

**THURSTON COUNTY
AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

**McLane Kitchen Conference Room
5033 Harrison Avenue
Olympia, WA 98502**

MAY 29, 2014

MINUTES

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Pat Labine, Co-Chair
Doug Wiseman
Robert McIntosh
Eric Johnson
Bill Wyman
Erik Hagan
Kevin Jensen
E.J. Zita
Chery Sullivan

MEMBERS EXCUSED: John Lentz, Dave Nygard

STAFF: Polly Stoker, WSU Thurston County Extension

GUESTS: Jeff Swotek, Ruth King, Sierra Smith

CALL TO ORDER – 7:02pm, Pat Labine, Co-Chair

ADOPTION OF MINUTES – The minutes from April were approved (but may have changes at a later date since they were so long.)

REVIEW AGENDA – add Conservation Futures 2014 Ranking Decisions topic.

THE PUBLIC COMMENT Sierra Smith gave a statement regarding a danger if you are headed to the Glacier Heritage area where a landowner's mentally unstable son is stopping cars as they enter to say they are not allowed. He has done this 3 times in the past month as well as numerous times in the past. He is armed with a gun and dogs. He also trespasses onto the land to harass people there as well. This area is used by researchers and students of universities. They just had Prairie Appreciation Days down there and this was disruptive to the event.

ANNOUNCEMENTS & OTHER BUSINESS – Welcome Kevin Jensen attending his first meeting as a committee member. Also Lucas mentioned he has not heard back from the Permit Dept on the green sheet concerns and questions that were submitted last meeting.

DIRECTOR REPORT: n/a

FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS: Zita would like to add a topic to the next meeting regarding Climate Change and AG Impacts. There are 3 different webinars available for viewing 1) forests 2) regional overview and 3) ag impacts. These issues will be changing by a factor of 2 to 5 in the next 20 years and it would be good for the group to be educated on this.

Lucas would also like to invite Tammy from Thurston County Planning department to discuss all of the green sheet applications we have been receiving regarding the marijuana grow operations and the lack of details they are providing regarding water and waste management. Lucas thinks we should devote an entire meeting to this topic since at each committee meeting this topic has not been answered and questions remain.

NRCS EASTMENT PROGRAM – Jeff Swotek

Good news is that the Farm Bill has been passed, and it is a good one. The bill has 2 parts: Financial Assistance which is funding for farmers and ranchers to do projects on their lands and the AG Conservation Easement Program. The packets of information he passed out can be found at www.wa.nrcs.usda.gov. The largest program under the Financial Assistance section is the Environmental Quality Incentives program, which is a multi-billion dollar program, which funds a variety of projects like broom control, cross-fencing, irrigation improvement, forestry, etc. A lot of energy audits and energy improvements on farms have been done with this funding. Next is the Regional Conservation Program which is a targeted effort, a group in a geographic region that want to do a large project in a specific water shed area. The Conservation Security Program is a program that rewards good stewards of land and encourages them to do more of the same at a higher level, catered towards the commodity AG on the other side of the mountains. Lastly in this category is Conservation Innovation grants which targets funding for individuals or groups who want to accelerate implementation of innovative technologies.

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) side of the bill is very popular in this area but not so much in southwest Washington. The 2014 Farm Bill consolidates 3 main easement programs. (Farmer/Ranch land protection program, Grassland Reserve program and the Wetlands Reserves program) This program can help a farmer keep their land by selling their development rights. Many do not know about this option and it can actually help save their farms instead of bankruptcy. If you have working ag lands and would like to explore this, you will need to partner with a Land Trust which has a proven track record for maintaining easements and also can get a 50% match in funding. The value is determined by an appraisal on the portion of the land they would like to do the easement. Then a 2nd appraisal is done with the hypothetical removal of the development rights which will decrease the value. The difference of these two is the value of the easement. (It's a PDR not TDR). This program will then pay half of this amount, with the sponsor paying the other half. Some of these are land owner donations. He always tells his customers an easement is permanent so you want to think this through before doing it. Take out the areas that may be needed in the future for children's houses. Or also future revenue sources for the farm and remove those areas as well. Also select a sponsor that has the ability to get the matching funds and has experience in managing easements. They will be the entity to hold the easement forever and must report once a year on the land to assure it hasn't turned to condos. There has been pretty good growth in the past 3 years. Thurston County's easement rank in the 10-25% of all granted. So many landowners think they have to sell their farm to get money to survive. We need to get the word out about what this program actually is and what it isn't. Program funding will increase between 2014 to 2018 and there's also an option to get targeted funding down the road for some preservation efforts here. And for trees, the farm bill also has a provision for an easement program on forest land. It's called the Healthy Forest Initiative and is so new there is no rule book yet but has enormous potential in Thurston County.

