



Okanogan County

Voluntary Stewardship Program

Biennial Report



Okanogan County, Washington

July 1, 2017 – June 30, 2019



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1 Introduction

VSP Work Plan

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. Participants developed a plan that characterized the importance of agriculture in Okanogan County, highlighted the ongoing stewardship activities by agricultural producers, and developed goals and benchmarks to continue the progress protecting critical areas. The Work Plan can be found on the Washington State Conservation Commission website (<https://scc.wa.gov/vsp/>) or requested from the Okanogan Conservation District. As the designated lead entity for providing technical assistance, Okanogan CD has the responsibility to administer technical programs that suit the needs of the unique agricultural landscape in Okanogan County.

Reporting

Okanogan CD staff have leveraged VSP to improve capacity, increase technical skills through training, and provide technical assistance to more producers, on more land. While Okanogan CD and local partners offer a wide variety of assistance to producers, the VSP program is helping to fill service gaps and provide quality technical assistance for the diverse agricultural operations in the County.

The Okanogan County VSP Work Plan characterized agricultural stewardship activities implemented from July 2011 through 2016. This biennium report describes activities conducted between July 1, 2017 and June 30, 2019 related to the purpose of VSP- to protect or enhance critical areas while maintaining the viability of agriculture. Outreach, participation, critical area data, and agricultural viability are considered in relation to monitoring and adaptive management guides in the Work Plan.

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:

- 2018 Okanogan Horticulture Association Annual Meeting, Okanogan, WA
- 2019 Okanogan Horticulture Association Annual Meeting, Okanogan, WA
- 2017 & 2018 Okanogan County Fair, Okanogan, WA
- Drought Resources Open House, Twisp, WA and Okanogan, WA
- 2018 & 2019 Local Work Group Meeting (NRCS), Pateros, WA

The Voluntary Stewardship Program and stewardship assistance was advertised in the June 2018 and March 2019 Okanogan CD newsletters. Handouts and advertising material were distributed at multiple events following approval of the Work Plan in September 2018.

3 Participation & Partnerships

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 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.

3.1 Completed Stewardship Practices

Agricultural producers in Okanogan County continue to implement diverse stewardship practices that protect and enhance critical areas throughout the County. In this report, stewardship practice implementation is quantified based on projects documented through voluntary incentives programs from Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and Okanogan CD (Table 1). Between 2017 and 2019, dryland wheat producers planted 160 acres of cover crops to protect and improve soil health. Seventeen water troughs were installed or improved to protect streams, wetlands and ponds from livestock. Over 1,600 feet of stream was improved with riparian planting and erosion control. Livestock exclusion fencing was installed along two miles of the Okanogan River bank, a project which included a significant conversion of 18 acres of pasture to riparian floodplain buffer. 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 and planted upland shrubs to improve sharp-tailed grouse habitat on rangeland. Projects were implemented on all types of agricultural land: dryland, irrigated, and rangelands.



Volunteers installed fence markers on over 4 miles of range fence in priority sharp-tailed grouse habitat.

Many irrigation districts and associations are pursuing water and energy saving measures. In 2018, Okanogan CD assisted a Reclamation District to replace 1,580 feet of cracking, seeping canal with 1,560 feet of pipeline. The project will save 100 acre-feet of water loss each year, which will remain in Spectacle Lake in most years. Several other irrigation districts are in the process of planning or implementing improvements that benefit stream flow as well as their water users.

3.2 Technical Assistance and Project Planning

Okanogan Conservation District provides technical assistance for diverse requests related to individual and multi-user irrigation systems, wildlife, water quality, native plants, and crops. The District partners with NRCS to provide rangeland management recommendations on forest and shrub-steppe. Okanogan CD conducted site visits to approximately 65 individual agricultural properties between 2017 and 2019. Several of these visits were developed into project plans and funding applications to WSCC or Ecology. Examples of technical assistance which included recommendations to protect critical areas:

- Field visit to an orchard regarding concerns that native riparian plants hosted codling moth. Researched the topic and advised that the plants present would not likely increase pest problems. Provided general codling moth recommendations and references.

