

Wasco County Local Work Group Meeting Minutes – February 27, 2025

USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

420 NE 1st St. Dufur, OR 97021

10am-12pm

In attendance:

Todd Dickson	Kendal Johnson
Randy McAllister	Dusty Eddy (retired NRCS)
Lisa Silvey	Dara Morantes (Wy'East RC&D)
Steve Ronfeld	Robert Wallace (Wy'East RC&D)
Bob Durham	Jackie Solomon (Wy'East RC&D)
Kip and Patti Blake	Anna Peach (Wy'East RC&D)
Blaine Carver	Ted Palmer (Wasco County)
Betty Odom	Jacob Powell (OSU Extension)
Amy Kaser	Justin Tryon (ODF)
Phil Kaser	Lissa Biehn (FSA)
Andrew Hartenstein	Brad Pickering (FSA)
Dan and Brittany Hazel	Jason Flowers (Oregon Wheat Growers League)
Tim Morelli	Shilah Olson (SWCD)
Grayson Morelli	Abbie Forrest (SWCD)
Mike Kelly	Allie Marker (SWCD)
Charles Remington	Scott Susi (SWCD)
Barry Schrimsher	Dana Woods (SWCD)
Bob Hammel	Ryan Bessette (SWCD)
Tyler Hammel	Justin McLaughlin (ODFW)

▪ **Welcome and Introductions**

Garrett Duyck – NRCS Meeting Facilitator
Emily Huth – District Conservationist, NRCS Wasco County
Dellaina Morse – Soil Conservationist, NRCS Wasco County
Erin Beuttenmuller – Forester, NRCS Wasco County
Michael Cistulli – Resource Conservationist, NRCS Wasco County

▪ **Purpose of the Local Work Group**

Review performance of the past year's projects,
Help shape plans and priorities for future projects,
Connect with partners and new audiences to seek opportunities to leverage partnership funds,
Learn about other NRCS programs, which may prove beneficial to you.

▪ **NRCS Vision – Supporting America's Working Lands**

At the NRCS, we have a proud history of supporting America's farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners. For more than 80 years, we have helped people make investments in their operations and local communities to keep working lands working, boost rural economies, increase the competitiveness of American agriculture, and improve the quality of our air, water, soil, and habitat.

Our Vision: A world of clean and abundant water, healthy soils, resilient landscapes, and thriving agricultural communities through voluntary conservation.

▪ **Technical Assistance (TA)**

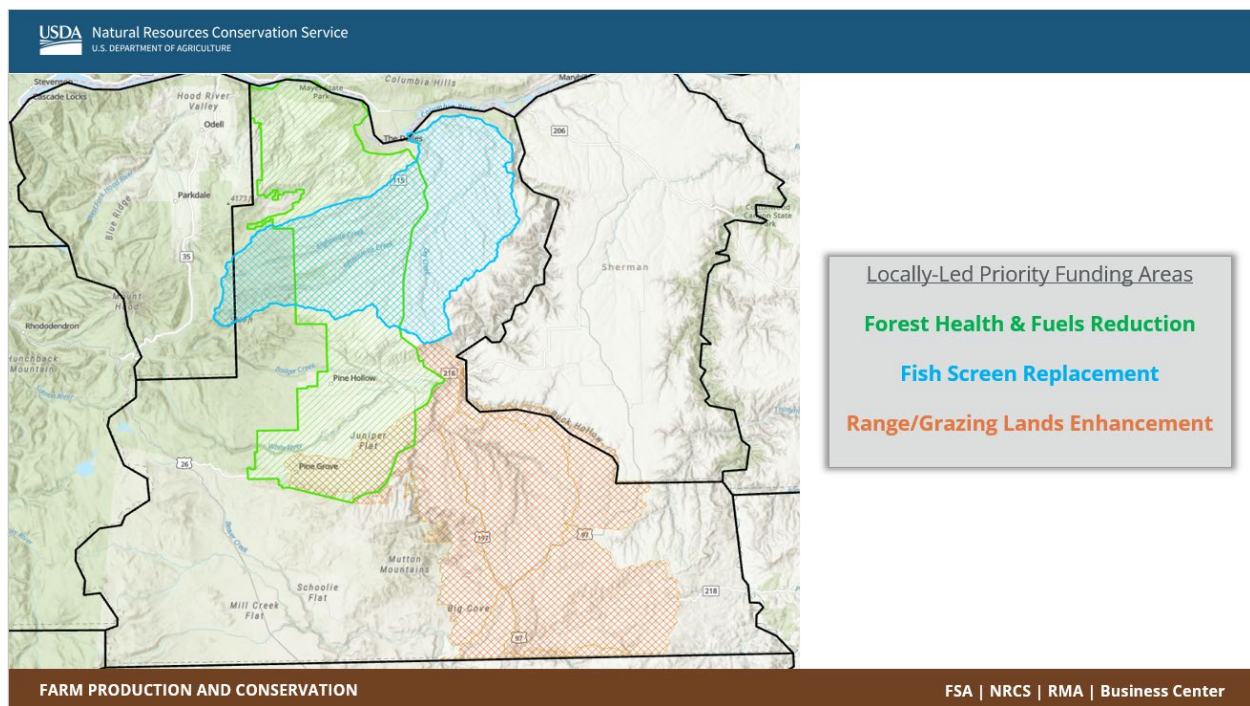
Through one-on-one, personalized technical assistance, we work voluntarily with producers and communities to find the best solutions to meet their unique conservation and business goals.

