

August 2020 VSP Newsletter

IN THIS ISSUE:

- VSP agricultural activities definition discussion - August 7 by webinar only
- Commission Director Concurs with Thurston and Chelan County Five-Year reports
- Five Year Report Template Preview webinar available for viewing
- VSP Five-Year Report Guidance and Template
- Five-year report due dates
- VSP FY 21-23 budget request
- VSP & COVID-19
- How to meet work plan goals and benchmarks
- Who decides what kind of monitoring is used in a VSP work plan
- Commission seeks environmental representative for the SAC

VSP AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES DEFINITION JOINT MEETING: To continue protecting the health and safety of our staff, volunteers, and the public, this meeting will be conducted via online webinar and teleconference. All members of the public are welcome.

If you would like to join us online, please follow the link included in the agenda to receive additional information on how to participate.

The joint meeting of the Statewide Advisory Committee and Technical Panel to discuss the VSP definition of agricultural activities and how it is applied in local land use decisions at the county level will be Friday, August 7, 2020, at 9 a.m. This meeting will be by webinar only. The agenda is [here](#).

We are asking for input and/or presentations by a number of counties and/or technical service providers.

A link to the Commission's Policy Advisory #04-19 is [here](#). It is the Commission's current statement of policy with regards to this issue. A draft proposed agricultural activities decision tree for use by county planners is available [here](#).

The decision tree is designed to be used by county planners or VSP technical service providers when to assist them in deciding how the definition would apply.

CONSERVATION COMMISSION EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CONCURS WITH THURSTON AND CHELAN COUNTIES IN THEIR FIVE-YEAR REPORTS: Thurston and Chelan counties were the first two VSP counties require to submit their five-year VSP review and evaluation reports to the Commission. After review and evaluation by the VSP Technical Panel and consultation with the VSP SAC, the Commission’s Executive Director concurred with both counties in their assessment so far – that they are meeting their work plan critical area protection goals and benchmarks. The letter from the director to each county can be found by clicking on the county on the VSP map on the [VSP web page](#), and then clicking on the “Reports” link on the sidebar.

FIVE YEAR REPORT TEMPLATE PREVIEW WEBINAR AVAILABLE FOR VIEWING: The Conservation Commission hosted a preview webinar of the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) five year report template on July 23, 2020. This preview is meant to assist county work group members, technical service providers, county staff and others who are implementing VSP to understand what the Commission’s role is in the five year reporting process and to see the kinds of questions and data the Commission is using on the template. [Click here to view the recorded webinar.](#)

FIVE YEAR REPORT GUIDANCE AND TEMPLATE: The Commission, with the assistance of the VSP Technical Panel and Statewide Advisory Committee, is currently working on a guidance document and template for county work groups to use for their for five year reporting requirements under VSP. We hope to have a final version of the guidance and template available soon. The Commission held a preview of the Template last month, and hopes to have a training on the finished product soon. Watch this space for updates!

FIVE YEAR REPORT DUE DATES:

COUNTY	5 YEAR REPORT DUE
Kittitas	11.17.20
Mason	11.24.20
Garfield	11.30.20
Asotin	12.14.20
Grant	12.14.20
San Juan	12.21.20
Cowlitz	12.22.20
Pacific	12.22.20
Okanogan	12.28.20
Benton	1.12.21
Skagit	1.19.21
Whitman	1.19.21
Columbia	1.20.21
Yakima	1.21.21
Douglas	1.22.21
Pend Oreille	2.2.21
Franklin	2.24.21
Walla Walla	3.7.21
Stevens	3.10.21
Ferry	3.14.21
Grays Harbor	3.21.21
Lincoln	3.21.21

Lewis	4.18.21
Spokane	4.22.21
Adams	5.23.21

CONSERVATION COMMISSION VSP FY 21-23 BUDGET REQUEST: The Conservation Commission (SCC) is seeking funding to continue implementing the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP), including all 27 county work plans, and provide for state agency participation in the evaluation, review, and monitoring of work plan success.

Background

The SCC is tasked by statute to implement the VSP. In the past two years VSP counties have finished developing their local work plans and all counties have begun implementing their plans. By the end of April 2021, all counties will have submitted their first five-year review and evaluation report.

Proposal

The decision package will fund:

Implementation of 27 local county VSP work plans (\$6,750,000). VSP counties have developed work plans describing the application of VSP. All work plans have been completed and were approved by the end of the 2017-19 biennium. Counties are now implementing their work plans, which includes outreach to landowners, developing individual landowner stewardship plans, monitoring the progress of implementation of these

individual plans, and monitoring the status of protection and enhancement of critical areas.

