



Wheeler Soil and Water Conservation District

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Board of Directors
Meeting Minutes
August 31, 2023

Directors

Anna Thomas
Zach Bruce
Brent Johnson
Dave Hunt
Ross Ryno

Employees

Cassandra Newton
Ayla Morehouse
Brooke Moore
Kristen Neuburger

Others Present

DelRae Ferguson, NRCS
Maria Snodgress, ODA
Don Sietz

The board meeting was called to order by Vice-Chair Thomas at 6:18 p.m. by the clock on the wall.

1. Agency Reports

a. Oregon Department of Agriculture, *Maria Snodgress*

Maria provided a staffing update. She advised that DEQ is reviewing Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDL), primarily the temperature ones, and the Middle John Day on that list. Maria reminded the Board that the implementation of TMDLs are included in the Ag Water Quality Area Management Plans (AgWQAMP). She stated that TMDLs are likely to be separated from the AgWQAMP and become an independent plan.

b. Natural Resource Conservation Service, *DelRae Ferguson*

DelRae advised that Jessica is back in the office full-time and is currently focused on FSA's deadline for the grasslands CRP. She also advised that Jonathan has moved to his new role and is no longer in the Condon office. DelRae stated that she is managing the majority of the field work on her own, but has someone from Heppner office helping her. She advised that her current focus is on the CSP signups that have a September 15th deadline. DelRae further advised that the Waterman forestry funding pool is available with a November deadline.

2. District Reports

a. District Manager, *Cassi Newton*

Cassi stated her report is in the packet, but she provided some highlights. She advised that she completed the newsletter and it should be going out in September. Cassi stated that she has been travelling to meetings regarding the Wood Innovation Grant and AgriMet. She advised that the audit is still being processed, but has been more seamless process since having the ability to share QuickBooks files and electronically sending documents. Cassi stated that all other items in her report will be discussed later in the agenda. Cassi introduced Ayla Morehouse as the new Conservation Manager. She advised that Ayla started on August 15th and has already made a great impact on the team, spending her first week in the field by herself conducting RCPP cultural resource surveys with contractors and participating in drafting OWEB applications with Brooke for the fall solicitation. Cassi advised that Ayla has a report in the packet.

Meeting Location: The Rock in Spray, Oregon

To Join from a computer or smartphone:

<https://global.gotomeeting.com/join/954414701> (Contact the office for meeting password)

To dial in using a phone:

(571) 317-3122 (Access Code: 954-414-701)

b. Conservation Manager, Ayla Morehouse

Ayla shared her excitement to be in Wheeler County and thanked everyone for the welcoming. She advised that she is currently working on getting involved in everything the technicians are doing, as well as attending meetings with Cassi to learn the management side of the District.

c. Conservation Technician II, Brooke Moore

Brooke stated that her report is current and highlighted that she has been working hard to get CREP contracts and OWEB applications lined out for fall since she will be going on leave a little earlier than expected.

d. Conservation Technician I, Kristen Neuburger

Kristen stated her report is current.

3. Monthly Business

a. Review and approve minutes

i. June 29, 2023 minutes

‡Motion made by Director Hunt to approve the board meeting minutes from June 29, 2023, director Bruce seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

b. Review and approve financial reports

Vice-Chair Thomas asked for clarification of the equipment line-item amounts between July and August. Cassi advised those funds were expended in July and it was accidentally carried over to the August financial report. She stated that the equipment line should be zero for August.

‡Motion made by Director Ryno to approve the July and August financial reports, director Bruce seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

c. Review and approve Accounts Payable

i. July 17, 2023

ii. July 31, 2023

iii. August 15, 2023

iv. August 31, 2023

‡Motion made by Director Hunt to approve the check registers from July 17, 2023, July 31, 2023, August 15, 2023, and August 31, 2023 as presented, Director Bruce seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

4. Upcoming Meetings & Events

a. Staff Meeting, every Monday

b. September

i. 4th Labor Day – SWCD office closed

ii. 27th JDBP meeting (JD), 9am

iii. 28th SWCD board meeting, 6pm

c. October

i. 16th-18th OACD Conference (Redmond)

ii. 24th-25th OWEB Meeting, Sisters

iii. TBD LJDWG

iv. 28th SWCD board meeting, 6pm

5. Upcoming Deadlines

a. September

- i. None

b. October

- i. 16th CREP TA application
- ii. 30th OWEB fall solicitation

6. District Management

a. SDAO Risk Assessment

Cassi stated that SDAO has a Risk Department in conjunction with SDIS and conducts risk assessments generally every three to five years. She advised that SDAO staff a risk assessment was conducted on August 31st and the District received high remarks regarding organization and the employee poster board. Cassi stated that the only recommendation received was to replace the emergency eye wash due to expiration.

b. Staffing

i. Delegations/Policies

Cassi recommended the Board to table this item until September due to her wanting Ayla to participate in the drafting and revisions of the delegations of authorities and responsibilities outlined in the Fiscal Policy. Cassi asked the Board if they had any suggestions for the delegations of authority, specifically regarding the bid award amount. She reminded the Board that when an employee moved into the District Manager position, the amount remained at \$50,000, but when a District Manager was hired outside of the District staff, it was reduced to \$25,000 until after the evaluation following completion of the probationary period of employment. The Board agreed to have a reduced limit until after completion of the probationary period of employment.

ii. Card User Authorization

Cassi requested the Board to approve card signatory authorization for Ayla.

