



Okanogan County

Voluntary Stewardship Program

Biennial Report



Okanogan County, Washington

July 1, 2019 – June 30, 2021



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1 Introduction

The Okanogan County Voluntary Stewardship Program Work Plan (Work Plan) was approved by the Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC) on September 17, 2018, following two years of effort by the VSP Work Group, Okanogan County, the Okanogan Conservation District, and many contributing partners. This report characterizes implementation activities between July 1, 2019, and June 30, 2021.

As the technical lead for VSP in Okanogan County, Okanogan CD staff conduct technical assistance, outreach, and effectiveness monitoring for the program. Staff leveraged program funding to identify unmet needs among producers, work with local agencies to understand program priorities, increase technical skills through training, and provide technical assistance to more producers, on more land.

This biennium was impacted by outreach and technical assistance limitations imposed by the coronavirus pandemic. Staff conducted fewer on-farm technical assistance visits and fewer producer meetings during 2020 and 2021. Web meetings and remote planning were not possible for some producers due to limited internet and technology accessibility. The Palmer Mountain and Cold Springs fires in 2020 also had significant impacts on range land and several ranching operations. Producers recovering from wildfire must replace lost infrastructure and manage lost income.

Despite the unforeseen obstacles during this biennium, the Okanogan County VSP supported several project planning efforts, implementation of two projects, and the procurement of new incentive opportunities through grants. Staff partnered with other agencies to fund conservation projects and improve critical area monitoring.

Many agricultural operators are eager to adopt stewardship practices. The Voluntary Stewardship Program provides educational and planning support necessary for agricultural operations to adopt conservation practices that protect critical areas. Monitoring data from critical areas and related parameters show the quality of priority natural resource like critical areas is being maintained, as demonstrated in the 5-Year Report (December 2021). The steady rate of conservation practice implementation on agricultural lands is protecting critical area functions and values.

This report satisfies the biennial reporting responsibility outlined in Statewide Advisory Committee and Conservation Commission Policy Advisory #05-08, related to RCW 36.70A.720 (1) (j).

2 Outreach

Okanogan CD organized or participated in multiple presentations, workshops and planning efforts to promote VSP, stewardship of critical areas, and learn more about emerging needs from the agricultural community:

- 2021 Okanogan Horticulture Association Annual Meeting, Okanogan, WA
- 2021 Okanogan Horticultural Association/WSU Extension Field Tour, Loomis, WA
- 2019 Okanogan County Fair, Okanogan, WA
- 2020 & 2021 Local Work Group Meeting (NRCS), Online
- 2021 Salmon Safe Certification workshop, Online
- 2021 Pesticide Stewardship Partnership, Online

The Voluntary Stewardship Program and stewardship assistance was advertised in print and online in Okanogan CD's quarterly newsletter. Handouts and advertising material were distributed at multiple events following approval of the Work Plan in September 2018.

3 Critical Area Protection

Critical area protection on agricultural lands is achieved by the maintenance and adoption of conservation practices. Participation in VSP is evaluated by implementation rates for stewardship practices, the availability and attendance of workshops related to critical area stewardship, reporting through stewardship checklists, and the number of producers planning projects with Okanogan CD. Planning and project implementation is coordinated with local agencies and organizations through reference to management plans, program partnerships, and consultation with local biologists and planners.

Conservation project planning and implementation remained steady during this biennium, and several plans were developed for implementation in 2022.

3.1 Completed Stewardship Practices

Agricultural producers in Okanogan County continued to implement diverse stewardship practices that protect and enhance critical areas throughout the County. Stewardship practice implementation is quantified based on projects documented through voluntary incentives programs from Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and Okanogan CD. As of the recently completed 5-Year Report, stewardship practice implementation was meeting goals and benchmarks set in the VSP Work Plan. Projects were implemented on all types of agricultural land: dryland, irrigated, and rangelands.

Wildlife habitat structures, such as snags and brush piles, were integrated into several forest management plans. Through the Working for Wildlife program, staff and volunteers installed reflective fence markers to improve sharp-tailed grouse habitat on rangeland. Agricultural producers worked with NRCS to install forest health like pruning and thinning to reduce wildfire risk and enhance wildlife habitat, installed troughs and surface water exclusion fencing, and improved irrigation efficiency. Utilization assessments and prescribed grazing plans improved upland range management on over 7,000 acres.

