



San Juan County Voluntary Stewardship Program Quarterly Work Group Meeting Notes

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

Attendees: Laura Pitts, Pauline Chiquet, Cathi Winings, Paul Andersson, Tyler Davis, Grant Carlton, Bernard Cowen, Maggie Long

1. Welcome – Welcome and Introductions

- The Work Group welcomed Tyler Davis from the San Juan County Department of Environmental Stewardship. Tyler will be joining future meetings as Byron Rot's (former Work Group member) replacement.
- The group discussed the Washington State Conservation Committee's (WSSC) and Ron Shultz's historical involvement in Work Group meetings. The Work Group seeks to continue to involve the WSSC in meetings and determined that, in addition to Bill Eller and Levi Keesecker, Alison Halpern may be the best point of contact for the agency moving forward following Ron's passing. Pauline will follow up with Alison.

2. Work Plan & Adaptive Management Plan Progress Report

- Implementation: Individual Stewardship Plan (ISP) updates and 2021-2023 biennium wrap-up on deliverables status

Three ISPs have been completed this quarter, with one on Lopez and two on San Juan, and two ISPs are underway, one on San Juan and one on Orcas. ISPs this quarter have taken place on vegetable farms and livestock operations. Eighteen landowners are on the waitlist to receive an ISP. Many of these landowners receiving ISPs are in the cost share queue.

- Mapping and Data Management:

Bernard Cowen, GIS lead at SJICD, presented on VSP mapping strategies in place at the District (see attached Mapping Presentation). He focused on critical area and agriculture intersections and mentioned that across the county there is a low percentage of interesections across all critical areas except for Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas, which are present in all ag parcels on the islands. Bernard also discussed using High Resolution Change Detection (HRCD) data as an effectiveness monitoring strategy to track acres of change on ag land, including impervious and semi-impervious surfaces gain and canopy cover loss. Bernard has populated a table of acres and types of change in critical areas where agricultural activities are occurring. Bernard reported that the total acres of change from the 2011 baseline and 2021 are very small. Cathi noted that we the Work Group needs to look at average annual acres of change and mentioned that the new HRCD data for 2021-2023 is available. Finally, Bernard discussed Stream Visual Assessment Protocol (SVAP) surveys, of which 11

were completed in 3 watersheds (Eastsound, West Sound, and Garrison Bay). These have been mapped and tracked digitally. SVAP assessments will continue in different watersheds each year, and they will be repeated every five years in each location.

Maggie Long, farm planning intern, presented on data management for VSP (see attached Data Management Presentation), particularly related to implementation monitoring. She mentioned SJICD is using a CRM tool called Quickbase, which allows for tracking of customers, projects, and Best Management Practices (BMPs). She showed several examples of customizable reports on tables used in preparation for the Biennial Report. These tables included the number of BMPs prescribed per year and the units of each practice installed. Maggie also demonstrated how GIS is being used to track management of BMPs spatially and in conjunction with county farm parcel maps. Further she described the process by which SJICD is developing its VSP StoryMap to publicly feature Best Management Practices installed on the islands.

3. 2023 Biennial Report

- Ag Viability Study: Updates and discussion on recently completed survey

San Juan Islands Conservation District completed an Agricultural Viability Study in partnership with the Agricultural Resources Committee (ARC) and San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild. The study is the third of its kind in San Juan County, following a survey in 2017 and 2020. A consultant assisted in collecting data and drafting a report. The report is still undergoing textual edits, some suggestions of which were brought up by Work Group members, but the data has been aggregated and used to inform the VSP Biennial Report.

The Work Group reviewed the initial report and highlighted the following key sections:

1. Trends show increasing difficulty on behalf of producers to maintain their agricultural operations.
2. Some of the main challenges for producers are: the cost of and access to farm worker housing, the cost of infrastructure, and the cost of skilled farm labor, which are consist trends with prior surveys.
3. Fewer farms in 2023 than 2020 have reported on plans to expand or maintain their operation size. More farms plan to decrease the scope of their operations.
4. More respondents to the 2023 survey than in previous years indicated that they have developed or plan to develop a farm plan.

The survey paints a dire outlook of agriculture on the islands, and trends over the years indicate a slow decline in agricultural viability over the years.

While approximately one fifth of producers participated in the survey, there is still room for more producer engagement to better represent the voices of all farmers on the islands. The Work Group discussed other outlets for receiving feedback from producers and several members mentioned

listening sessions hosted by the ARC. These sessions are hosted every year on each island and provide a venue for farmers to voice their concerns.

This report will undergo further editing before it is released to the public. SJICD will present the findings of the report to the Agricultural Resources Committee and make the report available in other forums, with a goal of ultimately making a presentation to County Council (likely set to take place in January 2024).