‡**Motion** made by Director Hunt to approve card signatory authorization for Ayla Morehouse, Director Johnson seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

iii. Bank Signers

Cassi requested the Board to approve Ayla Morehouse as a bank signer for having authorization for online banking access and transactions, not as a check signatory.

‡**Motion** made by Director Hunt to appoint Ayla Morehouse as a bank signer for having authorization for online banking access and transactions, not as a check signatory, Director Ryno seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

iv. Leave of Absence

Cassi stated that Ayla and her spent the past week working with Brooke to document the status and needs of Brooke's entire workload. Cassi advised that she is much more comfortable with understanding projects and managing the District than when this occurred in 2021. She explained that in the future the Conservation Manager would manage a Technician's leave of absence with assistance from the District Manager, but since Ayla has only been with the District for less than a month, it

cannot be expected of her to manage the additional workload caused by the leave of absence.

Cassi advised that her stipend for managing multiple positions ended upon hiring for the Conservation Manager. She requested that the Board consider continuing the stipend through the Technician's leave of absence and suggested a 50% reduced amount. Cassi explained that the weekend and late nights over the past year of covering multiple positions on her own and the continuous multiple workloads since 2021 is beginning to have a vast impact on her since the District has the lead on multiple larger projects and is planning for more large projects in the near future. She assured the Board that she is willing to continue covering positions to ensure the success of the District, but she is anxious to have a fully trained team to even out the workload and responsibilities.

There was discussion amongst the Board and staff regarding if the workload would solely be on Cassi or if other staff members would also have an increased workload; and, if the stipend should be reduced or split amongst multiple staff members. The Board asked each staff member for input individually.

¶**Motion** made by Director Ryno to approve the extension of the existing temporary stipend for Cassandra Newton through December 31, 2023, Director Hunt seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

c. Employee Evaluations

Cassi advised this item will be tabled until January. She explained that she was trying to get evaluations completed during the 2023 year due to missing them in January due to the extensive workloads; however, she has not been able to meet with the Personnel Committee Chair, so it has been decided to postpone until the next scheduled evaluations in January. She further explained that waiting until January will give Ayla time to get to know the employees, as the Conservation Manager is the one responsible for conducting the evaluations with the selected committee members.

d. Property

i. Water Rights

Cassi stated that she submitted a request for ownership change on the water rights for the property, but to have the District's name be on the certificate an assignment application needs to be submitted with a \$120 fee. The Board agreed that an assignment application should be submitted.

ii. WIG Status

Cassi presented the slide deck development by LEVER Architecture for the kickoff meeting held amongst all the project partners – the presentation included an introduction of all the partners, a preliminary schedule for the design process and meetings, the primary focuses of the project, an overview of property features/developments, and two options for the new facility location on the property. Cassi also presented a collaboration of photos that she took while on a mass-timber building tour that LEVER Architecture staff conducted for her and she provided feedback on her ideas that would be suitable for the Wheeler SWCD Conservation Community Center.

Following the presentations, the Board had an elaborate discussion with suggestions for revisions to the design goals and facility, such as: chipping out the rock slabs for building space, including a second story on the building, reducing rentable office spaces, weekend rentable venue space, and more. Cassi reminded the Board what the main focuses of the facility project are fill resource gaps and community needs in Wheeler County. She advised that she will take the suggestions back to the design team to determine the reality of them and report back to the Board.

iii. Security (Business Not Listed)

Cassi advised that there is evidence that people have been visiting the District's property regularly without notice, such as tire tracks throughout the front of the property and the fruit trees had been stripped. Cassi suggested that the District solicit for quotes to install a fence around the western half of the property and that the design team stated it would not interfere with construction. Cassi stated that she would prefer to install a deer fence similar to the one that exists in pieces around the property.

After discussion, the Board decided that the fence will not be a deer fence, but instead a more appealing fence style depicting that it is a public facility open to the public; and, a boundary fence around the property will not be pursued until after a building site location is chosen.

e. SWCD Requirements

Cassi stated that there is a notice in the board packet from the Soil and Water Conservation Commission (SWCC) that outlines the ORS requirements for SWCDs. She then reviewed the requirements with the Board.

7. Legislation

a. HB2110

Cassi advised that HB2110 passed and it changed the requirement levels for municipal audits. She further advised that the District still requires a full audit, so the changes do not currently affect the District's operations.

