



Wasco County Soil and Water Conservation District  
Board Meeting Minutes – November 13, 2024

**Directors:** Bill Hammel Phil Kaser Larry Powell  
Ken Bailey Stan Shephard Shawn Sorensen

**Directors via Teleconference:** Bob Krein

**Staff:** Shilah Olson Jennifer Sampson Abbie Forrest  
Drake Gilbert Dean Dark

**Staff via Teleconference:** Karen Lamson Samantha Filbin Ryan Bessette

**Guests:**

FSA: Lissa Biehn, County Executive Director  
Wy'East RC&D: Robert Wallace, Executive Director  
Dana Woods, Finance & Administrative Manager  
DS Consulting: Emily Stranz, Facilitator  
Wasco SWCD: Pat Davis, Director Emeritus  
Public: Charlie Ernst  
Steve Springston

**Guests via Teleconference:**

ODA: Brittany Mills, Agricultural Drainage Channel Maintenance Specialist

**1:01 PM Call to Order**

Bill called the meeting to order and asked if there were any additions to the agenda. Stan suggested the board dispose of the 4-wheelers that belong to the SWCD.

**Minutes:** Bill asked if there were any additions or corrections to the October regular board meeting minutes. None were made. *Phil moved to approve the October regular board meeting minutes as presented; Stan seconded. Motion carried.*

**Treasurer's Report:** Shilah reviewed the October Treasurer's Report, noting income, expenses, account and fund balances. She noted a few large expenses for Mosier Million and the ODFW Lower Deschutes aerial grass treatment. Stan asked how many acres were treated aerially. Shilah shared they treated over 4,500 acres at \$27/acre for the helicopter time. The first tax payment has been received and will show up on the November Treasurer's Report. *Ken moved to receive the October Treasurer's Report; Shawn seconded. Motion carried*

**Public Comment (5 Min. limit/person) –** None at this time.

## **Action Items**

**a. Public Meeting Policy** – Shilah reported the draft public meeting policy was distributed to the board by email and is in the meeting packets. This policy is based on a template provided by SDAO, which Shilah then modified to match current SWCD practices. This is part of SDAO’s best practices program to get up to 10% discount on insurance premiums. *Phil moved to approve the Public Meeting Policy as presented; Larry seconded. Motion carried.*

**b. District Cost Share Requests** – Abbie reported there were no cost share applications to present at this time.

**c. Columbia Gateway/Downtown Urban Renewal Plan Update** – Shilah reported she distributed an excerpt of the Renewal Plan to the board as the full plan was 156 pages. The full packet is available online if anyone is interested in reading it. Columbia Gateway/Downtown Urban Renewal is proposing a significant update and revision to their original plan that will have a direct impact on taxing districts, so they provided notice to each district. Their current plan is approved through 2026 and they are proposing to extend it to 2029. The SWCD is currently losing part of their tax to the Urban Renewal, and they estimate the SWCD will continue to lose approximately \$25,000 each year for the next several years. In total, the Urban Renewal Board is requesting \$6.1 million. This time is where the SWCD board may comment on the plan if they so choose, but they can’t really object to it as it is not up for public vote. Some of the taxing districts have a representative on the Urban Renewal Board, but not all of them do. Shilah wanted the board to be aware of this so that if it comes up for public vote in 2030, the board may choose to take action at that time.

## **ODA Update – Brittany Mills**

Brittany introduced herself and shared she is the program specialist for the Agricultural Drainage Channel Maintenance program at ODA. This is a program that has previously been limited to the South-Central Willamette Valley, but will be available state-wide starting in January 2025. This is a program for landowners and/or water districts looking to clean out sediment or vegetation in drainage ditches. There is no cost to apply, and once approved, the applicant has up to five years to complete the work. This program is meant to streamline this kind of work as landowners will no longer have to go through State Lands to obtain a permit.

