Voluntary Stewardship Program
Technical Panel Meeting
Tuesday, March 28, 2017
8:30am – 11:30pm

Facilitator – Bill Eller, VSP Coordinator, WSCC

Attendees in Lacey:  Brian Cochrane, WSCC (TP); Lauren Driscoll, ECY (TP); Kelly McLain, WSDA (TP); Amy Windrope, WDFW (TP); Commissioner Ron Wesen (SAC); Alicia McClendon, WSCC; Ron Shultz, WSCC; Evan Sheffels, WSFB; Maya Buhler, Thurston County; Jim Goche; Bruce Morgan; John McAninch, Jim Meyers.

Webinar:  Barbara Adkins, Tess Brandon, Vivian Erickson, Greta Holmstrom, Linda Lyshall, Michael See, John Small, Kara Symonds, Charissa Waters, Kathleen Whalen, Audrey Ahmann, Gen Dial, Angie Hubbard, Renee Hadley, Aaron Rosenblum, Kelly Rupp, Brandon Roozen (SAC); John Kliem, Grays Harbor/Lewis County.

VSP TECHNICAL PANEL MEETING

Session Objective:
Conduct an initial review of the Thurston County VSP Work Plan.

8:30 am:  Opening Comments, Introductions, Session Objective & Agenda
Introductions were made.  Bill Eller explained that there would be no representative from Thurston County to attend today’s meeting, though one did confirm, the chair of the work group called yesterday to inform the Commission that they wanted the work plan to stand on its own merits without verbal input.  Written questions would still be available for response.

8:35 am  Review the VSP TP Ground Rules – Bill Eller, WSCC
Bill Eller presented a review of the TP ground rules.  The room seating arrangement was suggested to be more of a round-table discussion for the TP members.

8:40 am  Review the VSP TP Policy Statement decision-making framework and process – Bill Eller, WSCC
Bill Eller mentioned the TP Policy Statement document as the basis for the discussion today.  Amy Windrope mentioned that she had a conflict and had to leave at 10:15am today.

8:45 am:  Thurston County VSP work plan – initial review of work plan - TP – Bill Eller, WSCC
Bill Eller asked a number of initial questions of the TP members.
  • Who’s read the work plan?  – most indicated they had not had time to fully read all the plan as they just received it on March 9.
    o Issues with time? – most said they are working with their schedules to make the time to read the plan, but will need additional time since receiving the plan on March 9.
    o Technical issues with how the work plan was provided to you? – no technical issues.
    o Technical issues with the evaluation form? – no technical issues.

Bill Eller suggested that the discussion begin with the members describing their concerns with the parts of the work plan the have read or positive feedback on the work plan on the parts they have read.  We would then try to harvest “practice pointers” for work groups who will be submitting their
plans subsequent to Thurston. We would be looking for “best practices” and what needs work – things that would either cause your work plan to fail outright or cumulatively.

Lauren Driscoll identified Appendix C of the work plan (Benchmarks) as the section that she thought would cause the most discussion.

Amy Windrope said that Appendix C and J, as well as H were where she focused most of her attention.

Kelly McLain looked through the outreach materials.

Brian Cochrane was able to look at all the work plan, but focused on Appendix C. Brian said it was difficult to find specific information related to the Technical Panel’s (TP) mandate in the statute. Brian thought it would be a good thing if the authors of the work plan would write for the audience of the Technical Panel and future work plan users. The other Technical Panel members agreed that would be helpful.

Practice Pointer: provide a cover sheet or a cross-walk table with the work plan that lists each element of RCW 36.70A.720(1) (a)-(l) and where to find it in the work plan.

Amy Windrope said that Appendix C was the closest Thurston has gotten to such a cover sheet, cross walk table, or “pitch” on how the work plan relates to RCW 36.70A.720(1) (a)-(l). The work plan should be something more than a restatement of what is in the statute.

Lauren Driscoll said we will need sufficient time to review the entire work plan, and that it would be good to have initial meetings like this in addition to a full review meeting on each work plan.

