

**WHITMAN COUNTY
VOLUNTARY STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM
MEETING
PUBLIC SERVICE AUDITORIUM
March 24, 2025
1:00 p.m.**

MEMBERS PRESENT:

**Jon Jones, Chair
Jeff Pittmann
Belsby
David Lange - Phone**

**Kim Weerts
Nancy**

Alan Thomson

STAFF : Brad Johnson, Palouse CD; Josh Larsen, Whitman CD; Maya Aune, Rock Lake CD; Josilyn Watson, Pine Creek CD; Elinor Huber, Clerk.

1:05 p.m. -Brad Johnson called the meeting to order. Introductions were made around the room. We have some new technical service providers, one with Rock Lake and one with Pine Creek. Thanks for joining us.

MOTION by Jeff Pittmann and seconded by Alan Thomson to approve the minutes from the June 13, 2025, meeting. Motion carried.

Kim Weerts - Nancy said that Larry Cochran's name was omitted from last month's minutes.

(Note from clerk- it appears that Nancy had different version of the minutes. His name was included in the original copy)

Brad Johnson - At the last meeting we were talking about the remaining monitoring funding in the budget for July 1, 2024, to June 30, 2025. On the second page that I handed out it shows all the different budget items that come to the County.

I just wanted to entertain an idea of what to do with that \$17,000 that we have unallocated. On the bottom of that page, it shows all the different required monitoring for the two year in the 5-year status report that was in the WC VSP work plan.

I'm open to questions, or ideas. What I am hoping for, what we talked about at the last meeting, was to use that to do a combination of all of this monitoring that is identified in the work plan and get that completed for the 2-year status report which then will be used in December for the 5-year report.

In the past, Ryan Boiling's crew with the research and monitoring program out of Palouse CD, had done most of that work for us, and we didn't get charged for it. So, this is helping them as they are doing that monitoring over the next three months, which is what I was hoping for. So, any questions, thoughts or ideas?

I know Jon at the last meeting you talked about putting another flow gauge in lower on the Palouse River, but there isn't enough money to do that. I called Ecology and their staff is already at 12 gauges, so we would have to put one gauge in plus another eleven and that is \$250,000 over the biennium.

We are given \$47,000 for a biennium, so, a new gauge is not in the works. I tried to look into that, but underneath that budget you can see what the 10-12 things that we are monitoring are. Turbidity, flow, temperature, fecals, and nutrients, all things that were identified in our work plan.

Jon Jones - To be clear are we looking, the \$17,000 has to go to (inaudible) and we can't, are we trying to come up with a new one?

Brad Johnson - Those are what we had in the work plan. Ok? If you have an idea of something else you wanted to see monitored, I would hope we would wait until July 1st, when we get the full \$47,000 because we need to need to meet these deliverables by, our 2-year status report is due in August and our 5-year report is due in January of next year.

We are trying to get everything in order for the 2-year and then for the 5-year. It is not that, if someone has an idea for monitoring, we can definitely entertain it and we can fund it, but I would wait until we get that new monitoring, in my opinion. I'm not a voting member but that's,

Jon Jones - We can't do all of these with the budget we have.

Brad Johnson - Yes, we can. If the \$17,000 is added to the Palouse Conservation District. Ryan is going to get going on that next week. He hasn't started on it. He has been doing some of the things. He got a chunk of some monitoring change, and he has been doing some work but then he will finish out everything with that. We can get it all done, definitely.

Jon Jones - That is really, that is good news. If we were going to pick one right now, I'd sure go for the temperature one because it is cheap and verifiable.

Brad Johnson - They are doing a ton, and I can't speak for the other districts in here, but I know with the RCPP we have a lot of temperature gauges out across the whole county. So, it's going to be pulling all that data together, running the model for the data pre-2021 and then post 2011 similar to what we did on the first 5-year report. So, it is basically just getting all the data that is out there.

