



San Juan County Voluntary Stewardship Program

Quarterly Work Group Meeting

Meeting Notes

Tuesday, June 4th, 2024

Attendees: Pauline Chiquet, Dean Dougherty, Charlie Behnke, Faith Van De Putte, Tyler Davis, Morgan Krueger, Roger Bairstow, John Latimer, Cathi Winings, Laura Pitts, Maggie Long

1. **Welcome** – Welcome and Introductions

The group welcomed Morgan Krueger from WDFW who was in attendance for Monitoring Plan support.

2. **Monitoring and Adaptive Management Plan Context**

In light of the new Monitoring Plan draft and Adaptive Management Plan presented to the group before this meeting, Pauline gave context on the process of San Juan County Work Group's first Adaptive Management Plan. The first Adaptive Management Plan was developed in 2021 after the Work Group determined through the first five-year report in 2020 that the county had failed to meet its goals and benchmarks. The Work Group determined that the benchmarks and metrics did not sufficiently address the stated goals; the failure was not necessarily linked to a failure to protect critical areas on agricultural land, but more of an inability, given the structure of the goals and benchmarks as well as the format of the 2020 five-year reporting platform, to report on protection and enhancement metrics as written.

The 2021 Adaptive Management Plan addressed these concerns by distinguishing between protection and enhancement goals and breaking each down into implementation vs. effectiveness monitoring. The plan also clarified its definitions of protection and enhancement and developed clear benchmarks with quantitative/quantifiable metrics.

3. **Monitoring Plan First Draft**

The group discussed the first draft of the Monitoring Plan.

- Data sources:

The Conservation District is the technical service provider for San Juan County VSP. Many of the activities reported on are implemented through the District; the District may also have access to some additional county and external data sources for monitoring and reporting on implementation and effectiveness goals:

- i. Internal (District) data sources include:

- Site visit reports
- BMP Implementation Survey metrics
- Completed cost share projects
- Spatial analyses such as High Resolution Change Detection (HRCD) and class 'e' buffer data
- Field protocol data from Stream Visual Assessment Protocols (SVAP), Wetland Rating System (WRS), and Biology Technical Note-14 (TN-14)

ii. External sources (as available) include:

1. Other completed restoration projects
2. NRCS EQIP completed projects
3. Water quality in-stream sampling

Cathi mentioned that the Monitoring Plan outlines using three SVAP questions as a proxy for water quality sampling when the latter is unavailable.

Further, EQIP data will be made available through the Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC), but data may not encompass the parcel scale, which will bring up a question that the Work Group has previously discussed on how to link these practices to critical areas. Pauline noted that some assumptions will need to be made about practices that serve specific critical areas and that, at minimum, these can be linked to resource concerns. The question of determining which critical area each practice addresses will also need to be addressed in the BMP Implementation Survey -- Pauline will add language to acknowledge this in the monitoring plan and to reference the list of practices contained in the 2021 Adaptive Management Plan. This table will likely be absorbed into the Monitoring Plan and taken off the new Adaptive Management Plan.

- Schedule: Introduction of new five-year rotational monitoring schedule

A new five-year rotational monitoring schedule was introduced in order to streamline monitoring by watershed. The cycle began in 2023 with several SVAPs conducted in the West Sound watershed. This year (2024) marks the second year in the cycle, with a focus on parcels within the False Bay watershed. Outreach efforts targeted seventeen landowners in that watershed this year. Six SVAPs were conducted as a result. Several other mapped streams within the watershed were examined and found to be more resemblant of ditches, precluding them from receiving an SVAP assessment. These reaches will instead receive a Wetland Rating System assessment.

With Laura receiving training for the WRS in May, the District now has the capacity and technical expertise to conduct wetland assessments. Given the wet spring this year, it may still be possible to conduct a number of these assessments within the False Bay watershed this spring or late this fall, as this assessment is less sensitive to water levels than the SVAP.