TA is the foundation for all our conservation planning efforts. You do not need to be a program participant or USDA client to request our assistance. TA is a public service we provide, which may look like:

- a walk through your woodland to inventory wildfire fuels or opportunities for wildlife habitat enhancement;
- reviewing your soil reports to develop a nutrient budget for fertilizer application;
- developing a holistic, integrated pest management plan;
- creating a forage balance to support the development of a grazing plan;
- assisting with Plant ID;
- making species recommendations and planting plans;
- providing general best management practices to address natural resources concerns

Wasco NRCS has staff with specialties in grazing lands, agronomy, and forestry, however their expertise also covers a broad range of other natural resource topics. If we don't know the answer, we'd love to help you find it.

▪ **Current Locally-Led Priority Funding Areas**



NRCS Oregon uses a Strategic Approach to Conservation to address priority natural resource concerns in specific watersheds and landscapes across the state, across public and private lands. Each county develops

a Long-Range Plan, which is updated to reflect changing needs and objectives of the county's natural resources.

Based on those plans, local Conservation Implementation Strategies (CIS) are developed to help agricultural producers in those targeted areas. Every year, NRCS hosts Local Work Group meetings at the county level, where farmers, landowners, conservation partners and other members of the community discuss the natural resource needs for the county. Based on feedback from those meetings, NRCS updates the county's Long-Range Plan and develops new Conservation Implementation Strategies to address those resource concerns.

The current funding areas reflect prior year community input. Given that NRCS is only allocated so much funding each year, we focus in these priority areas for 3-5 years, typically, so that we can reach as many landowners within those footprints as possible before changing course.

▪ Fiscal Year 2024 Accomplishments

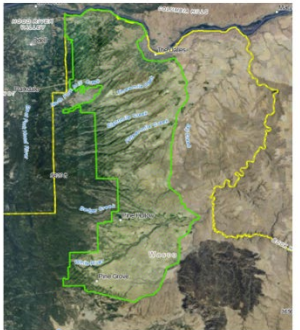


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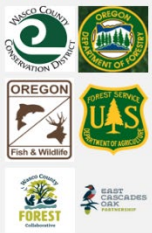
Active Project

Barlow Area Forestland Enhancement

Goal: Improve forest health, reduce wildfire fuels, and enhance wildlife habitat by implementing forest thinning, pruning, brush control, slash treatment, and habitat improvements.



Timeframe: 2022-2026
FY24 Awarded Funds: \$378,273
Acres Enrolled: 249.5



FARM PRODUCTION AND CONSERVATION

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Proposal Expires This Year

North Wasco Joint Chiefs

Goal: Improve forest health, reduce wildfire fuels, and enhance wildlife habitat by implementing forest thinning, pruning, brush control, slash treatment, and habitat improvements.

Joint Chiefs is a 3-year effort between NRCS and the USFS to implement cross-boundary projects.



Timeframe: 2023-2025
FY24 Awarded Funds: \$377,987
Acres Enrolled: 278



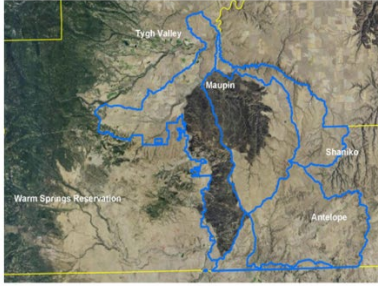
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South Wasco

South Wasco Rangeland Enhancement

Goal: Improve the condition of upland vegetation and wildlife habitat within south Wasco County through projects that promote plant vigor and landscape resilience



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Also Available in Wasco County

- **Food Security Initiative** – Support small farms and ranches that contribute directly to local food systems to increase the availability of fresh, locally produced food.

