

# LEWIS COUNTY VOLUNTARY STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM



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2019-2021 Biennial Report



## STATUS OF PLAN AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

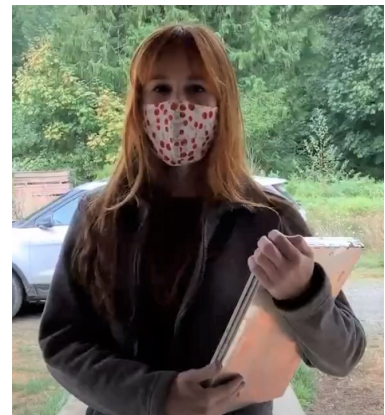
The Lewis Conservation District has been working diligently to meet the goal of contacting every farm in Lewis County. Since the implementation of the program we have completed 365 Individual Stewardship Plans. Since 2011, Lewis Conservation District was able to identify 356 best management practices that had been completed. We also recommended 770 practices that would benefit critical areas. Covid 19 has caused us to make significant changes to our outreach program. The Work Group has continued to meet and make progress. We have completed and submitted the Five Year Report. The following sections will discuss actions by the Work Group and District Staff.

### Targeting Watersheds

The District has had success with targeting watersheds by mailing postcards and then visiting in person.

In the previous two-year report, we mentioned that 500 postcards had been sent out to the Lincoln Creek, Independence Creek, and Upper Chehalis Watersheds. We were able to complete outreach in those areas. The next watersheds that we targeted were Stillwater Creek and Olequa Creek. A total of 406 postcards were mailed to these basins. About half of the area was completed when Covid-19 became an issue in Washington State. We decided to pause outreach efforts during this time of uncertainty in the spring of 2020. After several months and with much trepidation,

District Staff made the decision to resume in person outreach. The first day out Kenna and Kelly donned masks, knocked on doors and then physically distanced from farmers. Prior to Covid-19,



landowners in these basins had a tendency towards standoffishness. When we went back, most landowners were welcoming and happily told us about their farms. Participation levels were much higher, and this has continued throughout 2021.

For the next area, we mailed a total of 453 postcards to landowners in the Upper Cowlitz and Nisqually basins. The Conservation District had previously not had the funding to complete much outreach in these areas.

In the Nisqually Basin, the High Resolution Change Data showed no changes since 2011 on agricultural lands. From driving around, it appeared that the farms were long term and well established. We met few people that were not originally from the area. According to locals that we talked to, absentee landowners were renting out their property to farmers from Eastern Washington. We left flyers on the locked gates but did not hear from anybody. Although there are only a few farmers in this area, we continue to work to develop relationships with them.

Apart from a few dairy and cattle farms, the Conservation District has worked with few farmers in the Upper Cowlitz Area. Since 2011, the Packwood region has transformed from many large farms to only a few. There are also a few hobby farms. The Randle area still has a mix of large and small farms. Most of the large farmers have retired and are renting their land to farmers from eastern Washington. However, we did meet one small acreage farmer that had an amazingly well managed farm. He had sheep, pigs, poultry, and produce. There are several farms in the Glenoma area but we only had moderate success promoting VSP in this region.



In late spring 2021, we mailed 268 postcards to landowners in the Lower Cowlitz in the vicinity of Mayfield Lake. The outreach in this area went well. The Mossyrock area had the most participation of any area we have worked in. The next area that we are working in will be the Newaukum River basin.

## Workgroup

Staff have been trying hard to keep the workgroup members up to date and involved in the meetings. We have had presentations from Ecology, the Lewis County Noxious Weed Board, and Lewis County Community Development. Due to Covid-19, we had to cancel one of the workgroup meetings while we figured out what to do. Initially, we tried to schedule the next meeting in person but restrictions meant it had to go virtual. Some work group members were initially hesitant for a variety of reasons such as poor internet service. However, they were able to work through these problems and attendance has been excellent. District staff has been able

to facilitate the meetings and have meaningful discussions. In spite of this, everyone is looking forward to once again meeting in person.

Members of the VSP workgroup have been actively promoting the program. The work group members are from a diverse group of farmers including a Christmas tree farmer, a blueberry grower, a dairy farmer, a sheep farmer, several beef farmers and a crop grower. The Farm Bureau has also been an excellent partner for this program. When we are working in various areas of the county, we often mention to people that a board member lives in their area or is farming a similar product. Later, we have heard that they were in contact with the board member asking more about the program.