## **Board Succession Planning Discussion – Emily Stranz**

Emily Stranz presented the board with a draft outline for developing the Board Succession Plan. She reviewed the outline and explained what a succession plan would look like. Emily led a discussion on the different board positions, their respective terms, board responsibilities, challenges, opportunities, and future goals. Emily is anticipating the succession plan to be an approximately five-page document, that can be an operating guide for the board as they move forward. Discussion ensued. A projected timeline was also discussed, and board consensus was to ask Emily to have a draft plan prepared for review by the January regular board meeting. Then the board can provide input on the draft, and approve a final plan no later than the June board meeting.

## **Fifteenmile Groundwater Discussion**

Drake presented a PowerPoint presentation on Wasco County Groundwater. He began with a background slide explaining the chronology of the Mosier groundwater issue. Mosier was

declared a critical groundwater area in 1988. The major causes of decline are comingling and overallocation. The SWCD has orchestrated some comingling well repair and two deep wells in the Mosier Watershed. The deep wells were designed to address overallocation and take two of the larger water users and put them on a deeper aquifer. While this work has been done to address the issues, the Columbia River basalts are extremely complex and they are finding new dry wells in Rowena that appear unrelated to the problems they've already addressed. It appears there is a type of fault system that runs along that area and changes how the wells and aquifers react. There is a master's student currently working with GSI and OWRD to run high level testing in the area to try and determine what is happening. Overall, trends in 15Mile and 8Mile watersheds are declining over time.

OWRD is beginning a water budget study in the 15Mile Watershed and are reaching out to landowners to discuss what they will be doing in the watershed. There is concern about what the SWCD and OWRD don't know, including how many wells are comingling and there are wells that aren't even mapped. The SWCD is on the second round of the Mosier Million project and they are still finding new wells they didn't know about. Drake shared on the most recent round of the Mosier Million well repairs, the SWCD was quoted around \$300,000 for drilling a 600ft domestic well. Stan asked why irrigators couldn't pull water out of the Columbia River. It was explained that would be a complicated process involving water rights and possibly legislation, so it wasn't really a feasible option. OWRD has seen warning signs that something is happening and intend to study it over the next 30 years. Phil commented that Charlie and Steve attended the meeting because they don't have 30 years to wait and they are running out of water. Phil suggested the SWCD might try to use their influence to encourage OWRD to take action faster.

The board invited Steve Springston and Charlie Ernst to address the board. Steve Springston introduced himself and Charlie, and shared they operate the Denny Canyon Ranch at the end of Fargher Road. In 2005, Steve had a well drilled at 185ft and at the time it was rated at 40gpm and they set the pump at 80ft deep. Since then, they have had to move the pump deeper 3 times. The pump is now sitting at 180ft deep and can be pumped dry in only six minutes. They operate two homes and water livestock from this well and they are functionally out of business. The static water level is currently at 141ft, and when it was first drilled was 22ft. Their closest neighbor has lost 104ft of water and a neighbor up the canyon has lost 140ft of water. They suspect others are losing water as well. Steve noted when the orchards stopped irrigating in October, his well water level rose 4.3ft in a month. He suspects a comingling issue. They are considering deepening the well by 200ft, a cost of \$38,000, however Steve thinks they are only kicking the can down the road and will be lucky if the deepening lasts five more years.

Steve shared that he is coming before the SWCD Board to ask for help. He is working with OWRD but feels they take too long to take action. Steve expressed concern that there are a lot of people in the area in trouble because of lack of water, and many that don't realize they are in trouble but will soon. Discussion ensued on how the SWCD board could assist Steve and Charlie. It was suggested that the board might write a letter to OWRD about the problem. Pat suggested asking the Water Master to dial back water rights across the board as that is what they do in his irrigation district. Board consensus was that they wanted to help but weren't sure how they could help. Ken suggested the affected landowners form their own organization to gain more political sway. Shilah and staff will look into this issue and see what they can come up with to assist in some way. They will try to bring a suggestion to the December board meeting.