We are not going to be doing any new monitoring with this money at this point. Like Kim and Nancy had always asked what the difference was when it came in from the State of Idaho into Washington. Looking at that, we are going to be looking at flow gauges and temperature.

A lot of the fecal coliform and nutrient stuff is off of Ecology's existing gauges. Taking that, re-running the data because we've had 4.5 years, almost 5 years' worth of data

collected on some sites. So, Ryan has, and when we get that in the 2-year report and the 5-year report, just like last time, we will show that to you.

Alan Thomson - So all this monitoring can be done with the \$17,000?

Brad Johnson - Yes.

Alan Thomson - Sounds like a good idea to go ahead and do it.

Jon Jones - Yes.

Brad Johnson- I would need a motion to allocate the \$17,000 to the monitoring that is in the work plan and then I would like that budget to be approved too, then, as well. The monitoring gets allocated to the Palouse Conservation District, Research and Monitoring program to complete what is listed in the work plan and then you approve the budget. That is also on that page.

MOTION by Jeff Pittmann and seconded by Alan Thomson to allocate the \$17,000 to the requirements of monitoring in the work plan. Any discussion? Motion passed.

Kim Weerts - So, the \$17,000 is basically going to just personnel gathering the information and putting it together?

Brad Johnson - Yes, correct. Any other discussion? The second thing is our budget. Again, just a formality to approve the budget through June 30, 2025, that was presented. The implementation budget was at \$83,345.05, the monitoring budgets, the remaining balances of these. Okay, so the original budget was \$240,000 for implementation, \$47,000 for monitoring, \$39,375 for the Broeckel cost-share.

Before we go to this motion, I think everyone, Alan, you sent out when the County got notice that we got a second cost-share project. Correct? That went out to the work group? So, the work group had approved two cost-shares.

Josh was able to get the Broeckel cost-share funding, and they lost the other one at the Commission, correct? So, just within a month and a half or so, they came back and said they found your application and said that it could be funded. This is outside money, the capital cost-share funding. So, the project was approved by this work group and Josh just got it. That is why there are two cost-shares on this document.

So, the implementation budget is what comes to us every biennium for \$240,000. This was the first biennium or the first time we had the monitoring money and then this was the first time we had cost-share projects. So, there is about \$357,625 for those four tasks for approval from the work group.

Kim Weerts - So, if the cost share money is outside money should it be included in the budget as a line item or should the budget be the budget and then subtotal and then be,

Brad Johnson - This is how the Commission tracks it. The way I have it in that spread sheet right there. I didn't see this until I saw it for the first time at our last meeting in June. Art was the one that wanted to make sure it was similar to what the County gets from the Commission, and this is how it shows up from the Commission.

This is what actually comes from the Commission, and I just put it on, so you can see, there are four items in the budget that come from the Commission. There is implementation, there is monitoring, and then the two cost-share projects.

Kim Weerts - Okay, it just seems strange to me that they would, included in our budget would be line items that are basically coming from a different funding source.

Brad Johnson - But it is coming from, so there are the operational funds, and the capital funds, and they are all coming to the County. So, there are two, there are two pots of funding that we are working with, but one contract comes to the County, and it is, Nancy is holding it right there, Kim, with those four-line items.

Kim Weerts - Okay, if that is the way it is. It just seems odd to me that it wouldn't be labeled, it is different.

Brad Johnson - I get it, Kim, because I didn't have it that way and then Art asked me to break it out.

Kim Weerts - That's fine.

Josh Larsen - Maybe I can clarify for Kim. So, it is how the Commission, essentially VSP, gets a grant. You have your base fund, and then the Commission is granting you more funds to do that cost-share of that project. So, all of our budgets from the Commission will look like that.

Say, I do a fire recovery project. I only ask for \$50,000 but then later down the road I ask for more because I have another landowner that needs money, and they just allocate that to the district.

Kim Weerts - Yes, I understand that. It just accounting-wise, it makes it look weird to me, but that's fine.

