciding factor. Other factors include “ag viability”, project and landowner readiness, and others identified in a comprehensive scoring process administered by SJICD.

- Stream Visual Assessment Protocol (SVAP):

To track changes in stream health over time, streams that intersect with agricultural lands will be mapped by stream reach and watershed, and assessed using the SVAP rapid assessment tool. Surveys will occur every five years on lands where landowner approval is granted to conduct the field survey. Much of this is already outlined in the adaptive management plan.

- Wetlands Monitoring:

Pauline talked about the Department of Ecology’s new Wetland Rating System and its potential to replace Tech-Note 14 assessments which is inadequate for wetland monitoring, but up to this point has been the best tool available to the District. New tools were discussed by state and federal agencies at a recent VSP Wetlands Monitoring [webinar](#).

4. Budget Updates/Funding Outlook

VSP operates on a 2-year contract, the new biennium began July 1, 2023. The VSP capital funding pool, separate from the 2-year contract, was depleted recently with very little notice that funds were running out. A reappropriation of funds is expected to make nearly \$1mm available in early 2024. The District expects to have applications ready to submit as soon as funding is announced. Project funding also remains available through NRCS, WSCC Shellfish and other sources in varying capacities.

5. VSP Capital Project Funding

SJICD staff proposed two new projects for VSP Capital funding when money becomes available. Project worksheets were presented for both.

The process of approving and awarding VSP Capital funding for projects in San Juan County was reviewed: Projects seeking VSP capital funds require Work Group approval. The Commission reviews proposals on the second Tuesday of every month, decisions are released 2 weeks after review. The County receives the funds and then reimburses the landowner. There are no legal ramifications if proof of performance as outlined in the cost share contract is not being met; however, it can affect future fundability for the landowner.

Proposed projects included:

i. Saturn's Return Farm – Irrigation Efficiency

This project was presented to the work group for approval with a preliminary budget estimate based on a similar system being installed on New Hannah Farm. The project is linked to the Critical Aquifer Recharge Area (CARA) critical area designation and water quantity resource concerns. The proposal will be updated to clarify how many acres will be irrigated with the new system and how many acres are currently hand watered.

Vicki brought up the possibility of metering Garrison Creek to track water usage and suggested all future irrigation projects require sharing water usage data. Metrics on water use savings could be added to the proof of performance requirements in future contracts. Agricultural water use is the largest knowledge gap regarding water use in the County. Roger voiced the concern that farmers may be sensitive to share data on water usage for which they may not have water rights. This irrigation project is unlikely to exceed the 5000 gal/day exemption, a water right would only be needed to irrigate with surface water. Landowners are in the process of acquiring water rights for an existing stock pond on the property.

ii. Midnight's Farm – Heavy Use Area

Faith provided an overview of the project which is linked to water quality resource concerns. Dean expressed support for the project for its contribution to ag viability. The proposal will be updated to include information on how the woodchips produced on Midnight's Farm address resource concerns on other farms where they are applied as mulch and as bedding in livestock heavy use areas.

Paul noted that the cost estimate will likely go up in the final proposal but not substantially. He also noted that state statute allows the District to award cost share funds to its board members.

Both projects were approved by all present Work Group members (Faith abstaining from the Midnight's Farm vote) and will be submitted for Commission review.

6. Follow-ups

- Work Group Membership: New member appointments need to be made by County Council and are proposed to Council by the Work Group. Recruitment of additional Work Group members is expected to continue, with a focus on private landowners. Pending new members at this time include:
 - i. Tyler Davis, San Juan County Environmental Stewardship
 - ii. Jessa Madosky, San Juan County Department of Community Development
 - iii. Roger Bairstow, 4th Seed Farm

Attachments to Agenda:

- *Saturn's Return Farm – Irrigation Efficiency Project Proposal*
- *Midnight's Farm – Heavy Use Area Project Proposal*
- *Monitoring Plan Outline Framework*