- Developed three plans to reduce livestock impacts to wetlands.
- Provided cover crop and direct seed recommendations to reduce erosion and improve soil health.
- Suggested erosion control techniques for a cut slope related to a road.
- Assisted landowners to install more efficient irrigation pumps.

In addition to on-the-ground site visits, staff provided assistance over email or phone to over 30 individuals and office drop-ins between 2017 and 2019. 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 planning a project, however, Okanogan CD staff and partners are dedicated to procuring funding to respond to these needs.

3.3 Educational Opportunities

Okanogan CD partnered with local groups to present diverse workshops for land managers:

- 2017 & 2018 Soil Health Field Day – 55 & 45 Participants
- 2017 Okanogan Cattleman’s Range Monitoring Tour – 40 participants
- 2018 Okanogan CD Conservation Celebration, Ranching, Wolves, Wildlife – 85 participants
- 2018 Fuel for Fire, Forage for Cattle: Grazing Management with Stockmanship – 30 participants
- 2018 Water Right Workshops – Okanogan & Tonasket – 20 participants
- 2019 Livestock Watering Techniques Farm Tour - 4 participants
- 2019 Managing Your Land for Wildlife and Wildfire- 4 participants
- 2019 Okanogan CD Conservation Celebration, Sharp-tailed Grouse Recovery in Okanogan - 85 participants

Partners for these programs included NRCS, Washington State University, Washington Water Trust, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, WSU Extension, the Okanogan Water Conservancy Board, and the Okanogan Land Trust.



Range managers study characteristics and indicators of rangeland health and learn how to conduct monitoring for range assessments. Okanogan CD worked with NRCS to update the Range Monitoring Manual.

3.4 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.

3.5 Supporting Partnerships

Okanogan CD staff participate in several planning and resource management groups in order 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 for local, regional and statewide groups, such as the Similkameen-Okanogan Watershed Action Team, Methow Restoration Council, Working for Wildlife collaborative, and the 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.

Technical assistance requests are diverse, including, but not limited to water rights inquiries, weed identification, riparian planning guidance, wildlife concerns, crop recommendations and irrigation upgrades. In order to provide quality guidance to agricultural producers, and understand regional priorities and programs, District staff maintain cooperative relationships with agency partners such as WSU Extension, Okanogan County, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Ecology, DNR, NRCS, the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, and 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 name a few. These partnerships help coordinate resources to best assist producers to implement projects well-suited for their land and their agricultural operation.

4 Effectiveness Monitoring

Thorough effectiveness monitoring is required in 5-year status reports, however, it is useful to consider the available information for annual adaptive management and to ensure VSP is aligned with local management efforts.

Environmental quality data is collected by several agencies and organizations, with differing frequencies. Due to the post-fire recovery process in Okanogan County, many previous publications and data sources (including aerial imagery) may not be as relevant for comparison with the current status and may no longer provide a realistic trend comparison. Many water quality parameters are impacted by the effects of fire, and post-fire flooding can worsen water quality. As ecosystems continue to establish a new baseline following fire and flooding, additional surveys will be needed to track changes through time and establish a reliable trend. However, there are several sources of monitoring data which span the period of interest, although the effects of fire on critical habitat areas cannot be teased apart from other impacts on those resources. This will continue to be a challenge for monitoring critical areas in Okanogan County.



The Ecosystem Diagnosis and Treatment (EDT) reporting by the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation includes measures of aquatic habitat health related to the needs of threatened Upper Columbia River steelhead. EDT reports habitat metrics which are most influential to this population's success. Within the Okanogan basin, when comparing habitat conditions in 2017 and 2013, sediment loading decreased (a habitat improvement), while temperature increased and flow decreased. For the Methow basin, when comparing 2014 to 2004, although temperature increased, habitat improvements were seen in decreased sediment loading and increased flow.