Jon Jones - Are you waiting for a motion? Can you restate what,

Brad Johnson - So the July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2025, budget in the amount of \$357,625.

MOTION by Jon Jones and seconded by Jeff Pittmann to approve the WC VSP budget for July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2025, in the amount of \$357,625. Motion passed.

Brad Johnson -The crazy thing is we approved the budget for the first year but now we are just making sure that everything has been approved. That's what, if I remember right,

that is what Art wanted to do, because initially we didn't have that cost-share when we approved the budget. The cost-share was approved by this group and then it came to us and so now this is just capturing it all in a motion if I'm recalling it exactly how Art wanted that done.

So, I just have a couple more informational pieces for folks here. I've been on a committee to update the 5-year status review. If you remember when we did our first 5-year review during Covid it came out to be over 1100 pages long. I don't remember if you remember reviewing it, but I still have nightmares about entering information into about 1100 pages worth of documents.

So, the Commission has had a committee together and we've been going over a new webpage form that hopefully will be going to cut that by 20%. I hope there will only be 20% of what it was before, so a couple hundred pages. I'm hoping it is less than that. They are going to give us more boxes for dialog to talk about what is going on in our County with what, concerning VSP.

It seems really a lot less clunky, a lot less redundancy, because when you talk about a stewardship action and what critical areas those possibly could protect or restore, they have taken a lot of our comments in. I hope it is going to be a lot easier. They are supposed to be, the consultant that was hired is supposed to be bringing all that stuff over.

They were hoping to have it all ready for our 2-year status review. They are not going to have that ready. It's due in August. We are getting closer but I'm hopeful for that September- October timeframe for me to get it in front of you to review before December, January. It will be a lot easier.

I've been spending quite a bit of time working with the Commission staff and others around the State to take a look at it and see how it is going. I wanted to give that update and then at the last meeting our plan, our monitoring plan, hadn't been fully vetted and there were no concerns with our monitoring plan as far as the Commission was concerned.

There is one part of it that talks natural resource investment, and I can't remember what CPPE is, but we talked about using that. It is not applicable for this NRCS practice and everybody that has it in their plan doesn't need to use it, because what we thought we could get out of it and what NRCS can give us out of it isn't the same. It doesn't work for VSP planning, critical areas, functions and values.

So, our monitoring plan that was put together that you guys approved, and we submitted it, it is golden, and we are using that to go forward for both our 2-year status report and our 5-year report. Those were the updates that I had.

I've said this quite a bit already, the 2-year report is due in August. I need help, everyone's working together on this. I need more participation in the action map. We need to get producers to fill out what they are doing at the farm level and then roll it up to the County level for what is happening there. I have a few people who have some interest, and I was hoping to have them already. The rain, hopefully, I sent out emails this morning to people.

Then you can see down below, May 25th there is a VSP Technical Panel and Statewide Advisory Committee in the Tri-cities. June 4th and August 6th there are some other meetings and I've been attending most of those just to keep up-to date with what is going on.

At our next meeting I hope to have Mike Potete with us. He took over for Bill Eller. You guys, we delt a little bit with Bill Eller, but Mike is the new coordinator for VSP, and he has been down here and met with Mark Storey and the conservation districts.

I'm really excited about what he brings to the table. He has some Ag background, really likes what we are doing with VSP, knows that our first 5-year plan was accepted by the four Technical Panel Members Commission. Department of Ag, Fish & Wildlife, and Ecology, so I hope to get four agrees on that this year as opposed to three agrees and a partial agree.

I'm open to questions and obviously, we've got some new staff that are learning about VSP, and I've appreciated, Maya, you could probably talk a minute what you are thinking with the website.

Maya Aune - Sure, the Rock Lake Conservation District is in charge of the VSP website so that since I've come on that has now become my responsibility. I've been working on the VSP website for just a little bit now, cleaning things up. There was some redundancy there, pages that didn't need to be in there anymore.