- 2023 Biennial Report: Submission updates

San Juan County submitted its VSP Biennial Report on August 30, 2023. Eight questions formed the basis for this report, which focused on progress made throughout the biennium. The report featured case studies from farmers enrolled in VSP and highlighted key partnerships in the county to address agricultural viability in addition to compliance-related efforts.

The Agricultural Viability Study formed the basis of several questions in the report. In addition to the key findings mentioned above, the Biennial Report captured the following data from the study:

1. Farmer age, as captured by the results of the 2023 survey, is increasing in comparison to 2017 and 2020 and was highly represented in the 60s/70s range.
2. Many producers are seeking assistance on succession planning, and there is a gap between those who will be decreasing or ceasing their operation and those who already have a succession plan in place.
3. Current Use Farm and Agriculture (CUFA) tax designation numbers are almost identical to those in 2020.

4. Budget Updates/Funding Outlook

- Funding Sources: The District is pursuing many different funding opportunities through the Washington Conservation Commission and NRCS in the new biennium. These are:
 - i. VSP Capital—VSP is administering large amounts of funding to be used for cost share projects. This funding serves the implementation of practices that protect and enhance critical areas. Several projects have already been proposed for this funding opportunity, and one more was presented at this quarter’s meeting (see below for more details).
 - ii. Salmon Recovery Funding (SRF)—A SRF capital budget is currently funding projects serving the restoration of Garrison Creek. Another \$10mm in riparian funding is anticipated to be available in early 2024. SJICD intends to apply for this anticipated funding to expand future target riparian restoration watersheds.
 - iii. Forestry—Many ongoing discussions and funding opportunities are available for wildfire prevention projects. SJICD applied for funding for forest management and is awaiting the green light from a pending grant to move forward with forestry planning efforts. NRI funding will be used to support forestry cost share projects this biennium.

- iv. NRCS—NRCS has a variety of funding programs, including EQIP, CSP, CIG, and RCPP. These programs provide the opportunity to fund small and large scope projects across a range of priorities. Many times these programs can be used in tandem with traditional District-funded projects. In the future, SJICD will look to work in deeper collaboration with NRCS, both through referrals and through task orders to facilitate the distribution of these funds, as staff capacity allows.

5. VSP Project Funding

- VSP Capital project approval request: The following project was presented to the Work Group for approval:
 - i. 4th Seed Farm – Silvopasture and Prescribed Grazing Establishment: The project was presented to the VSP Work Group for approval with two budget alternatives, depending on the ability of the District board to approve a project above traditional CD thresholds. SJICD voting members are in alignment for the approval of this project. One non-SJICD voting member was present and presented his approval for the project. Charlie Behnke was not present at the meeting but commented on the proposal prior to the meeting with approval so long as the proposal is in line with the terms of the Land Bank’s active conservation easement onsite to preserve view corridors. The project will be put forth a final time to the larger Work Group. If no objections are received, the District will move forward with the project.

6. Other updates and next steps

- The Work Group is seeking new members. Due to the loss of two Work Group members last quarter (David Williams and Byron Rot) and waning farmer involvement, there are open spots available. The following names were discussed and approved for initial outreach as potential candidates:
 - i. Tyler Davis, San Juan County Environmental Stewardship (present at this meeting and willing to join the Work Group in the future)
 - ii. Sophia Cassam, San Juan County Department of Community Development (Grant to follow up with)
 - iii. Lovel Pratt, Friends of the San Juan (Paul to gauge interest from the new director)
 - iv. Amy Lum, Lum Farm (Pauline to follow up with)
 - v. Roger Bairstow, 4th Seed Farm (Since the Work Group meeting, Pauline has followed up with Roger, and he has expressed interest in joining)
 - vi. Christine Chan, New Hannah Farm (Pauline to follow up with)
 - vii. Jenny DeGroot, independent habitat biologist (Cathi to follow up with)
 - viii. Stephen Sullivan, farmer on Lopez (Pauline to follow up with)
- In order to fill more farmer spots, the group discussed opening up candidate outreach to all farmers who have received an ISP.
- The current VSP Work Group Roster is as follows:

Cathi Winings, SJI Conservation District
Charlie Behnke, SJC Land Bank

Dean Dougherty, San Juan Preservation Trust
Faith Van De Putte, Midnights Farm
Grant Carlton, San Juan County Manager's Office
Kathy Morris, West Beach Farm
Laura Pitts, SJI Conservation District
Paul Andersson, SJI Conservation District
Pauline Chiquet, SJI Conservation District
Vicki Heater, SJI Conservation District Board

Attachments:

- *Mapping Presentation*
- *Data Management Presentation*
- *2023 Biennial Report*
- *4th Seed Farm – Silvopasture and Prescribed Grazing Establishment Project Proposal*