A major impediment to migrating salmonids are impassable barriers. The Okanogan basin was last monitored in 2007, with many barriers improved or impacted by high flow events since then. Updates to this data source are being completed in 2019 in the Methow basin, with the Okanogan Basin anticipated in 2020. Also anticipated for 2020 is an update to the Methow EDT report, to fill data gaps and provide a more recent dataset for comparison of habitat trends.

Two upland species of concern in Okanogan County, the Columbian sharp-tailed grouse and the Western gray squirrel, are monitored by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. These species are useful indicators of upland wildlife habitat condition. Fire has impacted the sharp-tailed grouse population in the County, with grouse populations lower in 2017 than 2015, and some traditional leks (breeding areas) were found to be inactive in burned areas. The Carlton Complex burned approximately 30% of the modeled gray squirrel habitat, and the current distribution of gray squirrels is not known and WDFW has not yet updated the current population estimates. As monitoring of these and other species continues, habitat trends in critical areas can continue to be evaluated.



Okanogan CD partnered with WDFW and local ranchers to transplant sharp-tailed grouse from Canada to shrub-steppe in Okanogan County

Due to recent fires and flooding events, as well as the current drought conditions in the County, a longer time series over which to evaluate the trends in groundwater levels would provide a more accurate representation of groundwater status. Although additional years of sampling data will provide a clearer picture of critical area status following the fires and floods in Okanogan County, the difficulty of attributing habitat trends to either agricultural activities or natural processes will remain.

Understanding these limitations, and anticipating updates to many existing monitoring programs, Okanogan CD will coordinate with the technical panel to prepare for more thorough effectiveness monitoring for the 5-year VSP implementation reports.

Regarding on-the-ground implementation of stewardship practices, producers who implemented practices within the last two years will work with Okanogan CD to ensure practices are maintained. Photo documentation of these projects will demonstrate effectiveness over time.

5 Agricultural Viability

Comparing the United States Agriculture Census data from 2018 to previous years, Okanogan County agriculture is following at least one national trend: mid-size farms are decreasing, while small and very large farms increase. It's unclear at this time how that's specifically impacting Okanogan County's agricultural economy. The availability of water continues to be a marker of agricultural viability, and is currently a topic of several planning processes, including the WRIA 49 (Okanogan) Watershed Planning unit, and the Methow Watershed Council's exploration of long-term water availability. Land use zoning is another locally managed aspect of agricultural viability. The Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed revisions to the 2014 Okanogan County Comprehensive Plan is currently open to public review and comment.

The ability to provide technical assistance supports several elements of agricultural viability outlined in the VSP Work Plan. Between 2017 and 2019, Okanogan CD provided approximately 95 individuals or local groups with information, technical assistance or referrals regarding protecting water rights, regulatory guidance, and power savings. Financial assistance programs helped many improve animal health and farm management, in addition to critical area protection.



Open canal to pipeline conversion for a multi-user irrigation association servicing orchard and hay/pasture crops

Many producers in Okanogan County rely on multi-user irrigation systems for water. Okanogan CD and local partners receive many assistance requests to improve aging canals and pumping infrastructure for water efficiency and to reduce maintenance and electricity costs. These projects are vitally important to support agriculture, but they are expensive to plan and implement. Organizations like Trout Unlimited and Washington Water Trust assist with irrigation system improvements that address salmon recovery goals. Okanogan CD has consistently provided planning and implementation assistance to all types of systems, including small irrigation districts and associations which often have access to fewer financial resources.

In addition to on-farm infrastructure, market and processing services are important to agricultural viability. In 2018, Okanogan CD and the Methow Conservancy coordinated with a work group of ranchers to study the feasibility of establishing a USDA inspected meat processing facility in the County. In 2019, the Methow Conservancy partnered with Double S Meats in Tonasket for the County's only USDA inspection facility, which allows ranchers to sell to grocery stores and restaurants. Establishing this facility reduces the travel time and expense for producers by several hours.