Amy Windrope discussed the table in Appendix C – parcels not in the program – and asks what about those? Would monitoring only occur on participants in the program? What about expanding the monitoring to the whole watershed? It is OK to monitor those who are participating in the program, but the whole watershed needs to be monitored – not just those in the program. VSP applies at the watershed scale.

How is the baseline in 2011 described? How is it established? There is Footnote #7 in Appendix C on pg 4 that talks about how it is established – more explanation is needed – it should be brought out of the footnotes.

Practice Pointer: A clearly identified section of the work plan should be identified and in it an explanation of how the July 22, 2011 baseline was established should be included.

The Technical Panel members are not sure what the heading “for illustration purposes only” means in Appendix C.

Amy Windrope continues to discuss Appendix C and monitoring. She is not sure of the methodology and how it will be done. For instance, what plants will be included? What is the connection between the monitoring and the protection of the critical areas and agricultural viability? Those connections should be listed in a table.

Kelly McLain isn’t sure when monitoring will occur. She points out that adaptive management in the work plan occurs at 3 and 5 year intervals, but reporting is to be done at 2 and 5 year intervals. So, to accomplish that, annual monitoring must be done, but she doesn’t see an explanation of that in the work plan.
Practice Pointer: Clearly explain monitoring, adaptive management, and reporting requirements in the work plan.

What is the adaptive management threshold or trigger? How would annual monitoring occur?

Amy Windrope agrees that everything can’t be monitored, but work groups need to choose based on their protection goals. We need more specificity on how that will be done. Which species or habitat is most affected by agriculture in the critical areas and what does success look like under the VSP? How do the agricultural practices affect the species?

Kelly McLain admits that Thurston didn’t have the benefit of the state agency guidance that other work groups have received since they came first.

Amy Windrope asks about the ability to implement the work plan — how much will it affect the approvability of a work plan?

Lauren Driscoll is concerned about the assumption that participation benchmarks assume that if participation continues at the same rate, protection will be achieved.

Brian Cochrane doesn’t see where thresholds are identified — how will you know if you’ve achieved your goal? Looking for specifics on what the thresholds are.

Practice Pointer: Clearly identify and explain adaptive management thresholds in the work plan.

Kelly McLain says that the Technical Panel can’t fail a work plan on agricultural viability, but there are questions about how effective some of the action will be at meeting their objectives. Ag Objective 2, Appendix C, pg 6 for example.

Amy Windrope doesn’t see where the threats to the agricultural community are connected to agricultural viability in the work plan. She does like the discussion in Appendix H, pgs 10-13, about the farm viability, but doesn’t see this reflected in the monitoring. She thought a subcommittee of the Thurston work group tried to use a farmland protection scorecard.

Kelly McLain noted that other work groups are struggling with the monitoring of critical areas — what, when, where, how. Agricultural viability is not so difficult monitoring-wise, but are the goals reachable?

Amy Windrope things the Technical Panel just needs to look at the preponderance of the information supplied in the work plan on agricultural viability.

Kelly McLain says it’s the within 10 years standard. For Puget Sound counties, they are losing ag lands. Even with land use restrictions, they are losing land. But, this is not a threshold that will fail them out of VSP — still looking for that. The economic analysis of agricultural viability — that is a fantastic effort by Thurston — the small acreage.

Brian Cochrane says that the legislature defined agricultural viability and that it is more about the costs of making agriculture non-viable.

Kelly McLain says that VSP is voluntary. Agricultural viability by its nature implies reduced regulatory burden so as to make it easier to farm. The Technical Panel is somewhat hampered by the review of the Thurston work plan after it is put together (no crosswalk, no checklist). The three tables in the work plan are critical and good.
Amy Windrope isn’t sure what the scope of the critical areas involved in the county is, nor what the scope of agriculture is in the county. How will Thurston communicate to potential VSP participants? If in VSP, don’t have to do critical area ordinance stuff. If not in, how to get in?

Lauren Driscoll says there is a GIS map, but not sure how many parcels would be or could be in.

Amy Windrope would like to see more data on who is in or not.

Lauren Driscoll points to Appendix H, pg 24. The number of participants and what that number represents.