Voluntary Stewardship Program funding supported on-the-ground implementation of two projects.

The Booth pollinator planting project included planting a half-acre of barren ground with native plants and mulch to benefit pollinators. The planting site is located on a decommissioned irrigation ditch adjacent to public lands.





The Hancock Springs project is 1 acre component of a large shrub wetland enhancement project completed in partnership with Cascade Fisheries Enhancement Group. The project is converting previously farmed ground back to riparian forested wetland to benefit rearing habitat for juvenile Spring Chinook. Adjacent irrigated hay operation remains and the operator is pursuing irrigation improvements that will increase flow in Hancock Springs.

3.2 Technical Assistance and Project Planning

Okanogan Conservation District provides technical assistance related to irrigation systems (multi-user and individual), wildlife, water quality, native plants, and crops. Okanogan CD partners with NRCS to provide rangeland management recommendations on forest and shrub-steppe lands. In recent years, staff also respond to requests for post-wildfire ground assessment and planning to re-establish agricultural infrastructure like fences.

Between 2020 and 2021, Okanogan CD received 80 requests for assistance to conduct non-emergency conservation projects. An additional 20 requests were related to wildfire impacted operations where livestock management infrastructure was burned, and plant/soil health were concerns. Due to limitations from the coronavirus precautions, fewer site visits were conducted this biennium than usual. However, staff conducted 28 field visits for irrigation, range and orchard planning and were able to work remotely with other operators on long-term projects.

Examples of technical assistance which included recommendations to protect critical areas:

- Assisted 5 irrigators to install more efficient irrigation pumps or microirrigation on their individual wells.
- 11 irrigation water management plans were developed to reduce streamflow impacts during 2019 drought conditions.
- Planned 4 miles of canal to pipeline conversion to improve streamflow in Toats Coulee Creek.
- A ranch earned Salmon Safe certification for conservation practices implemented on their operation in the Twisp River watershed.
- Advised individuals and partner agency on the proper disposal of livestock mortalities to protect surface water following the 2020 and 2021 wildfires.
- Prepared large-scale planning maps to aid grazing management for 4 large ranch operations.
- Advised 6 operators on prescribed grazing and rangeland health. Two participants were new landowners managing range leases and wildlife habitat in the sharp-tailed grouse priority habitat area.

In addition to on-the-ground site visits, staff provided assistance to producers over email or phone. Many of these inquiries were related to native plant and wildlife identification, weed control, cover crops and irrigation upgrades, permit guidance (Hydraulic Practice Applications) and native seed recommendations. The high rate of requests for assistance often surpasses the capacity of staff to

dedicate time to planning a project, however, Okanogan CD staff and partners are dedicated to procuring funding to respond to these needs.

3.3 Stewardship Checklists

In the upcoming biennium, Okanogan CD will focus on improving the stewardship checklist and promoting reporting of farm stewardship not quantified by agency program reports. Updated checklists will be tailored to the farm type.

3.4 Improving Incentive Opportunities

During this biennium, staff and the Work Group worked with producer groups to identify producer needs and develop new incentive opportunities. Agricultural operations have the responsibility of managing large pieces of land and specialized equipment and infrastructure; operational changes are expensive. Ensuring adequate incentive and financial support programs are available is an important service to provide for operations interested in substantial conservation practice adoption. Irrigation efficiency improvements and assistance for orchards are two prominent needs with relatively limited support through existing programs.

WSDA Specialty Crop Block Grant: Tree fruit producers follow many state and federal guidelines to produce marketable fruit. However, there is increasing interest in additional practices like pollinator habitat plantings and soil health improvements following pruning or tree tear-out and replacement. During this biennium, staff submitted and received funding for a grant from the WSDA Specialty Crop Block Grant program to develop native pollinator planting guidance and implement 5 acres of native plants for pollinator habitat. The grant also includes technical assistance to facilitate Salmon Safe certification for operations that are managed with practices that protect fish habitat.