## Virtual Workshops

Due to Covid-19, the District started a Youtube channel as a way to both showcase local farmers and provide technical assistance in the way of virtual trainings. Videos include topics such as drip irrigation, tansy control, and tree pruning. Glenn Aldrich graciously shared information as he gave viewers a virtual tour of his blueberry farm and nursery. Hank Greenwald DVM, a retired horse vet, provided excellent information on horse nutrition. Both of these farmers had worked with us previously. However, in going out and meeting people we encountered Duane Roeck's wife. She told us that her husband had over 40 years of experience developing his grazing system. Originally from Othello, WA, he was a presenter at the Cattlemen's Association and the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program. It took us awhile to finally connect with Duane, due to numerous factors, but we were



The image shows a YouTube video player interface. The video title is "Grazing Systems with Duane Roecks". The video content shows a man in a white shirt and blue jeans standing in a green field with several brown cows grazing. The video is framed by a large image of the cover of "Washington Farmer-Stockman" magazine. The cover features the title "Washington Farmer-Stockman" in a large, stylized font, and the subtitle "Grazing Systems with Duane Roecks" in a smaller font. The cover also shows a man in a blue cap and white shirt standing in a field with cows. The video player shows a progress bar at 0:05 / 24:16. Below the video player, the video title "Pasture Workshop Introduction with Duane Roecks." is displayed, along with "20 views · 2 May 2021". The video is from the "Lewis Conservation District" channel, which has 3 subscribers. There are buttons for "ANALYTICS" and "EDIT VIDEO".

finally able to film a video of him talking about pasture management. It is his desire to pass on his knowledge and help others in his local community be successful. We believe that farmers teaching other farmers will ultimately be the most successful method of improving farming practices.

## Advertising

The District has added information to our website, <https://lewisconservation.wordpress.com/> for people that want to know more about the program. We will continue to improve the website as time allows. We can look to see how many visitors that the site receives each day. The week we mail postcards to a new area, we see a spike in views. When we go out and do in person site visits, we also see a spike in views. We put up posters at feed stores and auctions in Lewis County. However, they seemed to disappear not long after we put them up. No increase of visits to the website or phone calls was noticed after posters were hung up. This strategy has been discontinued for now. Handouts were given to the Lewis County permit center and County employees regularly refer cooperators to the District.

The best advertising has still been to go door to door to each farm. An improvement we made in the last year, was to print the flyer on write in the rain paper and leave it on a door or gate. In the past, we used door hangers but because there was not much actual information printed on the hanger, few people called us. Excepting Mossyrock, few people contacted us after they receive the postcards, but at least they notified people we would be visiting.



## Service Clubs/Organizations

The District has not yet been involved with local clubs. In May 2021, we hired a Veteran Intern through the Veteran's Conservation Corps program. She has been helping do outreach for VSP and doing some of the work on the ISPs. This has been a good learning experience for her and for us. She can relate to veterans when we are going out talking to farmers. Everyone on the VSP team has a different background in farming, and this has helped us to be able to relate to multiple types of farmers.

## Events

The District participates annually in the Southwest Washington Fair. In 2019, we partnered with the Farm Bureau and we each had VSP promotional booths. To promote pollinators and cover crops we gave away small packets of wildflowers and different cover crops. Sprinkler gauges were distributed so that people could measure how much they were watering. In 2020, we were unable to attend this event but look forward to doing so in 2021. This year we are going to

showcase the correct height to graze grass. The displays will show stressed overgrazed grass and properly grazed grass to emphasize the difference. Better grazing will improve soil and help with profitability. Pens and packets of cover crop seeds that benefit wildlife will be handed out. They are labeled with information of priority habitats and wildlife in Washington. Kenna also developed our own unique VSP sticker to hand out.

Other events we had information at were a presentation at Centralia College on saving Tarboo Creek, and the Boistfort Farm Assist Workshops. We will continue to be opportunistic when other events resume. Even with a few years of outreach, we still find that the vast majority of people have never heard of VSP.



## Five Year Report

In May 2021, the Lewis Conservation District submitted the five year report about how VSP was being implemented. The reviewers provided feedback on the report and staff will address their comments at a meeting in September. From the perspective of the Lewis Conservation District, the majority of the concerns were simply what we needed to clarify. A few days before the report was due, we received updated WDFW High Resolution Change Data. Despite the short time frame, we were able to incorporate this data into the report.