Funding to accomplish this is calculated at \$250,000 per VSP county for the biennium. Last biennium’s funding was at \$240,000 per VSP county. The increase is based on feedback from the VSP counties as to the resources needed for implementation. Many counties requested more, but the SCC believes the \$250,000 amount is a reasonable state contribution. The SCC encourages each VSP county to make their own financial contribution to local VSP implementation.

The use of these funds is up to each VSP work group, but includes meeting statutory reporting requirements and ensuring progress on their plans.

SCC administration of the VSP

(\$500,000). The SCC is charged by the VSP statute to oversee and administer the VSP. The administrative tasks include formulating the VSP Technical Panel and Statewide Advisory Committee, conducting their meetings, having staff serve on the Technical Panel, creating a five-year reporting template and process, serving as the statewide clearinghouse for VSP information, policy and procedure, assisting counties with monitoring and data collection, conducting outreach and education events, meetings, and

webinars, and creating and managing a VSP web page.

Additionally, SCC staff provide critical scientific guidance to local VSP work groups in relation to monitoring approaches, analysis, and reporting to assess both environmental quality and agricultural viability.

Other agency participation in VSP (\$600,000). The WDFW, WSDA, and ECY join with the SCC to serve on the VSP Technical Panel, which approves all plans. Now that all VSP counties are implementing their plans, the Panel's role shifts to the review and evaluation of five year reports of the VSP work groups for the on-going success of the plans and their adaptive management actions. Agencies will also be coordinating with counties on VSP monitoring in the field.

WDFW's High Resolution Change Detection (HRCD) (\$575,000). VSP counties must monitor and document their work plan implementation so that, at a minimum, their plan protects and does not impact critical areas. Monitoring these potential impacts allows the VSP work groups to adaptively manage their plans to achieve the resource protection goals. This is a requirement of VSP not found in non-VSP counties. A key tool for many VSP work groups is the use of High Resolution Change Detection (HRCD) technologies at WDFW.

HRCD is visual imagery from the air that allows technicians to determine whether changes are happening on the ground. Some VSP county work plans rely on this technology to support their outreach and landowner assistance work. Although WDFW has used this technology in a few counties, more resources are needed to support the use of HRCD in VSP work plan implementation. WDFW requests \$575,000 per biennium for High Resolution Change Detection (HRCD) for counties using VSP.

The Commission understands the need during the COVID-19 pandemic to maximize productivity while maintaining quality service with less resources. The Commission's VSP budget proposal seeks to achieve that with a nearly 15% reduction for the 2021-23 biennia over the FY 19-21 biennial proposal.

Total funding request for VSP for the 2021-23 biennium is \$8,425,000.

VSP AND COVID-19: We have received a few questions about impacts to the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC) and VSP related to COVID-19 and the Governor's "[Stay Home, Stay Healthy](#)" Proclamation (20-25). Though things could change, here are a few answers based on current information:

- The SCC is fully operational with all staff in telework status. Our office is closed.

- There may be small delays in processing VSP reimbursements or vouchers due to slow network connections and telework conditions.
- VSP funds administered by the SCC are available to allocate to counties. VSP implementation has not been put on hold by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- VSP Technical Service Providers (TSPs) should communicate with their county about the status of county government operations. Each county is complying with the Governor’s directives, including the “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” Proclamation. That may mean some county activities are shut down, curtailed, or limited. These temporary measures could affect the county’s ability to process VSP vouchers and reimbursements through the Commission. TSPs that have a more direct relationship with the Commission (i.e. where the county isn’t involved in the administration of VSP funds, but has delegated that responsibility to the TSP) shouldn’t see any problems other than slight delays as Commission staff are still processing reimbursements but under telework conditions. We suggest that TSPs review their agreements with the county and contact appropriate county staff for questions specific to that contract.
- Counties and TSPs may have to curtail, shut-down, or stop their VSP implementation efforts depending on how compliance with the “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” proclamation impacts the goals/benchmarks of their work plan (e.g. if one of the benchmarks is to attend grower meetings, which now have been cancelled due to the pandemic). In such cases, the county and TSP should document those goals and benchmarks, their efforts to meet them, and why those efforts were not possible (e.g. due to meeting cancellations). Another example would be if the TSP has entirely closed their office / business and cannot conduct VSP activities due to the pandemic. Once normal operations resume, the TSP, county, and county work group should address the effect the pandemic and/or compliance with associated proclamations had on VSP implementation in their county and their ability to meet work plan goals and benchmarks.
- In either example described above, VSP work plans may need to be adaptively managed in order to meet goals or benchmarks interrupted by the COVID-19 situation.