The group discussed the potential to switch the Agricultural Viability Survey to a five-year cycle as well (currently the survey is conducted every three years), matching timing with the ag census data (the next census period covers 2023-2028 and will be available 2029) and focusing ag survey on metrics not covered by the census.

- Baseline Data Establishment:

The date of inception of VSP, July 2011, is used as the baseline date for reporting. In some instances, conditions before 2011 can be reported on, for example, in spatial tools such as HRCD through which datasets exist before 2011, and in cases where landowners can self-report on conditions pre-2011. However, in many other cases, data does not exist to identify conditions before 2011. In these cases, i.e. for field protocols, baseline conditions are still being established with current testing. These baseline dates will be established at least partially by 2028, after the completion of the first full five-year monitoring cycle. For these field protocols, the baseline date will be recorded as January 1, 2028.

- Participation Monitoring:

Participation monitoring has not been identified as its own category of monitoring until now. The new Monitoring Plan discusses participation monitoring as a means of tracking interest in stewardship and demand (set against capacity to meet demand). While this is an important category to track, the District has not in recent years been in a position where capacity outweighs demand for stewardship assistance. Participation monitoring will track metrics such as cooperators on the ISP waitlist and survey respondents to ensure active participation of cooperators. This remains the least developed monitoring category.

- Water Quantity Monitoring:

Tyler asked about the incorporation of water quantity monitoring into the plan. Pauline mentioned that monitoring is difficult, as not much is known about the quantity of water in the aquifer. The following points were made:

- i. The County completed a Phase 1 assessment to assess the available quantity of water in the aquifer. Phase 2 has yet to be completed, and water quantity remains a huge unknown but will be very important in the future.
- ii. Water meters were identified as one means of measuring usage.
 1. 95% of wells on San Juan Island do not have meters, according to Mauldin's well services.
 2. The CD has previously incentivized the use of water meters and will continue to do so. Many cooperators have also expressed interest in sharing this data with the CD.
- iii. The 2018 Work Plan contained a goal on protecting groundwater resources that support ag and balance competing needs. It was removed because there were no benchmarks to measure the goal; there were plans to include a similar goal for ag viability but this has not happened yet.

- Stream Monitoring:

The group discussed the distinction between perennial vs. seasonal streams, and Morgan and Tyler clarified that both are classified as fish and wildlife habitat conservation critical areas for the following reasons:

- i. Seasonal streams can still support salmonids migration between refugia/primary stretches.
- ii. VSP has the ability to address fish passage barriers that may make possible in the future the presence of fish in upper reaches of streams where fish are not found presently.
- iii. The best available science from WDFW is also moving away from the distinction of fish-bearing vs. non-fish bearing streams, given the researched impact of upstream effects on downstream reaches.

- Ongoing Adaptive Management:

Pauline mentioned that the purpose of the Monitoring Plan is to internally serve the Work Group in carrying out all monitoring activities. As a result, the plan is subject to ongoing adaptive management as tools are modified and practices are refined. Though the plan that will be submitted in July will fulfill the requirements of the Commission for a monitoring plan, work is already underway to refine systems linked to agricultural viability, HRCD and other spatial analyses, as well as documenting past rationales for establishing current metrics. The District will release updated versions of the Monitoring Plan as these concerns are addressed.

4. Ag Viability

RCW specifies “maintaining and improving the long-term viability of agriculture” as a goal of the VSP.

- Defining Ag Viability:

The group had a large discussion on how the Work Group defines agricultural viability and what the implications are for San Juan County. Agricultural viability is the least defined “critical area” by the Commission, and the Commission is still developing guidance on how to measure agricultural viability.

