

## **2019 Local Work Group Meeting Polk County Highlights (Local Natural Resources Discussion Group)**

The annual Polk County Local Work Group meeting was held Friday, January 25, 2019 from 9:00 am – 12:00 pm at the OSU Extension Service, 289 E. Ellendale Ave., Suite 301, Dallas, OR. This meeting is held the last Friday in January annually to discuss natural resource concerns in Polk County and to help prioritize funding committed to addressing priority concerns. This meeting is designed to solicit input from conservation partners representing a broad spectrum of natural resource groups, agencies, landowners and land managers working together to improve natural resources in Polk County.

**Purpose: Build and expand partnerships; identify and evaluate resource issues; collaboratively improve priority resource issues.**

### **Objectives:**

- 1. Review current funding opportunities for 2018 and 2019.**
- 2. NRCS Proposed 2020 Strategies**
- 3. Review 2018 Priorities and Accomplishments, using current NRCS Long Range Plan 2018-2023.**
- 4. Recommendations additions to current priorities.**

## **1. Opening**

- Welcome

Karin Stutzman, Polk SWCD District Manager, welcomed participants, explained the SWCD's role as convener of the Local Work Group, and introduced Evelyn Conrad, NRCS District Conservationist for Polk County.

- NRCS District Conservationist's introductory remarks & review of meeting purpose and agenda

Evelyn began the meeting with highlights of the new locally led programs being developed as a result of the Local Work Group's 2018 meeting, proposed for funding beginning in 2020. More detail on that topic in the minutes below. At their 2018 meeting, the Local Work Group requested that the Polk County Long Range Plan be updated to cover the years 2018-2023. This document is dynamic, edited annually after the annual Local Work Group meeting to incorporate changes. The Polk County Long Range Plan is available along with the 2018 Local Work Group minutes on the Oregon NRCS website. It can be found by searching for, "What's available in my county? And selecting Polk County. It can be found here:

[https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/or/programs/?cid=nrcs142p2\\_044022](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/or/programs/?cid=nrcs142p2_044022)

The annual Polk County Local Work Group meeting is held the last Friday in January. Participation is encouraged.

## **2. Review current funding opportunities for 2018 and 2019**

Evelyn presented a slide show that reviewed the current NRCS funding opportunities for solving local natural resource concerns in Polk County. These include Forest Health, Oak Woodland Health, Wildlife Habitat – Elk Meadows, High Tunnels to benefit fresh local produce, and Organic Fund to assist producers with transitioning to Organic, or assisting existing organic producers with new requirements to meet their Organic Plan.

- Forest Health

NRCS offers funding through EQIP for improving forest health with the Structural Diversity in Forests fund, 2017- 2021, to address overstocked plantation style forest lands. Prior to this fund, NRCS had offered a fund for Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) forest land, 2010 to 2016. During 2017-2018, the western part of the Luckiamute watershed was the highest priority.

- Oak Woodland Health

NRCS, SWCD and Yamhill SWCDs offer funding through RCPP-EQIP for The North Willamette Valley Oak Restoration, 2015 – 2019, to improve oak woodland health in Polk and Yamhill Counties by thinning overstocked oak stands and remove encroaching conifers.

- Elk Meadows

NRCS offers funding through EQIP for Upper South Yamhill Early Seral Habitat, 2015-2019, to improve elk habitat by controlling weeds, planting forage species and promoting/maintaining early seral meadow habitat in forest clearings. The NRCS is partnering with The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde on this program. This fund not only improves upland elk habitat, but also helps reduce elk grazing pressure and disturbance on low elevation cropland.

- National Initiatives

NRCS offers several national initiatives funded through EQIP. In 2018-19 the 2 funds that received applications in Polk County included the High Tunnel Initiative and the Organic Initiative. Both initiatives were created for the 2008 Farm Bill. The High Tunnel Initiative assists producers by extending the growing season, to increase production of locally produced fresh fruits and vegetables. The Organic Initiative assists producers who are transitioning to Organic according to their Organic Plan and provides assistance with any production techniques and natural resource concerns in order to acquire and maintain Organic status.

Other NRCS National Initiatives include: Air Quality, Energy and Animal Feeding Operations.

### **3. Proposed New 2020 Strategies**

- Oak Woodland Health and Elk Meadows, update by Evelyn Conrad

At the 2018 LWG meeting, the group recommended to continue addressing oak habitat as a priority. The current North Willamette Valley Oak Restoration fund and the Upper South Yamhill Early Seral Habitat fund (known as Elk Meadows fund) will both end in 2019. Polk County NRCS began meetings with the Polk SWCD in late 2018 to develop a new proposal that would combine these 2 funds, since elk utilize oak savanna and oak woodlands as well as upland forest openings, and the implementation steps to create and maintain these habitat types are very similar. This proposal will be submitted to Oregon NRCS for review in spring 2019, and if approved would be funded in 2020. There are currently 6 applications for oak woodland restoration waiting for funding.