I guess from the work group's perspective, if you want to look at the website in the coming days, let me know if there are things that you would like to see, changes you would like to make, I'm the person that would be doing that. Mostly I'm just taking the information that is already there and cleaning it up, making it look a little bit prettier and easier to navigate for producers and anyone else who chooses to visit.

Brad Johnson - So, that is a good point. You probably don't have Maya's contacts so, when I get back, either this afternoon or in the morning, I'll make sure that you have access to Maya's contact information. Are you on Rock Lakes' CD, if they go to that website or if they go, you should put your contact information at the bottom of the VSP website.

Maya Aune - I will do that. The Rock Lake website is getting worked on as well. So, things are kind of messy at the moment, but I will make sure that you have my email.

Jon Jones - Are people accessing the website?

Maya Aune - Not particularly. I did look at the stats on that recently and I think most of the traffic was driven from me changing things around.

Brad Johnson - We get on that website too, with the producer to fill out the action map. Other than that, I know early on, they were asking about that, and James Schierman brought some information back. But I don't think over the course of the last 4-5 years we probably had that much other than the staff that was filling out the action map. Are you

able to see that? I'll send out the VSP website address. It's just Whitmancountyvsp.com, isn't it?

Maya Aune - That is the website.

Brad Johnson - So please take a look at that. This is our website. In the past, I know Art has always looked to make sure that within a week before the meeting it goes on this website. And the County, not to be confused, the County has a Whitman VSP page on their website. We post that we are having this meeting and then Maya posted it last week, so we got that one week's notice so that we are legal with our meeting requirements.

Maya Aune - So, I can tell you in the last three years, comparing 2023, 2024 and then of course, 2025 is going to be limited. We had about 601 views and 400 visits in 2023 and then in 2024 that went down to about 245 visitors, and 480 views on the website.

Jon Jones - Good information.

Maya Aune - So we could have a goal to improve via social media, which is also my draw at Rock Lake. So, I posted a social media post about this meeting, and I can continue to do things, make those better, make those VSP specific, driving people to the action map. Maybe that could help.

Jon Jones - I wonder if people understand VSP. I know it is hard to understand the whole concept. I wonder if just the landowner with just a couple acres on a stream or a landowner anywhere, if they are doing something good, we want to know about it.

Maya Aune - I was hoping to glean that from this meeting so I can better message it. I'm still learning as well. Any ideas you have about that, I am all game to hear because I want to make sure that I'm right. I'm married to a farmer and my husband farmer had no idea what this was, and he is still kind of confused. I know there are people out there who can benefit from this information.

Kim Weerts - Maybe we could also look at the mailings that we are sending out. We've had the same mailings since VSP's inception so it might be nice to change things up a little bit. In the mailing, it is kind of vague unless you know what VSP is. If we could target a little bit of a description maybe or?

Maya Aune - Yes, it requires a little snapshot of some verbiage that can quickly explain it to people.

Jeff Pittmann - Homeowner or landowner. It would cover everybody that way. (inaudible)

Maya Aune - Can I ask a question? My question is, what is the motivation for a farmer to want to do this? How do I convince my farmer husband who is very busy in the field right now, to sit down and do the action map? What is the benefit to them? I don't truly know.

Alan Thomson - That is an easy one. If you don't, you'll be hearing from me. It will be regulated through the County versus voluntary through VSP.

Brad Johnson - The biggest selling point that I've seen is just what Alan says. I don't like to say that we are going to the Growth Management Act but if we bail out of VSP, which we in no way shape or form are close, but the biggest benefit and again, I don't know own a stitch of ground in WC, so take this with a grain of salt.

The biggest thing is, if you are already doing good things and this is collecting it at the farm level, but it is rolled up at the county level to show the Legislature and environmentalists that critical areas function and value can be protected without the Growth Management Act and more regulation.

That has been well received, and again, it comes down to they have to trust us. More people have come in to visit with us after they have gotten to know us. The flourish meetings and you're telling them that what you are doing here fits VSP perfectly and I need to capture that.