NFWF Conservation Partners Program: Improving irrigation efficiency is a common goal for agencies and organizations concerned with maintaining streamflow for fish and other uses. Drought conditions in 2019 highlighted the need and interest for irrigation system upgrades. In 2020 Okanogan CD applied with NRCS for the Conservation Partners Program to use aerial imaging technology to accurately develop irrigation water management plans and associated irrigation equipment upgrades, which will be used in NRCS EQIP funding applications. This application has passed initial review and we expect to hear the status of the application in September, 2021.

NRCS/BoR WaterSmart: Staff worked with NRCS to submit an application for Whitestone Reclamation District to receive designated EQIP funds for 5 miles of canal to pipeline conversion and approximately 160 acres of on-farm irrigation upgrades. Whitestone Reclamation District diverts most of Toats Coulee Creek to two lake reservoirs. This project will reduce the amount diverted to maintain lake levels.

Ecology Livestock BMPs: Protecting water quality related to livestock management typically relies on barbed wire fences for exclusion. In rural Okanogan County, installing fence in remote, sparsely populated areas poses a negative impact for wildlife. The Livestock BMPs project will evaluate the effectiveness of log and slash placement to reduce livestock impacts on streams and wetlands. When installed with alternative water sources, these projects could reduce livestock impacts on water quality without impairing wildlife movement.

4 Supporting Partnerships

Okanogan CD staff participated in local and state planning and resource management groups to facilitate connections between agricultural operators, resource concerns, and agency/organizational goals and resources. Okanogan CD represents natural resources and the agricultural community in meetings such as:

- Similkameen-Okanogan Watershed Action Team (facilitator)
- Methow Restoration Council (Methow Salmon Recovery Foundation)
- Working for Wildlife collaborative (WDFW & Conservation Northwest)
- Arid Lands Initiative
- NRCS facilitated Local Working Group
- Upper Columbia Salmon Recovery Board Implementation Team
- Washington State Soil Health Committee

Okanogan CD staff responds to referrals from State agencies to provide support to land managers for compliance and regulatory assistance related to natural resource planning and permit applications. During the last two years, staff assisted private land managers with water rights inquiries, forestry activities, several riparian planting plans for permit applications. While Okanogan CD can provide quality recommendations for many issues, staff often refer individuals to other agencies and organizations, such as the Okanogan County Noxious Weed Board, Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Okanogan County, and others.

In order to provide quality assistance to agricultural producers, and understand regional priorities and programs, District staff maintain partnerships with the following agency/government partners to promote the goals of VSP:

- WSU Extension, orchard management and soil health.
- Okanogan County, shoreline and critical area codes.
- Washington Dept. of Fish and Wildlife, Working for Wildlife partnership, technical assistance to landowners, permit support.
- WA Dept. of Ecology, water quality planning and drought response.
- WA DNR, coordinating forest health technical assistance.
- NRCS, supporting conservation planning efforts and project prioritization.
- Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, referring to fish and wildlife management plans and priorities and coordinating resources.

Okanogan CD staff work closely with local organizations like the Okanogan County Noxious Weed Board, Methow Beaver Project, Trout Unlimited, Washington Water Trust, Methow Conservancy and the Okanogan Land Trust, to coordinate resources.

Monitoring Partnerships

During this biennium, Okanogan CD staff partnered with multiple agencies to improve critical area monitoring. Monitoring was identified as an area of improvement during the 5-Year evaluation and reporting process. The following monitoring projects were developed to improve critical area monitoring and agricultural land management:

- Soil health monitoring with WSDA to improve stewardship practice planning and understand local soil qualities.
- Pesticides in surface water monitoring with WSDA.
- Lake water quality monitoring project planned with Ecology and WDFW to encourage watershed improvements around Palmer Lake and adjacent wetlands.
- Assisted Cascade Fisheries Enhancement Group to conduct fish barrier monitoring with agricultural contacts.
- Coordinated with the Colville Tribes Fish and Wildlife program to use their Ecosystem Diagnosis and Treatment tool to prioritize and plan fish habitat projects.
- Installed three AgWeather stations with WSU staff to aid irrigation water applications.