- Wildlife Tax Deferral, as relates to Oak Habitat and Forested Elk Meadows - update by Karin Stutzman

This topic arose during the 2018 LWG. It is related to landowners who have Oak Woodlands and Elk Meadow projects. Such projects may reduce the number of trees per acre below the stocking rate required for forest land use as defined by Polk County Assessor. Landowners installing these projects could jeopardize their land use tax status with the assessor. Several counties, including Polk, participate in a state-wide program, run by OR Dept of Fish and Wildlife, that includes a tax category called Wildlife Tax Deferral, which requires a Wildlife Habitat Conservation Management Plan. However, ODFW funding has decreased in recent years (<2% of Governor's Budget goes toward natural resources), reducing ODFW's capacity for writing new WHCMPs or monitor existing WHCMPs in the program. Presently no new applicants are accepted into the program. The lack of activity in this program may be a barrier to landowners to restore habitats and their associated covers on their forest or woodland. This issue is important to Polk County landowners resulting in collaboration between ODFW and SWCDs to look for solutions. The SWCD is supporting this program by informing ODFW of Polk County tax deferral problems from landowners. There are 50 WHCMPs in Polk County, more than any other county in the state. SWCD's are looking to fund positions to monitor plans and enter data into a database. However, due to the nature of the statute, legislative action may be needed to resolve this tax deferral issue. The Polk SWCD can answer concerns regarding this issue in Polk County. SWCDs and the Oregon Association of Conservation Districts can present local concerns to the legislature.

- Erosion on perennial cropland, update by Evelyn Conrad

At the 2018 LWG meeting, the group identified this natural resource concern as a priority on orchards, vineyards and Christmas trees. In the last 6 months, Yamhill, Marion and Polk NRCS and SWCDs have identified soil erosion in the many young hazelnut orchards in the central Willamette Valley, and have begun a large outreach campaign to hazelnut growers. The Yamhill, Marion and Polk NRCS and SWCDs are developing a new EQIP funding proposal, to be submitted to Oregon NRCS in spring 2019 for review and funding approval. If approved, funding would be available in 2020. Pending approval of funds to treat erosion in Hazelnut Orchards, Polk NRCS will also gauge the level of interest from producers to warrant adding vineyards and Christmas tree farms in the future.

- Short Presentation on Soil Health, by Sue Reams

- 3 types of organic matter
  - Alive
  - Decomposing
  - Very dead - humus
- 4 concepts to follow to keep alive and decomposing OM:
  - Always keep soil covered
  - Minimize tillage
  - Continuous presence of living roots
  - Diverse crop or cover crop ensures diverse soil microbes
- 4 conservation practices that improve Soil Health:
  - Crop Rotation
  - Minimum-Till or No-Till
  - Cover Cropping
  - Buffers such as Filter Strips, Prairie Strips, Hedgerows, Other plantings

#### 4. Review 2018 Priorities & Accomplishments

Using the existing Polk County Long Range Plan (updated by Evelyn Conrad in 2018) as a reference, each 2018 priority was reviewed.

- Forest Health, update by Evelyn Conrad

At the 2018 LWG meeting, the group recommended to continue this as a top priority, and to expand the focus area beyond the current western Luckiamute watershed, to include Rickreall Creek, Salt Creek, and Mill Creek watersheds. This was accomplished. In Polk County, the Diversity in Forests fund has been expanded into a 2<sup>nd</sup> phase to include the Rickreall, Salt and Mill Creek watersheds for 2019.

- Streambank Erosion, update by Karin Stutzman

This is an ongoing concern for Polk County, but in 2018 the LWG did not rate it as a top priority. There are several options to treat this problem.

- OWEB Small Grants can be used, but funding is limited to \$15,000 each grant, \$100,000 per biennium, and often requires that landowners match the funds with private funds or other grants. Projects such as small culvert replacement, stream crossing hardening, and riparian plantings are common.
- OWEB Large Grants are used in larger scope projects such as small culverts replaced with bridges.
- If a landowner wishes to fund a project on their own, the Polk SWCD can write a plan, help with the permitting process and the design.
- CREP is a USDA program run by the Farm Services Agency with assistance by the Polk SWCD. The program has incentives to retire ag lands and convert to a riparian or wetland buffer.
- Oregon Dept of Agriculture helps producers meet minimum ag water quality criteria (overseen by Local Action Committees) with technical and financial assistance.

