



Columbia County Local Work Group Meeting February 13, 2025 Virtual Zoom Meeting

MINUTES

The meeting was called to order by Hannah Isaacs at 9:30 a.m. The in-person option of the meeting was cancelled due to hazardous weather. Meeting was held virtual zoom only. Those in attendance were:

Hannah Isaacs, NRCS
Kim Gray, NRCS
Dee Robinson, NRCS
Malyssa Legg, Columbia SWCD
Crystalyn Bush, Columbia SWCD
Tom Nygren, TSP Forester
Amber Kester, Columbia SWCD
Marissa Theve, NRCS
Linda Zahl, Pollinators
Rachell Meyers, SBWC
Jennifer Chavez, Columbia SWCD
David Taylor, Producer
Rebecca Thompson, Producer
Erin O'Connell, Columbia Co. LDS
Corin Pease, Xerces Society
Eliot Ewers, NRCS

Deb Brimacombe, Columbia SWCD Board
Bekah Gaxiola, NRCS
Nikki Hendricks, OWRD
Thomas Gehrkens, NRCS
Danielle Smith, Producer
Danielle Erb, Corp of Engineers
Rick Cowlshaw, ODA
Jason Busch, Producer
Brandon Steiner, NRCS
Marc DesJardin, ODF
KJ Smith, Producer
Bruce Moffatt, NRCS
Nicole Howard, ODF
Jake Barker, OSU Forester
Sergio Villasenor, NRCS

Hannah welcomed everyone to the meeting and stated that the purpose of this meeting is to provide a forum for partners, farmers, ranchers, foresters, and conservation groups to share conservation activities and discuss natural resource problems that should be prioritized. The group assists in guiding NRCS where to use farm bill funds for technical and financial assistance in the future. Hannah stated our appreciation of everyone in attendance for coming and volunteering their time to participate. We (NRCS) have the ability to target specific resource issues that are important to the county.

Hannah introduced our NRCS Staff in Columbia County, Bekah Gaxiola, Soil Conservationist and Dee Robinson, Program Assistant, working alongside Hannah Isaacs, District Conservationist.

NRCS has a new State Conservationist, Greg Becker.

New Water rights form – any irrigation related NRCS funded practice requires a water rights verification form.

NRCS is also awaiting the new Farm Bill coming out soon, which drives funding and programs for the agency. We are unsure what that looks like right now with the change in administration, but will keep you updated as guidance trickles down from NHQ.

Hannah presented a PowerPoint presentation explaining the Local Work Group process, our current Conservation Implementation Strategies (CIS's), Farm Bill Programs, and showcased conservation practices that have been implemented throughout the county through various NRCS Programs.

The Annual Local Work Group meetings are required by NRCS policy as a way to obtain local input on ways to make Farm Bill programs work locally, assist with establishing local resource priorities, and identify practices needed to address resource concerns in the county. Although we meet only once each year, comments or suggestions are always welcome throughout the year. Feel free to call or email any time.

Farm Bill Programs in Columbia County include EQIP, CStP, CRP/CREP, RCPP, and ACEP.

EQIP - Environmental Quality Incentives Program -

- Purpose – To solve priority natural resource problems on agricultural lands such as soil, water, wildlife and related resource issues.
- Assist farmers, ranchers and forest owners in complying with federal, state and local regulations.
- Encourage environmental enhancements.
- NRCS's primary conservation farm bill program in Columbia County.
- Most flexibility to address specific local resource needs on a county level.
- Conservation Implementation Strategies (county and basin competitive)
 - Columbia Corridor Soil Health
 - Soil Health Restoration and Management
 - Forest Management Planning
 - Forest Resiliency in the face of Climate Change
 - Lower Willamette/ North Coast Animal Feeding Operations
 - Nehalem Water Quality – New focus area
- National Initiatives (State competitive)
 - High Tunnel
 - Organic
 - On Farm Energy

