



## RAVALLI COUNTY LOCAL WORKING GROUP

(RCLWG)

Thursday, October 10, 2019

Minutes

1801 North First Street  
Hamilton, Montana 59840  
(406) 361-6181



**Ravalli County Local Working Group (RCLWG) meeting on Thursday, October 10, 2019, was called to order at 1:30 p.m. by Chairman Kent Myers and introductions were made.**

### **Introductions and Attendance:**

Kori Anderson (Bitter Root Land Trust, BRLT), Heather Barber (Bitter Root Water Forum, BRWF), Kyle Barber (BRLT), Allen Bjergo (Bitter Root Resource Conservation and Development, RC&D), Pam Gouse (RC&D), Patrick Mangan (Ravalli County Extension), Kent Myers (Bitterroot Conservation District, BCD), Julie Ralston (BCD), Jim Schroeder (Landowner), Sharon Schroeder (Landowner), Dan Severson (Landowner), Stacy Welling (Natural Resources Conservation Service, NRCS), Sam Lawry (Teller Wildlife Refuge), Eric Winthers (Bitterroot Forest Service).

### **Minutes**

Stacy Welling (NRCS) moved to approve the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2019 minutes with modification. Dan Severson seconded, motion carried.

### **Review actions from last meeting:**

*A) NRCS and RC&D will meet with the Forest Service to identify the specific Forest Health areas of resource concern.*

Welling reported that she has met with the RC&D and Forest Service. She will provide further details during her agenda topic later in the meeting.

*B) Myers will present the proposed Goals and Objectives for the BCD's Long Range Plan to the BCD for approval.*

Myers indicated that the BCD reviewed and approved the proposed Goals and Objectives at their meeting on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June.

### **Kyle Barber - Local Working Group input on BRLT's proposed Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) application, to be submitted by December 3, 2019.**

Barber explained that the RCPP is an NRCS program in which funds are committed for a 5-year period for agriculture land easements and Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) projects in a specific area. A total of \$300 million/year is allocated for the RCPP in the current Farm Bill. Importantly, these funds can be used for conservation easements on smaller tracts (< 160 acres) that would otherwise not be eligible for funding through the NRCS's Agriculture Land Easement (ALE) program. The deadline for applications is December 3, 2019, and Barber thinks that there may be less competition for this round because of the tight timeline and uncertainty due to the transition between Farm Bills. The next application deadline is July 2020, and the BRLT can re-apply if unsuccessful in the first round. The application will request approximately \$5-6 million for both conservation easements and EQIP projects and in the Eastside Highway corridor, Corvallis, and Burnt Fork areas. If approved, the RCPP funding will be used to do the following:

- Conserve high value agricultural properties, including smaller tracts of between 40-160 acres;
- Fill in gaps between existing easements in the specified areas;
- Promote purchase of ag lands by younger farmers and also generational transfer of ag lands;
- Conserve and assist small-scale diversified agriculture operations.

Barber said that the amount budgeted for easements will be based on past easements and proposed future easements. The grant will also identify 1-2 resource priorities for EQIPs (e.g., fencing, weed management, irrigation efficiency). Welling stated that EQIP projects in the RCPP grant would still have to follow NRCS requirements but would not be competing for funding with EQIP projects linked to NRCS Targeted Implementation Plans (TIPs). The local NRCS office will be responsible for administering the funds for EQIP/RCPP projects. Up to 10-15% of the RCPP funds can be used for technical assistance to facilitate administration of these projects. The matching requirements for RCPP easements are the same as for ALE's (50%), and are variable for EQIP projects depending on the nature of the project. Possible sources of matching funds include the Open Lands Bond program, BRLT, landowner contributions, and in-kind contributions by the LWG for regular and annual outreach meetings.

Barber said that the BRLT will be the Lead Partner in the grant and asked if the RCLWG would be willing to serve as the "Partnership Body." In this capacity, the LWG would be responsible for providing strategic vision, landowner outreach, and progress review and advice. Barber requested a letter of support from the LWG indicating that it is willing to serve in this role. The consensus of those in attendance was to support the BRLT's RCPP application as requested. Barber and Myers will draft the letter and will send it to LWG members for review and approval. Barber also agreed to attend a BCD meeting to request that they provide a letter of support. The RC&D and BRWF agreed to provide letters of support. Schroeder suggested that the LWG's letter of support should include the names and affiliations of the LWG members to show the diversity of the partnership. Severson stated that he supports the RCPP proposal because he is aware of smaller acreage landowners who would like to place their property in a conservation easement. Lawry stated his concern that the limited NRCS staffing in the local office would make it a challenge to take on additional EQIP projects, but he was overall very much in support of BRLT's application. Barber is hoping that the application will rank high because of the BRLT's track record with partnership programs in Ravalli County. A second RCPP application may be submitted in 1-2 years with a different focus, possibly on irrigation infrastructure.