While agricultural leases and permits by individuals on public lands falls outside the scope of the Voluntary Stewardship Program, public land is an essential component of many livestock operations in the County. Okanogan CD is dedicated to facilitating the Coordinated Resource Management process, assisting ranchers and agencies to plan management of public lands. Permit and lease holders frequently implement stewardship practices on public lands to protect water and wildlife.

Okanogan CD and the VSP Work Group will continue to discuss opportunities to support agricultural viability in Okanogan County. Okanogan CD will continue to attend local association meetings and participate in regional planning efforts to identify opportunities.

6 Adaptive Management

6.1 Stewardship Implementation

Stewardship benchmarks are sorted into several categories, based on the primary resource concern and management type. Adaptive management triggers are based on the level of stewardship practice implementation needed to surpass estimated annual disenrollment. Annual disenrollment is the estimated annual discontinuation rate for a stewardship practice. Implementing practices beyond the annual disenrollment estimate satisfies the VSP criteria to protect critical areas at a 2011 baseline level. Participation monitoring for stewardship practice implementation is presented in Table 2.

Based on stewardship practice implementation associated with NRCS and Okanogan CD programs during the last two years, adaptive management actions are being considered for Nutrient Management, Habitat Management, and Pest Management categories. Habitat and nutrient management practices fell slightly short. The integrated pest management practice (IPM) had the greatest decline in implementation, likely due to a decrease in incentive programs through NRCS, which change locally from

year to year based on the Local Work Group prioritization process for funding. Horticulture operations most commonly implement IPM, and Okanogan CD has recently increased outreach to horticultural operations through pollinator and chipping programs. NRCS will also resume planning and providing financial assistance for IPM projects. As interest in pollinators grows, so does interest in reducing chemical sprays to manage pests.

To improve reporting of annual implementation for all practices, Okanogan CD will request more participation from producers to report non-incentivized management through stewardship checklists. Feet of stream habitat improved is likely underestimated because riparian improvements (critical area planting) is reported in acres, not stream length.

While existing incentive programs cover many of the stewardship practices in the VSP Work Plan, several gaps have been identified for practices related to soil, range and habitat management practices. Okanogan CD and partners have limited financial capacity to respond to technical assistance requests related to pollinator habitat, cover crops, irrigation efficiency upgrades and range improvements, such as prescribed grazing. To address this shortfall in existing programs, the VSP Work Group approved a plan to provide financial assistance for a set of practices that are otherwise difficult for technical staff to plan. These projects will be used to demonstrate stewardship practices to other land managers and will be leveraged into grant applications and partnerships.

Table 1 Stewardship Practices Implemented with NRCS or Okanogan CD Assistance

		NRCS	Okanogan CD
Soil Management	Conservation Crop Rotation (ac)	324	
	Cover Crop (ac)		160
	Residue and Till Management, No Till (ac)		
	Mulching (ac)		
Water Management	Irrigation Water Management (ac)	54	
	Sprinkler System (ac)	60	20
	Pumping Plant (ea)	10	1
Nutrient Management	Nutrient Management (ac)	22	34
	Composting Facility (ea)		
	Animal Mortality Facility (ea)		1
Pest Management	Integrated Pest Management (ac)	0	0
Range Management	Range Planting (ac)		0.1
	Prescribed Grazing (ac)	14656	
	Watering Facility (ea)	15	2
	Spring Developments (ea)	6	
	Access Road (ft)		
	Access Control (ac)	5.5	
	Heavy Use Protection Area (ac)	0.1	0.1
Habitat Management	Conservation Cover (ac)		
	Critical Area Planting (ac)	44	6
	Stream Habitat Improvement (ft)		
	Channel Stabilization		1645
	Tree/Shrub Establishment (ac)	313	
	Restoration of Rare and Declining Habitats (ac)	20	3
	Upland Wildlife Habitat Management (ac)	20	112
	Fish and Wildlife Structure (ea)		344**
	Fish Screens (ea)		1
	Culvert/Bridge/Stream Crossings Upgrades (ea)		1

** Reported fish and wildlife structures exceeded 344 units. This is likely due to high number of snags and brush piles in forestry planning.

