

Initial Orientation Interviews Interview Summaries

The following initial orientation interviews were conducted by Don Stuart of American Farmland Trust. In some, Dennis Canty of Evergreen Funding Consultants also joined as an interviewer. Interviewer is indicated, below, by DS or DC

Mike Shelby & Mike Rundlett – DS, DC

Western Washington Agriculture Association (WWAA)

The rationale and structure of the Conservation Incentives project were discussed – both interviewees indicated support for the project and a willingness to participate and help in any way they can. The WWAA is, itself, conducting projects – especially in the Skagit County area. These are largely in partnership with the local conservation district. The main way they are able to provide information to landowners is by, themselves, acting as the clearinghouse. There is an issue of “fairness” that competes with geographic concentration of project money – something they often hear about in the Skagit County area. There are also capacity limits in the districts – the larger, more successful districts tend to out-compete the smaller ones. Issues for incentives are in the areas of buffers, BMPs generally, water conservation, wetlands, habitat generally, and land fragmentation and protection. Incentives can serve a good role in both protection and restoration, but it works best in the restoration area – they work best where we are raising the bar rather than just seeking basic compliance. CREP seems like a particularly effective program although it, too, needs to be more flexible.

Frank Easter – DS, DC

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

Frank described the NRCS process for taking community/partnership input in establishing priorities for NRCS programs through the State Technical Advisory Committee and Local Work Groups. Agencies from all over the state participate in this process and help rank the priorities and signups. Frank also discussed ways in which it is sometimes time-consuming for groups to participate in processes of this kind. The local work groups are more effective in some locales than in others, but they are generally provided with opportunities to exercise considerable decision-making authority. Frank does believe there could be an opportunity to run a “virtual” single application program – and says, in some ways, it works in that way already. For useful information on measures of effectiveness, Frank referred us to NRCS’s PRS system – and the Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) and to the modeling efforts of the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and also to the Conservation Practice Physical Effects (CPPE). We discussed some of the difficulties in truly measuring the benefits of conservation work.

Mark Clark & Stu Trefry -- DS

Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC)

Mark feels that we need a basic white paper on incentives and a state working lands program that focuses attention on lands that support natural resource businesses. Through the Priorities of Government (POG) process, there is heightened attention to issues of government efficiency and the State Budget Office is wondering if we are doing enough on incentives issues. There is a great deal of awareness of the extent to which we increasingly rely on voluntary incentives to

address major natural resource & environmental issues. The basic issue is NOT one of regulation vs. incentives – rather it needs to be one of how incentives can be effective, as an independent approach. There are definitely turf issues – Mark feels incentives can be most effectively delivered by an agency that has no regulatory responsibilities so there is no confusion between the roles. To make them more strategically effective we need: 1) a plan, 2) money for technical assistance, 3) make growth pay for incentives, 4) successful regulations (both must be successful, 5) adjust the percentage of cost-share to the public benefit. (Some districts have a cost-share matrix they already use.) Prioritization can be done at the level of the local CD. Also need to change the way we measure mitigation so we don't focus on productive farms – need a strategic prioritization process. And we need strong monitoring and measuring processes that are adequately funded. Prioritization is more complicated than just finding the most serious problem – it also can be a priority to: 1) take advantage of strong political leadership, 2) help a community that has a willingness to work, 3) leverage other resources already available, 4) deal with a problem that is connected with other, perhaps more important problems, 5) choose between a really bad place or a relatively good one that is in rapid decline, 6) choose a place where small amounts of money can make a big difference, 7) avoid a place where huge amounts of money may make little difference, 8) choose or avoid a place where we know big benefits are certain but where it will be impossible to prove that with the concrete measures we have available. Watershed groups are the people that understand these issues.