Kelly McLain wants to know what the universe of participants is – with or without a map. We need to see that resources are being targeted to those critical areas and agricultural viability that need it the most – that have the biggest intersect with critical areas.

**Practice Pointer: Clearly identify active and inactive VPS participants (or direct and indirect – those participating in VSP and those not) in the work plan, expected numbers of each, and how those participants will interact with the work plan.**

Amy Windrope says that Appendix H, pg 23 – the data sources for agriculture – they are not described as repeatable. They seem loose and ill-defined.

Kelly McLain says that Appendix H and C don’t match up well. Not sure what will be used. Thurston seems to have looked at and used most data sources listed, whereas most other groups she is familiar with have chosen one or just a few data sources or sets to work with. Regardless, those datasets need to be repeatable. Thurston chose two sources (the Ag census and Open Space tax code parcels) and listed them as a bundle and didn’t really choose one. Appendix C, pg 6 – agricultural viability elements.

**Practice Pointer: Datasets used for monitoring purposes should be repeatable for subsequent analysis.**

General discussion about ag lands and loss. From the USDA Ag census – looking at ag land might not be an indicator of loss of agricultural viability. Also, the datasets for the census are not necessarily clean, but they are getting better. Though the census is required, not all actually do it. Also, ag activities under VSP are defined differently than ag lands in the census.

Amy Windrope sees implementation challenges in Appendix C, pg 6 there are three land indicators. It is hard to know what they really mean. They are not necessarily complementary. Are they repeatable? Is there data rigor there? What correlation do these have to protecting critical areas and agricultural viability? Agricultural viability is not as rigorous as critical area goals.

Lauren Driscoll wonders about including monitoring of the critical aquifer recharge areas (CARA) using the Department of Health data that is available. That data could be used to inform about contaminants for CARA’s.

Kelly McLain says that in certain watersheds, they will know if there is something that needs monitoring. We should be looking at the watershed scale, not drilling down to specific streams.

Amy Windrope looks at Appendix J – the crosswalk between critical area functions and ag activities. Wonders about if that shows participation levels? Page 13’s summary of whether practices can have positive effects on critical area functions. How does this table connect with participation monitoring? What is the purpose of this table?
Kelly McLain says that she read this, but other work groups us this scoring matrix to better assess impacts on critical areas.

Brian Cochrane says that these are the practices that will be used to protect the critical areas.

Lauren Driscoll asks how these will be used to access the critical area functions? Water quality isn’t a critical area function.

Amy Windrope asks how these practices will be used to protect critical area functions?

The Technical Panel members like Thurston County’s list of practices that protection critical area functions, but they are not sure how this analysis compares to the baseline.

**Practice Pointer: Clearly set out how agricultural practices will protect critical area functions and how that compares to practices used at the baseline.**

Lauren Driscoll asks about indirect participation versus direct participation. The Technical Panel members have a discussion about that in general. They believe that Thurston is only counting those that enroll in programs in their work plan. Appendix B has definitions of terms. The Technical Panel members are struggling with the cross-walk of each of the appendices and how they will meet to work plan goals.

Amy Windrope says that she isn’t quite sure what to make of the adaptive management plan on pg 13.

Kelly McLain says we will need to make a decision on this plan on April 18th.

Amy Windrope (and the rest of the Technical Panel members) want to re-invite someone from Thurston County to attend and answer questions.

Lauren Driscoll asks how participation can show protection of critical areas?

Kelly McLain says spot checks will help.

Brian Cochrane says that will work only if all operators are counted (direct and indirect, participating and non-participating).

The Technical Panel members want to see clearly definition around the number of participants, active and inactive [see Practice Pointer on pg 4 of these minutes].

10:00 am: Discussion – meeting schedule for rest of year & conflicts on April 28 & June 30

April 28th meeting was cancelled. The Technical Panel members agreed to the following additional meetings to review the Thurston (and Chelan) county work plans:
April 12, 2017, from 8:30 am – 11:30 am - both
April 18, 2017, from 9am – 4pm - both
April 20, 2017, from 9am – 4pm - Chelan

10:30 am: Adjourn – formal Thurston & Chelan County VSP work plan meeting set for April 12