- **Organic Initiative** – Support transitioning organic, certified USDA Organic, and exempt organic producers.

If interested, contact our Small Farm & Organic Specialist, Jenn Eatwell
Jennifer.Eatwell@usda.gov or 541-699-3186; 541-280-4529

- **Climate-Focused Sustainable Livestock Production in Oregon** – Promote the ecological health of grazing lands in Oregon **assisting livestock producers who collaborate with third-party organizations** that provide baseline inventory, periodic monitoring, and promote climate-smart, sustainable livestock production.

- **Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs Forest Stewardship** – Improve forest structure and composition to reduce the **severity of wildfire across Tribal forestlands**. (Jefferson and Wasco Counties)



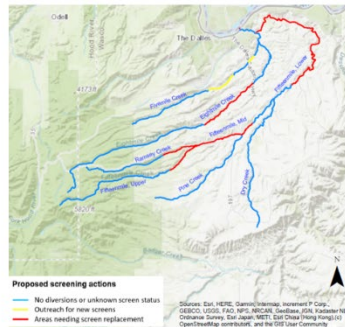
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Active Project

Fish Screen Replacement in the Fifteenmile Basin

Goal: Replace or install new fish screens within the Fifteenmile Basin to ensure safe fish passage, notably to reduce salmonid entrapment in existing irrigation diversions.



Especially our partners at
The Dalles Fish

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▪ **Discussion**

NRCS: We invite producers to speak on natural resource issues that are impacting their operation and want to revisit the topics that were brought up last year to gauge if anything has changed, if we've made strides, or if the topics are still relevant to the group. Initial discussion topics include virtual fence, WASCOBs, Firebreaks, Soil Health & Pest Management, and Water Conservation.

Public:

Water Conservation

- In search of assistance with water efficiency for an irrigation system. The area along the John Day River has not overlapped with cost-share opportunities for this and the new requirement for flow meters does not coincide with financial assistance either.
- Entire system upgrades including, but not limited to, piping open ditches, pump screens regulators, sprinklers, sprinkler nozzles; airless tires to help with compaction and ruts
- The conveyance system In Juniper Flat needs help; additional reservoirs for storage
- Vegetation removal is needed in the Juniper Flat irrigation ditch
- Groundwater quantity issues are occurring in the Fifteenmile Basin; wells drying up, low or slow aquifer recharge

NRCS: At last year's meeting, one of the bigger subjects was ditch conversion to pipeline as well as irrigation system upgrades on Juniper Flat. One point of this meeting is to get names and input on future projects so that we can pinpoint where to focus efforts and make a strategic plan for requesting future funding.

Public:

Virtual Fence (cattle collars that operate like an invisible fence)

- Interested in seeing what it can do and what size pastures it will work best for
- Cost prohibitive currently
- Difficult to locate a good spot for the base station to cover the most ground
- Virtual fence and firebreaks can go hand in hand to create enhancements if you already have the system, depending on geography.

Water and Sediment Control Basins (WASCOBs)

- Concerns about NRCS engineer capacity and availability
- What determines the size of the basin

NRCS: Local staff have working knowledge of WASCOBs and could assist with an initial site visit to look at the size of the drainage, slope, and other site characteristics. The drainage will determine how many basins are needed and the size. This practice can help alleviate ephemeral gullies in field draws. The precipitation is also a determining factor for the volume needed in the basin. Recent heavy rainfalls have resulted in a lot of sediment movement. A WASCOB collects that sediment and puts it back on your field. In a lower residue year for a wheat/fallow system, you may still see some sheet and rill erosion where these WASCOBs could be beneficial.

Firebreaks

Public:

- What are the recommendations for firebreaks/fuel breaks?
- Are you looking into doing trials for vegetated firebreaks?
- Firebreaks were brought up last year, when can we expect to see some movement on this?
- The freeway and along Hwy 197 are the county's biggest fire concerns, this would be a good area to focus for firebreaks.
- Observed examples in Idaho where they have run a grader along the fence line in crop fields.
- Worries about how this may impact FSA programs or if it will impact compliance.

NRCS: We have been working collaboratively with Sherman NRCS and other partners to start piloting a firebreak program. Some have been installed in Sherman as we continue to figure out what works and what doesn't. We are recommending 50–60-foot firebreaks, which is subject to change depending on the adjacent topography and fuel types. NRCS standards require that any firebreak we plan must have an anchor point, or an existing firebreak to tie into. This could be a road, man-made firebreak, etc. This can make planning difficult, which is why there needs to be landowner and neighbor buy-in to make this happen at a landscape scale.