EQIP CIC – EQIP Conservation Incentive Contracts

- This Program released in 2022 addresses concerns with drought in cropland
- Oregon participated in the pilot in 2021 which was open to all land uses
- Uses both practices and enhancements
 - Prescribed grazing vs mineral movement
 - Precommercial thinning and Slash treatment vs biochar
 - Single species cover crop vs multiple species targeting a specific concern

CStP – Conservation Stewardship Program

- Designed for operations that are already functioning at a higher level of conservation and are willing to adopt enhancement activities that make additional improvements
- Provides an annual payment for 5 years to maintain enhancements activities, with potential to renew for an additional 5 years.
- Uses enhancements rather than practices.
- NRCS may provide a minimum annual payment of \$5,000 in any year the Chief determines the total contract payment amount is below a base level.

CRP/CREP – Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (administered by FSA)

- Farm Service Agency program with NRCS technical assistance.
- 10 to 15 year agreements to pay an annual payment to maintain riparian areas and other crucial areas.
- Can be restrictive on allowed activities once the property is in contract, i.e. can't do EQIP or other programs on same CRP land, and certain farming practices are restricted.

ACEP – Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

- Permanent Contracts (no expiration date)

Agricultural Land Easement (ALE)

- NRCS purchases easements on land used for agriculture to reduce future conversion of those lands to non-Agricultural uses.

Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE/WRP)

- Previously known as WRP. NRCS Purchases easement on ag land to restore wetlands and associated uplands.
- WRE – Wetland Reserve Easement
Previously known as WRP. NRCS purchases easement on ag land to restore wetlands and associated uplands. We have 3 permanent easements in Columbia County that cover approximately 480 acres.

RCPP – Regional Conservation Partnership Program

- A partner-run program with NRCS matching funds
- A way to work with entities other than private landowners
- Had a previous agreement with Columbia Soil and Water Conservation District.

Hannah showed several pictures of successful conservation projects in the county including high tunnels installed, cover crops, grass seeding, rainwater harvest collection tanks, brush management, mulching and hedgerows, heavy use areas, livestock troughs, grazing management, and tree planting.

Commonly Used Practices

Roof runoff structure (clean water diversion/catchment)
Forage and biomass planting
Livestock pipeline
Watering facility (livestock/wildlife troughs)
Cover crop
Conservation crop rotation
Mulching
Reduced tillage
Soil health testing
Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan
Forest Management Plan
Fence
Tree and shrub site prep and establishment
Herbaceous weed treatment
Brush management and removal
High Tunnel
Hedgerow planting
Pre-commercial thinning and tree release
Waste Storage
Residue Management in forest
Heavy Use Area

Current Columbia EQIP CIS's -

Forest Diversity: Focus is on fuels reduction, mainly precommercial thinning, brush management, access roads, etc. This area for Forest Diversity CIS covers 4 watersheds in the South Scappoose and Milton Creek area. This CIS is nearly identical to our previous Forest Diversity CIS, just different targeted watersheds. Our county is approximately 75% forest land, so it is crucial to continue to provide assistance to our private forest land operators. This is a Basin-Wide CIS that we joined in the middle of its lifespan. The target area for this CIS will be moving in the coming years to accommodate where the greatest need is.

Columbia Corridor Soil Health: Goal is to improve soil health of the Columbia River Corridor farmlands through management improvements on pasture and cropland and encourage improvements to water quality and fish habitat to assist with salmon recovery. Practices include fencing, cover crop, high tunnel, conservation cover, crop rotations, pollinator habitat, hedgerows, heavy use protection, forage planting, tree planting, mulching, brush management, weed control, rotational grazing. Very good interest with more people enquiring all the time. Main resource concerns being addressed are soil health and water quality. Targeting small market garden producers and livestock operators.

Soil Health Restoration and Management
Forest Management Planning
Lower Willamette/North Coast Animal Feeding Operations
High Tunnel Initiative
Organic Initiative
On Farm Energy

Setting Priorities for Columbia County Resource Concerns for 2026 and beyond –

Nicole Howard – do we have spraying practices – which program would that fall under? That would best fall under EQIP. Chemical spot spray, bio-management (bugs), grazing, weed management are a few practices we have available to help combat weeds.

