Columbia County Voluntary Stewardship Program
Work Group Meeting Minutes
February 21, 2024, at 9:00 a.m.
Planning Department/Zoom

I. Call to Order
Work Group Chair Rick Turner called to order the regular meeting of the Columbia County VSP Work Group at 9:01 a.m. on February 21, 2024.

II. Attendance
Attendance: Rick Turner, Roland Schirman, Joy Eckhoff, Tom Schirm (WDFW), Marty Hall (County Commissioner), Aneesha Dieu and Kayla Nathanson (Conservation District staff), Dena Martin (County planning staff), Reid Camp (Cramer Fish Sciences)
Zoom: Sean Williams (WDFW)

III. Minutes
- Schirman moved to approve the February 7, 2024, minutes. Eckhoff seconded. All in favor.

IV. Cost Share
- **Cranmer Fencing Project (VSP 2024-01)**
  - Nathanson presented a revised application for a fencing project to keep livestock from accessing the South Touchet river to protect water quality and enhance vegetation. (The previous application included pasture fencing that the work group did not feel was protective of critical areas.)
  - The total budget is $5.375, with VSP covering 75% or $4,031 and the landowner covering the remaining $1,344.
  - The work group agreed that the revised project addressed their initial concerns and protects the riparian habitat.
  - *Schirman moved to approve the revised project as presented. Eckhoff seconded. All in favor.*
  - The applicant is encouraged to revise the estimate and submit a new application to include just the fencing along the river.

V. Discussion/Action Items
- Monitoring Plan
  - Reid Camp/Cramer Fish Sciences was in attendance to discuss the development of the Columbia County VSP Monitoring Plan required by the State Conservation Commission.
  - Dieu shared that the work group needs to develop a problem statement, goals and benchmarks. These should be developed using guidance from pages 24-31 in the VSP Watershed Monitoring Project Development Guide
  - Work group members discussed several related topics that included: history of conservation in Columbia County, areas of concern specific to the County, potential triggers for adaptive management and corresponding actions, and enhancements that can be shown through remote monitoring.
  - Work group members discussed changes seasonal changes, including temperature and rainfall. Camp asked if there is webmap data that could be captured to be helpful from an ag viability standpoint.
  - The group discussed negative changes in critical areas that are unrelated to producer stewardship, such as mudslides following forest fires and floods.
  - Dieu read a draft problem statement, for Camp to use as a starting point. The work group unanimously approved:

"Historically, Columbia County producers were early trendsetters in the land of conservation; assessing degraded ecosystems and evaluating and implementing practices to protect our natural resources. Practices over time have not been directly correlated to improving critical areas as there has not been an effective way to prove causation. Columbia County VSP Work Group seeks to address this disconnect by evaluating voluntary practices installed against monitoring data over time at a watershed scale to prove effectiveness."

- Camp stated that without tying projects to specific landowners, which we do not want to do, the plan would be unable to show causation, but could show correlation as related to BMP practices.
- Williams said that the web portal could be useful in identifying data gaps, which could then allow the SCC to work with legislators to provide funding that would allow agencies to fill those gaps and provide improved monitoring.
- Dieu suggested a relatively concise, easy-to-read, 10–15-page executive summary-style plan that would include appendices, to be developed later, to address different critical areas, monitoring methods, data gaps, adaptive management, etc. The appendices would continue to develop over time as information and needs are gathered and assessed.
- Dieu said she would like to bring the work group together in a couple of months to review the web data being collected.
- Martin asked Williams if the monitoring plans are being reviewed or approved by the SCC. Williams said there was not initially a formal review or approval requirement, but that Counties have expressed an interest in review, so that may change. Williams said that counties are welcome and encouraged to share draft plans with state agencies for support and review, even if there is no official review process.
- Dieu asked the work group about the "do something" level. That level can be addressed by education outreach, review on effectiveness of projects, investigation into the causation, etc. The work group agreed that the "do something" level responses should be kept broad so that they can be customized to fit the specific situation. The "do something" level should be based on degradation below the 2011 baseline.
- Work group members discussed the former practice of landowners within a known area of concern, gathering to discuss the problem and potential solutions. The practice has fallen to the wayside, largely due to the lack of area agronomists that would spearhead the meetings and brainstorming sessions. Turner feels producers are still willing to participate in voluntary practices, especially if they have input and buy-in in the process, especially if there is financial support.
- Camp suggested formalizing the idea of landowner meetings if data shows problem areas. The idea of working directly with landowners in the vicinity of an area of concern gives the power back to the landowners themselves to determine how best to address the issue.
- Camp said he feels he has the information he needs to develop a plan that will fulfill VSP requirements and then find ways to give the County power to make decisions, assess monitoring needs, and potentially request funding to fill data gaps.
- Camp will return in April to review the web map with the work group.
- The County needs to update its contract with Cramer Fish Sciences:
    - *Eckhoff moved to approve a contract with Cramer Fish Sciences, to complete a VSP monitoring plan by June 30, 2024, and a basic web map, at a budget not to exceed $30,000. Schirman seconded. All in favor.*

VI. Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held in April, with the date to be determined once the monitoring plan is available for review.

VII. Adjournment

Turner adjourned the meeting at 10:14 a.m.