There are bare earth (disked or graded) firebreaks and vegetated firebreaks. Erosion may be a concern for bare earth, as well as invasive species. We have approval to have the firebreaks only be bare during wildfire season and they could be planted with your crop in the fall to maintain ground cover during our critical erosion period in winter. The NRCS Plant Materials Center in Pullman, WA may be able to help us do a few trials of different vegetated firebreaks using species such as forage kochia, alfalfa, or various bunch grasses. We have not reached out to any landowners to help with the trial yet, but if you're interested, please let us know. We will also continue our conversations with FSA to ensure that implementation does not impact other programs or program compliance.

Our plan is to get a funding proposal for firebreaks submitted this spring, which, if approved, would allow us to take applications in Fall 2025 for our Fiscal Year 2026 funding cycle. We will be reaching out to community members and partners to collaborate on this so that our proposal aligns with the community's needs.

Soil Health & Pest Management

Public:

- Concerns about reinventing the wheel with no-till
- Concerns about reverting back to conventional tillage
- Noted that this was a low-residue year for fallow fields so more soil movement observed
- Concerns about the potential of losing Round-Up
- pH is declining
- Lime is currently unaffordable
- The Soil Conservation Service originated to address soil and it's important to keep that at the forefront of planning efforts.
- Seek & Spray sprayers are of interest (i.e. Weed-it, Weed Seeker)
- Herbicide resistance is occurring

NRCS: We see that adapting is going to be necessary to avoid repeating history. OSU Extension is doing studies on the use of tillage. It's not inherently wrong, it can be a great tool if you think carefully about when it's appropriate and how best to use it to meet your objectives. There are also studies going on in Idaho on amending soil pH. Change is slow, but hearing these same issues continue to be brought up helps inform us and keep us focused on what's next. Please do not be discouraged.

There is also potential through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) to implement pest management enhancements. These enhancements can be used to implement drone technology, optical spraying technology, other new technologies. The application deadline for CSP is tomorrow, 2/28.

Plants/Vegetation

Public:

- Ponderosa Pine, Oregon White Oak, Douglas Fir mortality throughout the county
- Standing and fallen dead trees are creating a fire hazard
- Ryegrass has invaded many areas in the county, and is especially tall in the canyons creating a fire hazard
- Skeletonweed at the north end of the county

NRCS: Our forestland funding currently assists landowners with technical and financial assistance to address tree mortality. One of the challenges in these pockets of communities is getting together to talk about these topics. How would you see your community coming together to get more specific about project details? To coordinate fuel breaks, etc. what works best to get in communication and get these projects on the ground?

Public:

- Watershed council meetings, Fifteenmile specifically mentioned
- Rangeland Fire Protraction Associations (RFPAs), Petersburg specifically mentioned for firebreak collaboration
- More frequent neighborhood meetings
- OSU Extension is a resource for outreach
- Oregon Wheat is a resource for outreach
- Irrigation District meetings, Juniper Flat ditch meetings mentioned
- Noted to keep the meetings valuable for the producers; i.e. what are the specific opportunities available

What solutions would best be delivered by NRCS? What can NRCS specifically offer that others cannot?

Public:

- Financial Assistance; difficult to try new things or make changes without funding
- NRCS can help change the emphasis on certain things; we have a connection with those on the ground and those who allocate funds to us
- NRCS has expertise and connections with other partners like FSA, RC&D, SWCD. Collaborative efforts make things happen on the ground.
- Big things can happen when NRCS takes the lead; No-till is a great example; similar could happen around the firebreak discussion
- ArcGIS and farm/ranch mapping is a big help so we don't have to go hire someone with that skill set
- "NRCS is the agency that is central to forward progress in agriculture. It is the agency that allows farms to become more sustainable over time through conservation, adaptation of technology, and changes in cropping methods. Farms cannot be viable indefinitely without adopting new practices, and NRCS is the agency that enables producers to improve their land and pass it on to the next generation." (Input provided via email after meeting)

▪ Partner Updates

FSA Updates (Lissa Biehn): April 15th is the deadline for ARC/PLC; CRP no news currently

Wy'East RC&D Updates (Robert Wallace): Irrigation grant funds through Wasco Electric; RC&D may not have funds but can still assist with connecting you to other resources. Continuing to test out electric farm equipment such as tractors and UTVs. Provided an updated on an upcoming project to have mobile battery stations in the event of an emergency or loss of power.

OSU Extension (Jacob Powell): Drone Workshop March 18th

Thank you for attending!

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Office Location:
2325 River Rd. Ste. #3
The Dalles, OR 97058
(Next to Wasco PUD Office)

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Wasco County NRCS Local Work Group Feedback