In discussing ag viability and attempting to reconcile goals and benchmarks from the 2018 Work Plan with the 2021/2024 Adaptive Management Plan, it became clear that there was a need to redefine goals and benchmarks for the current Monitoring Plan and Adaptive Management Plan. The following points were made:

- i. The Work Group is still establishing a framework for measuring ag viability and is currently using the Ag Viability Survey to do so. The Group questioned the use of this survey when sample size is so low and perhaps not very representative. A question was raised on whether the survey is indeed the best use of resources to answer the question of viability.
- ii. Faith mentioned that the Ag Census may be a more reliable data source, though the farms represented in the ag census data (commercial) vs. through the survey (commercial and non-commercial) raised the question of whether both data sets are indeed needed to paint a full picture of ag viability.
- iii. Faith is part of the Puget Sound Partnership which is also looking at defining ag viability over the next year. Faith offered to can share insights from the meetings.
- iv. Pauline asked if the Food System Plan might also be a good place to look for inspiration in developing new goals and metrics for ag viability. Faith will look into this and see if there are goals that align.
- v. Ag viability is better represented in the county through cultural measurements rather than financial measurements. For example, many farmers in the county do not rely on their farms for income, and there may be better metrics than financial elements to paint the picture of agricultural viability and capturing homestead production within the framework of ag viability. The group discussed the need to expand the definition of ag viability beyond economics to look at supporting structures – access to markets, infrastructure, supporting services, etc. One measurement that may approximate economic information while considering other factors is a question on the *value* of products produced, rather than dollars of products sold. Points were also made on the economics of farm operations vs. the economics of stewardship.
- vi. Some information related to ag viability can be captured through implementation monitoring tools – BMP Implementation Survey and cost share projects- which provide insight on farm infrastructure.
- vii. Other information can be gleaned outside of the survey.

The group identified a need for the formation of a subcommittee. Faith, Roger, and Pauline have indicated interesting in joining and will meet in the next week to revise the ag viability goals and benchmarks.

5. Adaptive Management Plan (AMP)

The 2024 AMP is very similar to the 2021 AMP with the addition of new tools (WRS to replace TN-14 in wetlands), a column specifying which assessment tools are used to measure each benchmark, and further clarification on baseline conditions.

- Quantitative Benchmarks: Currently there are very few quantitative benchmarks in the AMP. The following questions were raised:
 - i. Are quantitative metrics needed? These were initially added at the request of the Commission upon review of the first Adaptive Management Plan.
 - ii. How do we choose quantitative targets? The example of 75% of wetland BMPs was raised, and its origins were questioned. Cathi responded by saying it was a rather arbitrary number, perhaps worth examining more closely. Maggie and Pauline will look into the data to see how closely the current data meets the metric of installing wetland BMPs on 75% of ISP parcels with wetlands, to determine if the 75% does in fact make sense, and if it might also translate to riparian areas.
 - iii. Should the group aim to include more quantitative metrics? Do all critical areas need them? Cathi clarified that quantitative metrics only exist for enhancement goals and not protection goals. Therefore, while meeting these goals is encouraged, it is not required for the success of the program, as the program's success hinges upon the fulfillment of protection *or* enhancement goals.

6. Follow-ups

- Work Group Membership: New members were approved for appointment by County Council in April:
 - i. Tyler Davis, San Juan County Environmental Stewardship
 - ii. Jessa Madosky, San Juan County Department of Community Development
 - iii. Roger Bairstow, 4th Seed Farm
 - iv. John Latimer, Seagate Farm
- Agricultural Viability Survey: Data interpretation is underway. A preliminary data analysis was sent to the group and briefly discussed in this meeting. More information and discussion will occur at a later date, as the group will soon be looking to draft a more final report for the Ag Viability Survey, which will depend on many of these metrics.

7. Action Items

1. Pauline to send out an internal version of the 2024 Adaptive Management Plan which highlights the changes made from the 2021 plan
2. Work Group members to submit comments on the Monitoring Plan and Adaptive Management Plan by June 13th
3. The newly formed Ag Viability subcommittee to meet for the first time to review ag viability goals and benchmarks and create a new table for the 2024 Adaptive Management Plan
4. Pauline to send an updated Monitoring Plan following the meeting of the Ag Viability subcommittee and creation of new ag viability goals and benchmarks