**Stacy Welling - Update on NRCS long range plan and proposed Targeted Implementation Plan (TIP) on forest health; LWG suggestions for outreach to landowners.**

Welling stated that her colleagues at the NRCS are excited about the RCLWG and thanked those in attendance for their combined work and interest. She indicated that Travis Lemke is the new NRCS Supervisor for the Missoula and Ravalli County field offices and will work out of the Missoula office.

Welling said that work on the NRCS Long Range Plan and the associated TIP for forest health is progressing, but her main effort to date has been on identifying eligible landowners with larger tracts of land who are interested in participating in the program. She said that this TIP will be for three years and will be focused primarily on the east side of the valley between Sleeping Child and the north county line. This TIP will complement the proposed Gold Butterfly project on the east side and is therefore aligned with the increased focus by the USDA on "shared stewardship." The south end of the valley may be addressed in a future TIP. Welling is planning to send a brochure to 640 landowners on the east side, and the BCD has agreed to cover the cost. Another opportunity for outreach will be at the five community meetings that the Forest Service is putting on to promote the Bitterroot Front Project, and Welling is planning to have a table set up at each of the meetings. Welling asked if the LWG would be willing to host a public outreach meeting somewhere on the eastside of the valley, and the members in attendance were supportive of this request. Welling will contact Ralston about setting up the public meeting.

Welling said that the next deadline for TIPs is June 1, 2019, and requested that the LWG start thinking about potential resource concerns that could be addressed. Possibilities include rebuilding riparian areas and improving irrigation infrastructure. It might be possible to coordinate TIPs with other programs such as the USDA's Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership, the Western Montana Restoration Initiative (WMRI), and the Bitterroot Front Project, which will likely have a water component to it. At some point, it might be helpful to have a partnership coordinator for Ravalli County. It was agreed that resource priorities for new TIPs will be discussed at the next LWG meeting, tentatively set for 1:30-3:30 PM on January 23, 2019.

**Kent Myers - Update on Bitterroot Conservation District's Long Range Plan; status and potential goals and resource concerns to be included in plan.**

Myers gave a progress report on preparation of the BCD's Long Range Plan. The core of the plan is the list of resource concerns in Ravalli County that was compiled earlier this year by the LWG. Myers explained that the purpose of the Long Range Plan is to identify the BCD's goals and objectives for addressing these resource concerns, but it does not commit the BCD to any particular course of action. The plan is intended to be a working document that will be reviewed on a regular basis (e.g., annually) and updated as needed. Another benefit of having a Long Range Plan is that it will make the BCD eligible for certain DNRC grants. Myers reviewed the potential actions and projects, some of which are already ongoing, that will be listed in the draft plan:

1. Forest health – RC&D support, landowner cost-share program, education/outreach;
2. Pasture/rangeland/cropland – pollinator initiative, no till drill rental program, promote precision agriculture methods, landowner cost-share program;
3. Water quantity – improve flow measurement devices, mainstem gauges, irrigation infrastructure projects, maintain/improve backcountry dams, use of groundwater for drought mitigation;
4. Water quality – nutrient monitoring on mainstem and tributaries, education/outreach, assist in watershed restoration projects (BRWF), Supply Ditch/Burnt Fork project, riparian fencing;
5. Weeds – education/outreach, landowner cost-share program.

Other potential project categories that were suggested include wetland protection/enhancement, wildlife habitat, riparian fencing, and TMDL reduction. Myers will review these suggestions and incorporate them as appropriate. A draft of the plan will be sent out to the LWG for review prior to being finalized.

**Actions**

1. Draft the letter of support for the BRLT's proposed RCPP grant (Barber and Myers).
2. Organize a public outreach meeting in support of the Forest Health TIP (Welling and Ralston).

**Next meeting**

January 23, 2020, to be held in the USFS meeting room (1801 N. First Street). Agenda items to include a discussion of potential TIP(s) for the June 2020 update to the NRCS Long Range Plan.

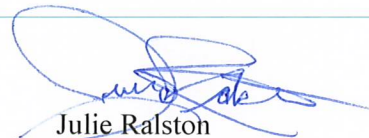
Meeting adjourned at 3:00 p.m.

Kent Myers  
Chairman



Date:

1/23/2020



Julie Ralston  
BCD Administrator