8. Projects/Programs

a. ODA SIA

Maria stated that ODA is looking at the next five-year schedule for implementation of SIAs and that she was tasked with reaching out to the SWCDs in her region to determine with the SWCD was comfortable with where they were on the schedule. She advised that Wheeler SWCD is currently scheduled for 2026 and asked if the District was interested in requesting a different year.

Cassi suggested that if the Board is interested in pursuing an SIA in West Branch area to move the SIA up to 2025 to align with project funding through the current planning efforts, but if looking at Mountain Creek or any other location to leave it scheduled in 2026.

The Board was unable to decide where to focus for an SIA and decided leave the SIA scheduled for 2026 to allow for further discussion and planning.

b. BLM – Priest Hole Restoration

Cassi advised that the grant agreement still hasn't been received by OWEB and appears to still be with DOJ for review. She stated that she has been working on the project a small amount because reimbursement of funds can be backdated to the award date.

c. BLM – Noxious Weeds

Cassi stated that the BLM agreement was executed and is a total of \$30,000 for the first year. She provided an overview of the objectives and advised that Kristen will be conducting the treatments.

d. ODA Noxious Weeds – TOH

Cassi provided an overview of the invasive noxious weed "Tree of Heaven." She advised that Dan Son with ODA accompanied her and Kristen on a tour around Wheeler County to conduct a survey of all known infestations. She stated that staff will be submitting an ODA Noxious Weed grant application to eradicate the species from Wheeler County through an Early Detection, Rapid Response (EDRR) phased approach that includes restoration over the next 3-5 years. Cassi advised that the BLM Noxious Weed agreement will be used as match and treatment will occur for Tree of Heaven present on BLM land. She explained that landowners with known infestations will be contacted and urged to participate in the cost-share grant.

After discussion, the Board recommended that the District not require cost-share from the landowners for the Tree of Heaven EDRR grant to help warrant participation.

e. NRCS/SNW – RCPP

DelRae stated she is in the very early stages of working with Cassi and Jordan Zettle at Sustainable Northwest to plan a new RCPP in the Waterman area. She explained that the RCPP will be applied for in August 2024 to replace the current Waterman funding pool and would include practices such as pre-commercial thinning, juniper removal, and Rejuvra treatment.

f. AgriMet

Cassi stated that she met with BOR and Hood River irrigation districts to explore the idea of partnering the regions into one tribal application. She advised that although the networking and discussion was great, the possibility of pairing the projects into one application was not feasible. Cassi advised that she is continuing to seek BOR/CTWS assistance and she is working with DelRae to determine the possibility of NRCS funding to fund some stations for Gilliam and Wheeler counties.

g. SB2010 (SB3142)

Cassi advised that HB3142 was rolled into HB2010 and included \$300,000 to be provided to Wheeler County that will be passed through to Wheeler SWCD for removal of Western juniper. She further advised that funds are to be provided to recipients by Oregon Department of Administrative Services by July 1, 2023 or within 60 days after the effective date of the 2023 Act, whichever is later. Cassi explained Wheeler SWCD can distribute the funds to any number of landowners or number of acres per landowner, as long as the set requirements are met. She reminded the Board that these funds are able to be match towards larger restoration grant applications.

The Board discussed priority areas and possible disbursement options. The Board requested the agenda item to be tabled until funds are received, and asked Cassi to seek a timeline intended for expending these funds.

9. Partners

a. Umatilla SWCD

Cassi stated that she discussed with Dan Son about the possibility of sharing a “weed education trailer” with a neighboring region. She explained that there are a few weed education trailers shared across the state that serve as a portable display to conduct noxious weed education at events and Dan initiated communication with Wallowa and Umatilla counties to see if sharing their trailer would be feasible. Cassi advised that she will be following up with the Weed Supervisor in Umatilla County to discuss this opportunity further.

b. Spray School

Cassi advised that she was approached by the Spray High School arts teacher, who inquired if Wheeler SWCD would be interested in allowing the photography class to create promotional media for the SWCD. Cassi invited the teacher to reach out when the class was ready for an assignment and she would work with them to provide a project or topic to promote on.

c. Fossil School (business not listed)

Cassi advised that she was approached by the new Fossil 3rd and 4th grade teacher, who was seeking assistance in developing a stream assessment plan that the students could work on throughout the school year. Cassi stated that she is working with the teacher to develop that plan and she agreed to assist with the process throughout the year, including some time for staff to present to the students and fieldtrip options.

d. Sustainable Northwest

Cassi advised that Sustainable Northwest (SNW) was awarded a Wood Innovation Grant that will fund them to pilot ten projects across the United States through sourcing materials, marketing, and collaboration. She further advised that SNW selected the Wheeler SWCD Facility Project as one to pilot. Cassi stated that she is still working with Jordan Zettle at SNW to determine what the pilot will fully entail.


10. Business Not Listed


a. None

Next Meeting September 28, 2023 at the Spray Fire Hall!

The board meeting was adjourned by Vice-Chair Thomas at 9:26 p.m. by the clock on the wall.

Respectfully submitted by Cassandra Newton


James Collins, Chair


Cassandra Newton, District Manager