But why, because the Legislature and environmentalists, mostly the environmentalists brought this about because they thought farmers and ranchers needed more regulation and needed to be told what to do, as opposed to this voluntary approach which is so much better. Anybody else have anything to add to that? Jeff, you filled out the action map right away. Jon, you filled it out, Kim and Nancy, we have on the action map.

Jon Jones - The reason I filled it out was because I was already doing those things through the government some kind of programing, so I knew exactly what it was. If I just had moved here from Texas I wouldn't have a clue, what can I do? I'm not affiliated with, no CRP, no CREPP, no cost-share anywhere, so I would be confused to get help with my septic system, something like that. There could be room in the VSP to help landowners with something like that. It may only be planning or designing but maybe some help.

Maya Aune - That would make sense, like you mention cost-share projects. Maybe it is appropriate to talk about this, you mention things like help, assistance, that can come in lots of forms. I'm asking so that I can write about it and produce things online for people to read. So, can you give me more examples of ways that people can benefit outside of just not being regulated?

Kim Weerts - I think it is more of a storytelling. I come at from the side that a lot of ranchers and cattlemen don't seek the money. They've done a lot of good things on their own and to me it is telling the story in WC about what good stewards we are of the land. I'd like to see it go that way. To me, it is a focus that is not pushing cost-share, and a lot of people are anti cost-share.

Jon Jones - That is what we are all about. We are trying to paint a good picture of what farmers and ranchers are doing. Sometimes urban people see the very worst part of farming. We've all seen that. We can drive through a country, and you think, "Wow what is that?" It can be a really bad thing. But not every rancher and farmer is like that.

Maya Aune - It's not the majority.

Jon Jones - No, it's not the majority but we want to shine a good light on what we are doing that is good.

Kim Weerts - Also, it is not just limited to farmers and ranchers. Anybody who has a little plot of land that is adjacent to a critical area can go on that map and explain what they are doing.

Brad Johnson - It is outside the cities. It is all private land outside of the cities in WC.

Alan Thomson - In the unincorporated areas of WC. It is understandable that landowners, farmers and ranchers would be a little bit reluctant to give up information on what they are doing. We know that. But if worse came to worse, and we off-ramped this program, then you are all going to be regulated by the GMA and that means your ranches and farms are going to be subject to our Critical Areas Ordinance.

Right now, agricultural is exempt from the Critical Areas Ordinance except in a floodplain. That is a big selling point right there. We are not trying to snoop on you guys or shop you to the Feds or the State. We just want to make sure that the critical areas are protected on a voluntary basis with the Ag lands.

Brad Johnson - One of the interesting things about the action map, and you and I can talk offline, too. I think this is good conversation to hear what they need for the, what they are looking for on the website and get their perspective on things.

But the action map, we've got 111 entries, which I meant to look before, I think we are up by at least 30 from the last time we did a 2-year report. I'll get those numbers for our next meeting.

But at the very end of the report the producer can make his entry private or public. And the private ones don't show up on the map, but they show up in our data. Then they are rolled up at the County level. We are asking these questions at the farm level, but we are never reporting or talking about just the farm level or partial level. Once people hear that, and they ask me, and I tell them that I need your data, I don't care if there is a pin on the map or not. I just need your data to roll it up at the County level.

We've got 802 steward actions from those 111 individual reports which are about 50/50 public and private. It is probably a little higher now because the last 4-5 have all been public or made private. I don't care if it is private or public, it's just, we just need that stewardship that is occurring like Kim said.

I have worked in three counties quite a bit and I know what goes on in Columbia and Walla Walla to some degree. There are a lot of things that go on in WC that are self-funded, and they are good stewardship. Those other counties, I would say it is probably more

cost-share that gets them to do what they are doing. In WC, it is a little bit different from the standpoint that people are doing things on their own.