### **ODOE C-REP Grant in Partnership with Wy'East**

Shilah reported the SWCD has received a grant from Oregon Department of Energy (ODOE) to support some creative solutions for resiliency in Wasco County, and invited Robert to explain further. Robert distributed handouts to the board and shared that Wy'East and the SWCD applied for the grant through ODOE for a little less than \$1 million for backup battery packs and other resiliency focused technology. The goal is to have this equipment placed strategically, so in the event of a power outage, these battery packs can provide power to pump fuel, water, etc. They need to be tied in to a solar energy source to charge, so they are going to use Dufur School. These battery pack trailers also have 3 phase output as an option, and can be used to charge electric vehicles. The SWCD is acting as the fiscal agent for Wy'East. There are possible incentive payments available, but Robert needs to consult an accountant to see if they can take advantage of that or not. They are still waiting on the contract from the State of Oregon, but Robert hopes by Spring they will be able to begin purchasing equipment. Shilah reported after the contract is received, she will draft an MOU with Wy'East for this specific project.

### **Updates**

**a. Next Meeting** – The next regular meeting is scheduled for December 11, 2024, at 1:00 PM, at the USDA Service Center and via Zoom.

Regular Updates were provided in writing due to time constraints.

### **Agency Reports**

**a. NRCS** – Emily was not able to attend the meeting.

**b. FSA** – Lissa reported they are in the middle of ECP signup for 2024 wildfires to help rebuild fences. They have only had 5 or 6 producers come in and she thought there should be 65 other producers that haven't come in yet. The deadline is December 5<sup>th</sup>. EFRP is also going along with ECP to help replant trees. Although she does not anticipate a lot of interest in this as timber was not hit very hard in the fires this summer. Acreage reporting for feed grain is due December 15<sup>th</sup>. Orchard acreage reporting is due January 15<sup>th</sup>. The NAP signup deadline for cherries is November 20<sup>th</sup>. Rangeland and hay crops NAP deadline is on November 30<sup>th</sup>. If you received emergency relief program funds, you are required to have insurance for the next two years to remain in compliance. Lissa is in the middle of replacing Martha, who is now a state office employee. Interviews have been completed and she hopes to make an offer to someone this week. There is currently no farm bill, so there is no CRP signup at the moment.

**c. OSU Extension** – Jacob was not able to attend the meeting, but provided a written update included in the meeting packet.

**d. Wy'East RC&D** – Robert reported Wy'East has been very busy lately. He was invited to Washington DC and to the White House to participate in the Farmers and Ranchers in Action Day. 90 farms and ranchers from across the country attended. The event included a tour of the White House. Robert shared he felt a little out of place but was honored to be there. The event included a lot of good discussions. The Council of Foreign Relations reached out to Robert and requested he put together a listening session on December 3<sup>rd</sup> to discuss cherries, wheat, and other crops and how trade is impacting producers and their businesses. This will be the fifth of five listening sessions scattered across the country. Wy'East is currently hiring for two positions: a Rural

Energy Project Manager, and a new Energy Trust of Oregon staff member. Robert has new electric equipment that will be arriving soon, including a miniature excavator which will be available for demonstrations. Sustainable NW and Wy'East hosted an event in November where they toured The Dalles Dam, the Dufur School, carbon capture near Google, and had a conference at the Discovery Center. They were discussing energy efficiency and current projects. Wy'East staff attended the Oregon Solar Expo. Today, Wy'East staff are attending the Willamette Agriculture Show in Albany. Tomorrow, Robert will be at Chemeketa Community College with the new excavator. In early December, he will be attending the National Groundwater Show in Las Vegas. A couple of weeks ago, he met with Energy Trust of Oregon and discussed creating energy hubs throughout the state.

### **Committee Reports**

- a. **Audit Committee** – Tabled due to time constraints.
- b. **Facilities Committee** – Tabled due to time constraints.
- c. **Watershed Council Updates** – Tabled due to time constraints.

### **District Manager Report**

- a. **Work Plan Progress & Grant Status** – Tabled due to time constraints.
- b. **Activity Reports and Schedules** – Tabled due to time constraints.

*Shawn moved to adjourn the meeting and consider the tabled agenda items at the December meeting; Phil seconded. Motion carried.*

**Adjourned: 3:21pm**

Jennifer Sampson