VSP is tasked with making sure that critical areas are not negatively impacted by agriculture. One issue that came up is that there were two wetland violations in the Toledo area. Both farms are owned by new landowners from out of the area. The smaller violation is in the process of restoration. The larger farm hired a consultant that mapped 95 acres of disturbed wetlands which is a larger amount than the District believes existed in 2011. They have implemented part of the restoration and are planning more in the future. Wetlands appear to be the critical area that is most threatened by agriculture. Especially with new landowners from out of the area that find only marginal land for farming is available for purchase.

Challenges to address in the next five years include finding more monitoring data and communicating with various agencies that we need data based on whether they are in the Cowlitz, Nisqually, or Chehalis WRIA's. We will be looking for ways to implement positive practices, especially ones that benefit wetlands.

In July 2021, we met with the Lewis County Noxious Weed Control employees. They were able to hear from us about what local farmers concerns are with weed control. Also, they will be keeping track of where they treat weeds on agricultural land and relaying the information to us. District staff will be on the look out for weeds and will encourage landowners to treat them.

Lewis County and the Lewis Conservation District have fostered an excellent working relationship. We are working with them to ensure that we are meeting their expectations for the next five years. Meetings with other agencies are being arranged.



## Individual Stewardship Plans

We are continuing to refine the Individual Stewardship Plan Process. Talking to landowners has made us realize that we need to add some questions and eliminate others. As we contact more landowners, we have a better understanding of what is relevant. New handouts have been developed for recommended best management practices to make them more clear to landowners.

At first we had a separate visit back to the landowner to deliver the plan. Now we mail the plans with explanations of practices and information on other programs at the District. Some of these landowners do go on to get Farm Plans or enroll in other programs. They also have information on important contacts that may have not had before, priority species for their area, tree planting lists, and pollinator plants.

VSP has allowed us to reach farmers in a way we have not been able to previously. We listen to their concerns and work on connecting them with the resources they need. We continue to maintain the Access database of practices that have been completed and ones that have been recommended. From time to time staff will check to see if any new practices have been completed.

## Issues with Viability of Agriculture

Land costs are rapidly rising in Lewis County as are land taxes. Ag land is quickly becoming more valuable to sell for houses. While working in different areas of the County, we see dilapidated field fences, people mowing 5 acres of lawn grass and new houses in former fields. Smaller

farms have less resources such as tractors and other equipment. Many farms are relying on one farmer to come and cut and bale hay. Prime farmland is expensive so newcomers to farming are often buying marginal lands. These new farmers are also not always sure how to best manage the land.

Established farms are facing issues with development encroaching on their farms, rising costs, and changing markets.

## Reducing the Conversion of Farmland to Other Uses

Lewis County often refers new farmers to the District. We are able to work with new farmers to ensure that they don't negatively impact critical areas. Although much farming has been lost,



District staff are seeing more interest in creating small farms where profit is not the primary motivation. Most of these people have off farm jobs and the agriculture is something they enjoy or do to provide for their family. These farmers are often receptive to new information and learning how to manage their property better.

Some are keeping livestock to meet the income requirements to stay in the agricultural tax bracket. In fact, land taxes are a major complaint when we complete surveys on small farms. We make sure that farmers know how to enroll in open space. Even though these farms are small, collectively they can have a big impact.

Many landowners, especially in eastern Lewis County, are renting out their fields. This is especially true if the landowners are





retired. Other farmers are renting several fields and helping to keep the land in agriculture. However, many of the rental fields need better management. We are making sure that landowners and/or renters have the information they need to help manage the properties in a way that will benefit the environment and profitability. Things we would recommend usually include better grazing rotation (prescribed grazing) and reseeding.

New homes are going to be built adjacent to agricultural land. Farmers can install hedgerows and time manure spreading to help minimize complaints. The District is considering developing a handout to give to new people moving into the County. This could include information on what to expect when moving into areas with agricultural production. Depending on how much interest this generates, we may have an in person class.