Kim Weerts - It is easier to capture the stewardship that is being done with cost-share because it is physically public. So, it is trying to find a way to have those people who are not taking cost-share, share what they are doing. Share their story.

Brad Johnson - And David, I don't know that David can hear us, but David said, "VSP is the storybook, and the farmers and ranchers are the storytellers." We have kind of used that as our motto.

Jon Jones - Farmers and ranchers, both sometimes they are doing something good. They don't understand it is supposed to be good. Contour farming. I don't know anybody who doesn't do contour farming. I guess it is kind of changing a little bit, but it is a good way to change.

That's what people do, and they don't even think about it being something good. Crop rotation is another one. Proper crop rotation. We don't advertise it, so people when they look at the website, they think I'm not really doing anything. But they are. We need to pick that out some way. So, it is your job to do that, Maya.

Maya Aune - Yes sir.

Brad Johnson - David, do you have any comments on the website or the action map?

David Lange - (inaudible) The VSP program that the growers do, the main thing is they were able to (inaudible). VSP is like getting a BB gun and if we bail, then we fall under the Growth Management Act and being regulated like Alan said. It is important to report on the good things that we are doing anyway.

Brad Johnson - I'm not so sure that the last postcard might have already gone out. I'm going to try to find out where we are with that. But definitely going forward I'm going to lean on the other districts to help us come up with some innovative ways to do a snapshot, better descriptions, not be as vague. Those postcards you can't get much on them.

Kim Weerts - No, but changing it up, because I know about the program but every time I see it is, same thing.

Brad Johnson - What is interesting about those postcards is when I do reach out to a producer, they have seen them and they filed them, and they were going to get back to me and never did. So, I think we are doing better than what we think we are doing because we, you guys, the work group in my mind have done a great job.

You remember when we started, this will be a walk down memory lane for you, but we did radio ads. Remember radio ads? We spent \$25,000-28,000 on radio ads and that got the word out but when you talked to people, they didn't know what VSP was.

We did more here than anybody in Eastern Washington. I'm talking about Spokane, Lincoln, Adams, Whitman, Garfield, Asotin, Columbia, Walla Walla. We did more than anybody did, and our ads were heard in Garfield County. Because as you guys know, I work in Garfield County, and we were giving away prizes if you put into the VSP action map you were in a drawing. We had three prizes and the guys in Garfield County wanted to know where their prizes were. We don't have that down here. We've done a lot.

Kim Weerts - I think the postcards are good. I just think we need to change them up.

Brad Johnson - I agree. I didn't mean to say, I agree 100% with what is being said.

Kim Weerts - If you are going to attend some more meetings, Grain Growers, things like that, I think taking what Jon said and focusing on, that this is, "Tell me what you do. Go around the room and tell me what you do. Do you know that that is a stewardship?"

Brad Johnson - I had one producer, after he filled out the action map say, "I didn't know how much good I was really doing." I honestly got that response from somebody. So, you are absolutely right. I think it's just ingrained in what you do, right? When you are doing the right thing, you listen to the negative that is out there instead of focusing on the positive.

Kim Weerts - You just do what you normally do, and someone just needs to get that out there.

Brad Johnson - I can't thank David enough. I think VSP is the storybook and the farmers and ranchers and homeowners are the storytellers outside the incorporated areas.

That is all that I had for this meeting. You've got some questions. We will send some information to you to look over the website. We are going to revamp the postcard. I just sent them some information in the last couple of weeks so I'm not sure if it didn't already go out.

I will check on that today. If not, we will get together and revamp that. Or, I think this was the last one going out with the current funding, so after July we will go, we will bring something in front of you, too. We will send, is there a small contingency of you that want to see what we are putting together and would like to be a small work group?

We've got approval to send out the postcards, but would you like to see something if we make changes? Okay. We will send it out and see if we can get comments before it goes out to the public. And Maya said she is open to any comments on the website.

Any questions? With that we are adjourned.

Adjourned - 1:47 p.m.