Crystalyn – continuing to hear from ag landowners with erosion issues. Huge water quality issue, permitting difficult to work through. Need an avenue that could streamline streambank stabilization to save land.

Erin O’Connell – attended a new training that showcased new products that might be useful to help with streambank stabilization. Will get with Hannah and partners to share information and ideas.

Amber is starting a project using earth bags for streambank stabilization. This will be an exciting project.

Jason – are there any standardized drawings (or could they be developed) for engineering designs to combat streambank stabilization that would be approved by Corp of Engineers or DSL or the county that would be available to the public? Hannah will look into this. Root-wads are better than rip-rap and people may not know about this or other options available besides rip-rap and heavy boulders.

Crystalyn – to continue with what Jason was saying, terracing, earth bags and willow plantings can be really affective and more cost-effective option than riprap and large boulders. Still requires permitting and heavy equipment, but a viable option. Crys would be willing to be on a taskforce to talk about this further.

Hannah provided a link in the chat to view our newly updated Columbia County NRCS Long Range Plan. This provides a more in-depth look at what NRCS is working on in Columbia County. You can find it here:

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2024-11/2024-ColumbiaCounty-LRP-508.pdf>

Corin – works for Xerces Society and is a partner biologist with NRCS. He is available as a resource if anyone wants to get started with pollinators. Hedgerows, wildlife habitat plantings, conservation cover, cover crop, riparian plantings for pollinators. Pest Management 595 practice, isn't used very much, but could be incorporated more often at the state level. Can also look at using netting to keep bugs out of crops instead of high tunnels.

Tom Nygren – Forester, TSP – small woodland owners are concerned about periodic income between being able to harvest trees – such as mushrooms, silvopasture, maple syrup production, etc. How does NRCS fit into that. Hannah stated that NRCS doesn't concentrate on income production, but rather conservation. We've been seeing an increase of maple syrup production in our county. NRCS can help with tree planting, but that's about the only practice we would have related specifically to maple syrup production. Another thing people can do while waiting for timber harvest, would be patch thinning for fire logs/firewood sales.

Jason – can landowners get technical assistance without a contract? Yes! NRCS can offer technical assistance on-site without requiring a contract. We can develop a conservation plan that lays out conservation practices that would help address resource concerns and improve productivity of your land.

Rebecca asked what funding will actually be available for FY2025 and when will we know. With all the uncertainty right now, we are hoping to know more sometime after February. We haven't received guidance as to what will be changed, so we are moving forward as planned.

Danielle asked if there is any assistance available for hydroponics? Hannah will look into seeing if that is something we can add or if something might be available to assist with that specifically.

Marissa mentioned that the National level is working on internal policy and there will be a wetland determination exemption for restoration coming out soon.

Nikki – new forms for water rights verification. Nikki and Jake are available to help answer questions before people jump into starting a small farm garden production without water rights. Is there funding available for water catchment systems to offset water rights? Yes! NRCS can fund water catchment tanks and gutters.

Jake mentioned there are programs in other states/counties for maple syrup that focuses on energy efficiency and equipment upgrades, would be good to have something like that in Columbia County.

Sergio mentioned that CSP might be a better fit for maple syrup production.

Rick Cowlshaw, ODA Regional water quality specialist for North Coast area. Contact person for water quality concerns. TMDLs are changing. If you have any questions, feel free to contact Rick. 971-453-2992. Oregon.gov/ODA

Danielle Erb – Army Corp of Engineers – can help with permitting. Contact info available on the Portland District website.

Hannah thanked everyone for switching to online zoom meeting at the last minute and taking the time to provide input into our programs. Please feel free to reach out to Hannah or Bekah if you have questions or need assistance.

Be safe . . . be warm . . . be healthy . . . be happy.

Thanks everyone!

Meeting adjourned at 10:30 am

Dee Robinson