Profitability of farms has always been an issue. However, we are seeing new and innovative ways that farmers are able to stay in business. The Huntting Pumpkin Patch and Haunted Forest is being creative with agritourism to attract customers to their family farm. This father and son duo are working hard to keep agriculture viable. The Southwest Washington Grower's Cooperative was formed to help support local agriculture. This organization supports the Southwest Washington Grain Project and the Southwest Washington Food Hub. The District was able to sponsor a grant for the Grain Project to get a portable grain belt to load Barley onto train cars. The Food Hub allows farmers to sell their products directly and keep more of the profits. The District sponsored a grant for them to increase their outreach activities. One of the accomplishments was to translate their application into Spanish to make the program more accessible.

The District continues to have a successful program of renting poultry processing equipment. There are also two different sizes of no-till drills that can be rented. The smaller one is wearing out and we have applied for grants to get a new one. The District also promotes soil and hay testing by having equipment available. The people bring the samples to the office and we send it to the lab. The



results help them decide if their soil is fertilized properly. We also have two sizes of manure spreaders that farmers can rent for a nominal fee.

Lewis County is working on updating its Shoreline Master Plan. A presentation was given to the VSP workgroup. The comments given by the workgroup were incorporated into the final product.



## Protecting Critical Areas

The major focus of the VSP program is to protect critical areas. In the plans, we provide cooperators with maps of critical areas on property they own or manage. Voluntary is the part of the program that landowners focus on the most. We explain to them that even though the program is voluntary that we do need to document that critical areas are not being degraded from the July 2011 benchmark. The majority of the recommendations that we make for farms will help increase production and ultimately profits. Consumers want to see that farmers are doing a good job managing their properties. We give them information on how to enroll in programs such as Salmonsafe.

Stewardship is a word that farmers can relate to. They are stewards of the land and we are just giving them the tools they may need to become better stewards. There are multiple practices that farmers have put into place on their own. When we do the surveys we tell people to please let us know what they have done that is positive. They also tell us plans for the future on their farm. Money is often an inhibiting factor so we try to refer them to various grants that may be able to help them. The Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) with NRCS is one that we often provide them with information on.

Most farmers are willing to do things to help the environment. They willingly fence cattle out of streams but are worried about 200-foot buffers being mandatory. These would be devastating to farms that often have multiple waterways. We met an older farmer that had a large cattle farm that was very interested in conservation. He had wanted to get cost share to install a permanent fence but the agency he was working with wanted a 100-foot buffer. He was willing to give them 25 feet, but they said that wasn't eligible. Ultimately, he installed an electric fence right on the edge of the bank. We will be working with him in the future to see if we can increase his buffer and get him a permanent fence.

For farmers in the Chehalis Basin and the Cowlitz River downstream of the Mayfield Dam that

would like to have bigger buffer we supply them with information about the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). We do have a few farmers in the Upper Cowlitz that would like to install riparian buffers to help with erosion. Currently there is not any funding for this. Most buffers in this area would also have to take into consideration erosion concerns.

The Carbon Capture Foundation has given us free cedar and fir trees to plant along waterways. Participants in VSP were provided 2500 trees to plant along waterways and to provide habitat. Another area of interest is providing pollinator habitat. Many farmers have done things to attract wildlife to their farms. This is especially true of the hobby farmers.

Water and water rights are essential for a viable agricultural community. Kelly has worked with cooperators to complete irrigation water management plans. These plans show farmers how to water properly following what their water right details. It also shows areas where water can be saved. Two irrigation projects that were funded by the District were able to install more efficient K\_Line irrigation on 100 total acres. In the future, we anticipate working more with water issues as it is important for fish and wildlife and farmers.

Farms are often located in floodplains and critical aquifer recharge areas. Proper nutrient management is emphasized as these areas are more vulnerable to over fertilization. We are working to replace fish barrier culverts with larger structures that will allow fish to pass but will also not impede water flow.

Geological hazard areas are mapped and the locations are given to landowners. Awareness of volcanic lahars, landslide risks and soils that are at risk for liquefaction is important but there is not much the landowner can do about this. The only exception is there are a few areas of high erosion areas where Christmas trees are farmed. We recommend using cover crops between the rows.

## Looking Forward

The Lewis Conservation District, Lewis County, and the VSP workgroup are working hard to ensure that agriculture continues to flourish and does not negatively impact critical areas. Kelly and Kenna had a lot of adventures meeting farmers throughout the County. From having an onery little dog jump in our car and not want to leave, to debating which door is the front door only to have the farmer pop out of the barn, and to seeing a proud Dairy farmer's daughter show us her prize calf. We are developing connections with the community so they see us as people working on their behalf and not just as another government agency.