Fred Colvin -- DS

Washington Association of Conservation Districts

One good example of the kind of impact a targeted program can have is the Washington Dairy Nutrient Management Program and the state funding that was provided in a concentrated way for cost-share assistance to dairy operators. The Whatcom County program, in particular, showed what can be accomplished. This was concentrated, by default, to dairies since that is where the public attention aimed the legislature. CREP, however, is another example of the potential impact of concentrated cost-share. The local work group process does not seem sufficiently consistent to really do a good job of picking priorities – rather where the money goes seems to depend too heavily on the presence or absence of strong local leadership rather than on the seriousness or the problem or any good criteria for selecting priorities. It is more a matter of knowing who to call. We also need to appreciate that we're not paying the entire cost – it is cost share and so there is a significant burden on the landowner – despite the level of public benefit we're dealing with. There are definitely times when we should be paying 100% of the cost – and also, at times, paying a bonus of, say, 10% or more. It also wouldn't hurt to tie in the viability of the farm to this process with a bonus going to the farm business to keep it viable. We also need good credentialing for people who do these projects to make sure the projects are up to standards. Measures like these would help us enlist the landowners who now do not participate.

Kirk Hansen & Ken Miller -- DS

Washington Small Forest Landowners & Washington Farm Forestry Association (SFLO & WFFA)

It is possible to quantify the benefits of habitat projects, but quantification of specific projects tends to break down at the landscape level – what is needed is landscape change, not necessarily just individual good projects. We need better monitoring 0 to fund assessment of past projects, not just leave when the project is done and forget about it. There is a natural tension between

democracy in program fairness and being strategic. Kirk and Ken have been specifically trying to work within the NRCS STAC process to take advantage of the program money which is supposed to be available for forestry but they find it very time-consuming and frustrating. The process is cumbersome and difficult for newcomers to break into. Although, they have had some success at this. There is an increasing tree farm presence in the local working groups. EQIP money tends to go to the worst offenders, and that is usually in agriculture, not in forestry. NRCS also has a strong historical focus on farmers and it is a struggle to change that bias. One barrier is just letting tree farmers know they are eligible – historically were not. Also, the lack of technical assistance and engineering money means the projects that get funded are the ones that do not require those services – not necessarily the best projects. There is also a size advantage in EQIP – hard to fund smaller projects. Most landowners own BOTH farm and forest lands but the programs are designed for one or the other and are quite different – makes for a very difficult and confusing patchwork of efforts on any given farm/forest property. It can be difficult to assemble a package of assistance to a farmer. For forest landowners, they tend not to take action for many years, and by then the rules have changed.

Jay Gordon -- DS

Washington State Dairy Federation (WSDF)

Jay was interviewed during a dairy risk management workshop in Lynden, WA so this was a brief interview. The Washington State Dairy Federation very much supports conservation stewardship incentives – they were supporters of the Dairy Nutrient Management Program when it passed the 1998 Legislature. The program made a big difference in dairy operations in Washington. Today, all dairies are required to have a fully implemented nutrient management plan. The program helped many farmers with the cost of creating and of implementing these plans. The principal disadvantage is lack of sufficient resources to fund these programs. And the programs need to be made as farmer/user-friendly as is possible so they work on the individual farm.

Josh Weis -- DS

Washington Forest Protection Association (WFPA)

Josh feels that one of the best incentives that can be offered is regulatory relief for landowners who will voluntarily take on good stewardship practices. We need some way to have state-level accommodation for regulatory relief where the overall performance of an industry or of some sectors are above and beyond the standard - on the ground. The requirements need to be more flexible - for a small forest landowner, a 5-year plan may be a bit short, but for a large forest landowner, they are the norm. But there is no state mechanism for writing an HCP for this kind of thing. Natural resource landowners need stability so they can invest – so the problem is how to get that stability as community attitudes toward industry and toward the environment shift from year to year. Another incentive that would be very useful would be tax incentives for environmental performance levels above and beyond current regulatory requirements – above the baseline. For example, where clear cutting is lawful, there could be a tax benefit in exchange for the choice to do selective harvest. There is also a need for strong PDR programs in forest lands. We need to try to look for solutions other than regulation – to avoid having government automatically look at every issue as justification for another regulation.