

Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed Partnership
Place-Based Integrated Water Resource Planning
Stakeholder Meeting

Meeting Minutes

April 17, 2019

OSU Ag Extension Office

Island City, OR

ATTENDANCE: Larry Larson, Steve Parrett, Matt Insko, Tony Malmberg, Curt Ricker, Adrienne Averett, Mike Burton, Jed Hassinger, Ann Hulden, Levon Baremore, Cheryl Murchison, Dennis Murchison, Bill Gamble, Tucker Billman, Tim Wallender, Kacie Melville, Tim Bailey, Donna Beverage, JB Brock, Brett Moore, Jason Malday, Anton Chiono, Dana Kurtz. Via Phone: Susie Snyder, Margaret Matter.

I. Welcome

Dana called the meeting to order and brief introductions took place, which included many comments that flooding is occurring in new places not seen before and on a larger scale.

- a. Dana provided a summary of the last meeting. Discussion surrounded Sub8 issues/vulnerabilities.
 - i. Feedback indicated that there was too much time spent on language and whether or not issues were severe enough to be considered critical. Uncertain outcomes were a concern. A map showing all subwatersheds with annual deficits and surplus was requested and is provided today. A better definition of rankings was also requested.
 - ii. The process will take a new direction by identifying issues for the whole watershed, and then rank subwatersheds that each issue applies to. Strategies will be brainstormed by issue.
 - iii. Dana reviewed meeting guidelines and reminded the group that today's goal is to identify as many potential strategies as possible by brainstorming big ideas; vetting will come later.

II. Step 3 Report Update

Dana shared the Step 3 Report update, which is now ready for adoption by vote. Everyone who signed the governance agreement and has also attended two of the four most recent meetings may vote. The Step 3 Report was adopted by unanimous vote, with one abstention from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation due to the time it takes to get official approval from a final document.

III. Step 4 Critical Issues and Strategy Brainstorm

- a. JB Brock, Union County Emergency Manager, provided an update regarding flooding in the area. He indicated that flooding looked different this year for several reasons: we went into winter with dry conditions, water soaked into the ground rapidly, and then there was a lot of late season snow and rapid evacuation of mid-elevation snow. One reason for increased flooding frequency is the warming trend: it is hotter and dryer and snow comes out faster.

Many years ago, the Army Corp of Engineers advocated for dikes very tight to the stream channel and suggested reducing the pitch; it would decrease flood frequency but increase severity; it would result in a reduction in farm land but you wouldn't have catastrophic failure. It would not be expensive, but the challenge is that it would have to be systematic solution. To reengage the Army Corps of Engineers, we would have to rebuild the system because it is not connected.

Despite damages on agriculture ground and private property, Union County has not declared an emergency because it has not met the required threshold for public infrastructure damages. If it qualified, funding would assist with public infrastructure repairs. Private damages would only qualify for a low interest loan, and only if the landowner does not have insurance.

Several landowners shared concerns that flooding is more severe this year compared to previous years and is also showing up in areas that have not historically had a problem. There are also public roads that are still under water and have not been assessed for damages.

- b. Dana recapped Sub8 issues agreed upon from the previous meeting.
- c. Potential strategies were discussed.
 - i. Storage
 - Ask neighboring communities about their flooding problems before they had reservoirs (Phillips, Pilcher, Hereford & Burnt River area).
 - Regulate water with reservoirs.
 - Slow the spread of water through storage and restoration.
 - The opportunity at Rinehart Gap should not be overlooked.
 - Increased storage should be investigated first.
 - At what cost are we willing to store a large volume of water, like we have this year?
 - ii. Levees, Ditches & Stream Restoration
 - Change levee setbacks to address fish issues.
 - Consider another channel, opposite of levee.
 - Some changes can't be made by farmers when old slews have been filled for so long.
 - Floodway easement program allows some farming practices; small levees are built far from the channel, then you grow the crop every 4-5 years and get compensation.

- Restore the state ditch that has dropped 8-10 feet in the valley and spread water throughout the valley so it doesn't flood.
 - Restoring the state ditch would result in flooding homes and losing all crops.
 - Use a combination of reconnecting flood plains and the upland flood plain.
 - Increasing flood plains will hold longer if it is peat. Bird Track and Catherine Creek have loam on top of cobble.
- iii. Soil Organic Matter
- If soil organic matter is increased, each acre can store 16k additional gallons of water.
 - The ag community is doing a better job (than in the 1970's) by putting more organic material back into the soil.
 - Flooding must be controlled to have organic matter.
 - Increasing organic matter is a storage issue.
- iv. Land Management
- We need better range and timber management.
 - Grazing and timber management is part of the solution.
 - Manage grazing with the result of organic matter.
 - We can influence Forest Service decisions through better involvement
- v. Other Discussion Points
- We are farming on flood plains so there is no easy way to make flood waters go away.
 - We need solutions with multiple benefits and that also address water quality; flooding in production lands results in chemicals ending up in the water.
 - We need a 20 year plan (like other counties) that will benefit agriculture, fish, and forestry.
 - History should be a strong consideration when determining solutions.
 - Is there a way to incorporate power, recreation, tourism, and reservoirs?
 - Maybe we need to ask how we can live with flooding.
 - Asking farmers to live with flooding is like asking the Forest Service to live with wildfires.
 - Despite our best intentions and efforts, we cannot control Mother Nature.
 - Some of the solutions that were suggested today would impact private property rights that would result in confiscating property. This group has no business doing that.

IV. Conclusion

a. Next meeting is May 1, 2019 @4pm at the Misener Room, 1001 4th Street, La Grande

b. Other comments

- Bill said a project proposed to move the Medical Springs highway and restore the channel through that large valley is in development stages. Over the years, it has been shoved to the east side of valley and they have lost storage capacity, but they are trying to reestablish those

channels. They would like to slowly release water through summer.

- There was discussion about what happens when this project ends. Donna said they could start looking for project funding. Brett added that Oregon Water Resources has additional funding opportunities for feasibility studies. Matt asked if this group would continue to function after this partnership project ends; Brett said that is the intent. Donna said that to get funding, a case needs to be built to show how a project would solve a problem. Brett said that the group would develop a list of strategies and even if a project is not a top priority, it can be pursued if it meets our needs.

The meeting was adjourned at 6:00 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Cinda Johnston
Union County Planning Department Specialist