Following the 5-Year review, staff will work more closely with WDFW to identify rangeland monitoring strategies.

5 Agricultural Viability

Table 1 shows metrics and conditions considered to evaluate agricultural viability in Okanogan County.

In addition to changing economic conditions, wildfire and drought pose operational challenges for Okanogan County producers. These environmental conditions also impact the condition of critical areas. The voluntary approach to critical area protection provides the flexibility for individual operations to respond and adapt to changing operational and environmental considerations. Generic regulations could not accommodate the breadth of management that occurs for land used in livestock, orchard or crop production without a significant burden to the operator. Water quality monitoring and monitoring of priority fish and wildlife species indicate the voluntary approach to critical area protection can protect critical areas in Okanogan County.

6 Adaptive Management

The adaptive management plan completed for the 5-Year Report (December 2020) contains the action items the Work Group will consider for improving VSP implementation during the next biennium.

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TABLE 1 AGRICULTURAL VIABILITY OBJECTIVES AND PERFORMANCE

Viability Goal	Performance Objectives	Performance Metrics	Adaptive Management Trigger	Biennium Performance Comments
Maintain a secure link between agricultural producers and agricultural land base.	Agricultural practices continue to occur at similar levels.	Change in agricultural land cover.	Significant decrease in presence of agricultural activities on the ground.	According to the Ag Census, mid-size farms are decreasing in Okanogan County, while small and large farms increase following a national trend.
	Permits and leases for crop lands and grazing allotments on federal and state lands are available at similar levels.	Acreage data from state and federal agencies.	Significant conversion of agricultural lands to non-agricultural use by public agencies.	
	Preservation mechanisms exist to maintain lands in agriculture.	Comprehensive planning and zoning encourages preservation of agricultural resources.	Significant threats to agricultural land base due to development.	
	Maintain Right to Farm Ordinance.	Existence of Right to Farm Ordinance for the County.	Right to Farm Ordinance no longer Exists or is being infringed upon.	
Water resources necessary for producers are available and reliable.	Water rights transfer assistance continues to exist	Continued availability of water rights transfer assistance.	Water Rights transfer assistance no longer exists.	WRIA 49 planning efforts to clarify streamflow protection goals for the County was conducted and approved. An Okanogan County water bank is in development. The local water Conservancy Board is available. Drought resources lag behind agricultural season, but are sometimes available.
	Water rights are maintained within Okanogan County.	Educational opportunities related to maintaining active water rights are available.	Informational opportunities are not provided.	
Improved agricultural market infrastructure and services.	Agriculture related businesses and services exist within the county.	Number of agriculture related businesses and services that exist.	Significant decrease in overall number of businesses and services, or loss of sole business in a particular market sector.	Some growth, some loss of agricultural businesses, unclear what affect on agriculture in general.
Education, training, and support for best management practices	Availability of education, technical resources, programs and events	Number of available resources, programs and events.	Significant decrease in resources or programs available, significant decrease in events held or in participation in events held.	While programs and resources are changing, local organizations are working to adapt and respond to interest in new technologies and best management practices.
A welcoming business environment with flexibility for agricultural operators.	Improved understanding between agricultural operators and agency personnel.	Number of forums and meetings to discuss key issues in a cooperative manner.	Lack of opportunities for discourse between agricultural community and agency personnel.	Similar levels of opportunity for engagement with agency personnel. WRIA planning effort was a significant conversation about water use and agriculture.
	Implementation of flexible site-specific solutions to address critical areas issues.	Types of practices that are permitted.	Adverse impacts to agriculture due to flooding and streambank erosion continue and landowners report lack of management alternatives.	
	Farming remains economically viable and productive.	Number of farms operating in Okanogan County.	Significantly fewer farms are operating.	
Protect private property rights	Voluntary approaches are used for environmental protection, rather than regulatory approaches.	Participation in stewardship practices and programs remains voluntary.	Within the scope of VSP, incidents contrary to the provisions of the “no enforcement” resolution on page i reported to VSP staff or VSP Workgroup	Voluntary approach is in place.