- Water Quality, update by Karin Stutzman

This is an ongoing concern for Polk County, but in 2018 the LWG did not rate it as a top priority. A 2016 audit of OR Water Resources showed that due to low budget, there is no knowledge of the status of groundwater. There is no staff time for detailed GW investigations. Not all water users are required to report. Field managers have large areas to service. If this is important to you, continue to voice your concerns with the Polk SWCD. A SEDCOR Ag Breakfast is planned Feb 20 and 27 on this topic.

- Invasive Weeds, update by Karin Stutzman

This is an ongoing concern for Polk County, but in 2018 the LWG did not rate it as a top priority.

- There is no weed board in Polk County. This requires citizen involvement. Contact Karin Stutzman if you are interested.
- The Polk SWCD wrote a letter to different agencies (including ODA) regarding controlling noxious weeds on roadsides, such as poison hemlock and tansy ragwort, discussing proper timing of spraying to control these important weeds.

Resources:

- Invasives-Noxious Weed Program run by OR Dept of Ag with Hotline.
- Western Invasives Network. Grants are available, such as the grant for *Ludwigia peploides* (water primrose) awarded to Polk County SWCD.

- Water Quantity, update by Karin Stutzman

This is an ongoing concern for Polk County, but in 2018 the LWG did not rate it as a top priority. This broad category includes flooding and insufficient water for irrigation. As a result of the flooding in Salt Creek in 2016-17, the Salt Creek Collaborative has formed. Members include landowners, Craig Pope from Polk County Board of Commissioners, ODA, NRCS, and OSU Extension Service. This is a charter model that could be used as a pilot to resolve other natural resources issues. Possible solutions are no action, petition the County Commissioners to remove drift, form a Water Improvement or Drainage District, or other action.

## 5. Small Group Discussion and Strive for Consensus

Participants were asked to break up into groups to discuss the list of suggested priorities and decide which 3-4 priorities they identified as most important and included in the Long-Range Plan. Once the smaller groups developed and presented their lists, the full group compared lists and identified the priorities that were identified most frequently among the 5 lists.

**Forest Health and Oak Woodlands – Top Priority**, funding currently available to address this concern.

- Recent increase in forest species mortality. Re-think how to plant for success.
- Thinning fuels reduces fire danger
- Stand diversity improves overall forest health
- Low soil moisture is stressing and killing conifers in the uplands
- Protecting forest from conversion will improve water holding capacity in soil and reduce surface runoff.
- Wildlife Tax Deferral- Oak Woodland and Forest land
  - Develop partnerships to promote implementation
  - Education

**Soil Erosion – Top Priority**, funding proposal being developed for 2020, approval pending.

- For perennial crops, prioritize hazelnuts
- Vineyards and Christmas tree farms may be addressed later.

Water Quantity – Storage for agricultural use – High Priority, solution oriented networking and discussion in progress.

- Important – This is an ongoing county wide concern tied to a variety of water quantity concern.
- Irrigation storage and system improvement is very expensive.
- Off channel storage, ponds and covered tanks are most likely option, permitting generally required - Impound, capture, store, release.
- Soil health, including organic matter, soil structure and surface cover, has a direct correlation to irrigation water requirements. By improving soil health, water holding capacity increases, reducing irrigation water needs.

Invasive Weeds

- Polk County has a good road maintenance program with county road maintenance.
- More public education is needed.
- Recommendation to hire a position to GPS all roads, based on the Yamhill County model.
  - Are larger efforts needed for Oxeyed Daisy or Tansy Ragwort?

- Cooperative Weed Management Area board revival is an option. Contact Western Invasive Species Network.

Stream Function – Associated with streambank erosion, water quality/quantity, and wildlife habitat;

- Reintroduce beaver analogue dams in stream, improve floodplain function and groundwater recharge.

Additional Items – Polk SWCD will follow up on these items.

- Create a list of who to call for Technical Assistance.
- Educate the public about regulations.

## **6. 2019 Polk Local Work Group Natural Resource Priorities**

### **2017 Priorities**

- 1. Water Quantity/Quality of Groundwater**
- 2. Emphasis on Education to Landowners**
- 3. Forest Health**
- 4. Water Storage**

### **2018 Priorities**

- 1. Erosion – Perennial Crops and Streambanks**
- 2. Forest Health**
- 3. Water Quantity**
- 4. Oak/Wildlife Tax Deferral**
- 5. Invasive Weeds**

### **2019 Priorities**

- 1. Forest Health**
- 2. Oak Woodlands**
- 3. Soil Erosion**
- 4. Water Storage**
- 5. Invasive Weeds**
- 6. Stream Function**

## **7. Meeting adjourned.**

### **Save the Date: 2020 Polk County LWG Meeting**

Date: The 2020 LWG meeting is scheduled for January 31, 2020

Location: OSU Extension Service, 289 E. Ellendale Ave., Suite 301, Dallas, OR

Time: 9:00am-12:00pm

Edits completed by the Polk SWCD and NRCS