- While holding remote / virtual / or on-line webinar meetings of VSP work groups is possible under the Proclamation, please remember that the [Open Public Meetings Act](#) must still be complied with, though the [Governor's Proclamation 20-28](#) should help with how the public can be accommodated. Please make sure you review the [Governor's Proclamation 20-28](#) in its entirety for new requirements before proceeding. For example, the proclamation temporarily suspends the ability of an agency to take "action" on matters at a meeting unless they are necessary and routine, or necessary to respond to the current pandemic. The latest [Guidance issued by the Attorney General's office is here](#).
- Commission staff are available to help! Contact [Karla Heinitz](#) for VSP-related contracting and cost-share questions and [Bill Eller](#) for general VSP-related questions.

HOW TO MEET YOUR WORK PLAN GOALS AND BENCHMARKS: An important part of implementation is monitoring of critical area functions and values, and assessing whether the data gathered is enough to determine if work plan goals and benchmarks are being met. Presenting this information to the work group by those gathering the data

is an important piece to gauge how well goals and benchmarks are being met. If existing data and approaches are not sufficient to assess critical area functions and values, such as due to gaps in data, monitoring should be augmented via adaptive management.

Don't hesitate to have those meetings as the work group is responsible for submitting in the five-year review and evaluation reports of each county work plan.

Questions about VSP monitoring and data gathering should be directed to [Levi Keesecker](#). He can be reached by phone at (360) 789-3650 or by email at lkeesecker@scc.wa.gov.

[Policy Advisory 03-18](#) identifies the roles of each of the various entities responsible for VSP implementation. County work groups should be meeting regularly to meet statutory obligations, monitor progress, and take adaptive management actions.

Overseeing implementation, providing direction and oversight to the VSP technical service provider on compliance with VSP goals and benchmarks, and adaptively managing implementation if those goals and benchmarks are not being met are among the most important duties of the work group.

Each county work group should be regularly communicating with the technical service provider(s) implementing the VSP work plan to address any issues that arise. Perhaps a benchmark was set too high, or new information renders a goal insufficient to meet needs. Review of the benchmarks and goals is part of the adaptive management process.

Question: *Who decides what kind of monitoring is used in a VSP work plan?*

Answer: Each county work group. Each county VSP work plan must meet goals and benchmarks set by the county work group. Those goals and benchmarks are based on statutory requirements, but are unique to each VSP county.

Each county work group crafted their county work plan to protect critical areas while maintaining agricultural viability. A critical part of the work plan is monitoring to measure success vis-à-vis meeting those goals and benchmarks.

[Each county work group has identified monitoring or a suite of monitoring practices to use to meet those goals and benchmarks.](#) Some of those practices complement [monitoring already happening in the county.](#) Others might need to be created to meet the unique needs of a particular VSP county.

Regardless of the method or methods used, the monitoring must be scientifically sound and produce scientifically-valid results.

It is important to remember, however, that while there are many monitoring methods and resources to choose from, the ultimate choice for which to use is each county work groups' to make.

The adaptive management component of VSP is designed to allow a county work group to pursue a monitoring method and, upon discovery that it isn't meeting the data needs of the work plan, to bring on another method or switch entirely to a new method.

Local, state, or federal agencies, non-governmental entities, and others might suggest monitoring methods for the VSP work group to use, and we welcome that input. However, the decision is the VSP county work groups' alone.

The Commission recently hired a natural resource scientist to assist VSP county work groups with analyzing their monitoring methods, and providing suggestions on options, methods, and data-gathering efforts.

Questions about VSP monitoring and data gathering should be directed to [Levi Keesecker](#). He can be reached by phone at (360) 789-3650 or by email at lkeesecker@scc.wa.gov.

COMMISSION SEEKS ENVIRONMENTAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE SAC: An important part of the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) is the Statewide Advisory Committee (SAC) appointed by the director of the Conservation Commission (Commission).

The SAC is comprised of environmental, agricultural, and county members, and tribal representation is also sought. The SAC serves to advise the director of the Commission on a variety of policy and programmatic aspects of VSP.

The Commission is currently seeking an environmental representative to serve on the SAC. The term is for two years. Meetings are generally held every month or every other month. Members serve as volunteers to help the Commission achieve the goals of VSP, which include protecting critical areas while maintaining agricultural viability.

More information on the SAC can be found at the [Commission's VSP web page](#). If interested in serving, interested persons should contact Ron Shultz, Director of Policy and Intergovernmental Relations, rshultz@scc.wa.gov or by phone at 360-407-7507.

SUBSCRIBE TO THE VSP NEWSLETTER: New subscribers should access this link and choose the subscription for the "Voluntary

Stewardship Program (VSP)" under the Programs and Policy tab:

<https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/WASCC/subscriber/new>.

If you have any questions on how to sign up, please contact Bill Eller (beller@scc.wa.gov) or Laura Johnson (LJohnson@scc.wa.gov) at the Commission.

Bill Eller | beller@scc.wa.gov | 509-385-7512 | Washington State Conservation Commission