For the Financial Assistance program, you can apply for funding any time with no obligation. 2015 will close late this fall. The properties are then ranked and they go out in the field to see what the projects are they want to do. Close to 80 applications in right now to be reviewed. NRCS manage hundreds of projects every year.

There is a public media event on June 3rd where a member of the white house is coming to Thurston County and that would be a great time to go out and support these easement programs and an opportunity to engage in this discussion with someone who can have influence on the federal level. We locally can also suggest to the Commissioners to fund more farm land with the Conservation Futures program to support this movement.

CENTENNIAL FARM TOUR – Ruth King

Different groups (SSCLT, Historic Commission, and VCB) have approached Lucas requesting assistance setting up a Farm Tour. It just so happens that there is the annual Farmland Trust dinner planned on September 20th and this date might be good for a tour as well prior to the dinner starting. The tour could start and stop at the fairgrounds since there is where the dinner is held. Per George the VCB would commit to providing some funding for this event. The admission that would be charged could help pay for the bus rentals, port-a-potties and other costs. The farms could also receive a stipend too for allowing the group onto their land and would be provided a script of information to go over during the visit. They would also like to hire commentators for the bus rides to educate along the route about the farms they are visiting. The route and the details need to still be worked out but some locations suggested could be Johnson Berry Farms, Schilters, and a shell fish operations. If lunch was not provided it would be an incentive for the farm tour attendees to stay for the preservation dinner too at the fairgrounds. It would be nice if this type of event could be set up to happen annually and the AG committee could house the details of the event. The motion to somehow get involved was passed and a subcommittee will be formed to assist (maybe doing this over email.)

CONSERVATION FUTURES FOR 2014 RESULTS RECOMMENDATIONS – Doug Wiseman

He spent 2 mornings looking at 5 different sites. They have \$950,000 total to work with. All of the property ranked very close.

- 1) Bush Prairie down south of Tumwater right by the airport, 5 acres vegetable growing with hoop houses, and a lot of pocket gophers. Asking for \$75,000 from CF with a total ask of \$150,000. It is also the original Bush family homestead. They may not have a match for the other funding.
- 2) Nelson Ranch on Old 99, 550 acres, looking for \$1,480,000 total, \$500,000 from Conservation Futures. They do not have a partner yet for the other half. The biggest part of the acreage is river bottom from the Deschutes River. (Was ranked Number 2)
- 3) Darlin Creek (Lake Lucinda) on Delphi Road 40-50 acres which could be subdivided into 5 acres plots and the rest of it is wetland and forestry. \$2,500,000 total, \$1,250,000 from CF. It would have to be bought, no easements.
- 4) Raimos (spelling?) Black River piece.
- 5) Schwiker (spelling?) is adjacent to the Weins property, on Skatter Creek and the Chehalis Creek asking \$450,000 from CF, \$786,000 total. 113 acres total. (Was ranked Number 1)

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS FOR SELECTING CONSERVATION FUTURES PROJECTS- Robert McIntosh

Robert studied the documents provided by Andrew Defobis from our last meeting in search of specific answers regarding the legal requirements for selecting Conservation Futures projects and came up empty handed on a couple of topics. One topic being the information describing who is on the county Conservation Futures Review Group, and possibly also what the county does with the Review Group's recommendations. The documents we have already received are: (1) the Conservation Futures Review Group Review and Ranking Criteria; (2) the Conservation Futures Web Site; (3) the Conservation Futures Operational Guidelines; and (4) the Conservation Futures Strategic Plan. But none of these four documents says who is on the Review Group, or what the County does with the Review Group's rankings. Lucas will reach out to Andrew again to make sure we are not missing a specific document which houses these answers. If there is not one, the next step may be to request a hearing with the commissioners (as in a minority report, not from the whole AG committee) to address the concern over the way in which the projects are chosen.

ADJOURN – 9:15pm, Pat Labine, Co-Chair