TABLE 2 PARTICIPATION MONITORING: STEWARDSHIP PRACTICES

Management Type	NRCS Code	Key Stewardship Practices	Protection Metric ¹ (Annual)	Adaptive Management Trigger (120% of Protection Metric)	2017-2018 Annual Implementation	Adaptive Management Action			
Soil Management	328	Conservation Crop Rotation	27 ac (6%)	32 ac	80 ac	Annual metric exceeded No Action			
	340	Cover Crop							
	329	Residue and Till Management, No Till							
	484	Mulching							
Water Management	449	Irrigation Water Management	27 ac (3%)	32 ac	57 ac	Annual metric exceeded No Action			
	442	Sprinkler System	0.18 each (3%)	0.18 each	1 sprinkler system upgrade				
	533	Pumping Plant							
Nutrient Management	590	Nutrient Management	29 ac (6%)	35 ac	28 ac	Increase outreach to improve reporting, develop incentives for animal composting			
	317	Composting Facility	0.04 facility (6%)		1 facility				
	316	Animal Mortality Facility							
Pest Management	595	Integrated Pest Management	222 ac (6%)	266 ac	0	Increase outreach to horticulture association to encourage reporting, identify incentive opportunities			
Range Management	528	Range Planting	350 ac (6%)	420 ac	7,330 ac	Annual metric exceeded No Action			
	516	Prescribed Grazing	0.81 each (3%)	1 each	11 each				
	614	Watering Facility							
	574	Spring Developments	7 ft (6%)	8 ft					
	560	Access Road							
	472	Access Control							
561	Heavy Use Protection Area								
Habitat Management	327	Conservation Cover	176 ac (3%)	211 ac	259 ac	Riparian improvement and upland habitat metrics met (Critical Area Planting)			
	342	Critical Area Planting							
	395	Stream Habitat Improvement	0.17 mi	0.20 mi	0.15 mi	Increase outreach to improve reporting; review incentive programs for stream improvement			
	NA	Channel Stabilization							
	612	Tree/Shrub Establishment							
	643	Restoration of Rare and Declining Habitats							
	645	Upland Wildlife Habitat Management	0.06 each (3%)	0.07 each	344**	Annual metric exceeded, No Action			
	734	Fish and Wildlife Structure							
NA	Fish Screens	0.01 each (3%)					0	1	Annual metric exceeded, No Action
578	Culvert/Bridge/Stream Crossings Upgrades	0.01 each (3%)					0	1	

Adaptive Management Evaluation:

Annual metric met	Annual metric partially met	Annual metric not met
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** Fish and Wildlife Structures far exceeded protection standards via implementation of snags and brush piles during forest treatments (rangeland), and range fence markers to protect grouse and other wildlife. Fence markers were installed on 4 miles of range fencing in the Working for Wildlife priority area to protect sharp-tailed grouse.

Notes:

1. Protection Metrics are calculated based on annual practices required to meet benchmark values identified in Table 5-1
2. For partial metrics (for example, 0.06 Fish and Wildlife Structure), Okanogan CD will request information on planned projects from agricultural producers, technical agencies and organizations for their annual monitoring.

TABLE 3 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 2018 Ag Census, mid-size farms are decreasing in Okanogan County, while small and large farms increase following a national trend. A draft update of the County's Comprehensive Plan is currently accepting public comment.
	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.	Water rights workshops were conducted in 2018. Water availability is part of several on-going planning processes: the Okanogan Watershed Planning Unit and the Methow Watershed Council. The local water Conservancy Board is 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 to 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. Few resources available following 2018 Okanogan River Flood. Dept. of Ecology has begun to offer more management alternatives for erosion and livestock financial assistance.
	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.

