



FERRY COUNTY VSP BIENNIAL REPORT

2019-2021

Compiled for the Washington State Conservation Commission on
behalf of the Ferry County VSP Work Group
by the Ferry Conservation District



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ABBREVIATIONS

Ecology	Washington State Department of Ecology
FY	Fiscal Year
ISP	Individual Stewardship Plan
Ferry CD	Ferry Conservation District
NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
RCPP	Regional Conservation Partnership Program
RCW	Revised Code of Washington
USFWS	United States Fish and Wildlife Service
VSP	Voluntary Stewardship Program
Work Group	Ferry County Voluntary Stewardship Program Work Group
Work Plan	Ferry County Voluntary Stewardship Program Work Plan
WSCC	Washington State Conservation Commission

1 Introduction

This Report for fiscal years (FY) 2019–2021 documents the status and accomplishments of Ferry County’s Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) Work Plan (Work Plan; Anchor QEA 2018), which was approved by the Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC) in November 2018. This report documents implementation efforts that have occurred between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2021. This report also documents ongoing and planned implementation efforts which will be included in future reports to the WSCC.

The major focus of this report is on agricultural viability. The recently (March 11, 2021) submitted Five-Year VSP report concentrated on the more technical aspects of Work Plan implementation and monitoring with limited opportunities to discuss agricultural viability. When VSP passed in the legislature it was promoted as a balance between maintaining (or enhancing) critical area function at 2011 levels and agricultural viability. To encourage participation in VSP, the Work Group felt it was important to highlight this aspect. Detailed information on practice implementation and monitoring is available in the Five-Year report.

The Ferry Conservation District (Ferry CD), under the direction of the Ferry County VSP Work Group (Work Group), developed this report to provide a periodic review of the effectiveness and accomplishments of the County’s Work Plan in meeting the purpose and intent of VSP (Revised Code of Washington [RCW] 36.70A.700(2)).

This report includes the following:

- A summary of actions and accomplishments made by the Work Group in meeting the VSP goals **between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2021.**
- A report on the progress towards meeting the goals identified in the Work Plan as measured in accordance with the Work Plan
- A description of how adaptive management needs are being identified and instituted
- A report of the status of Work Plan implementation including progress towards meeting the protection and enhancement benchmarks

1.1 Requirements

This report fulfills the state requirements outlined under RCW 36.70A.720 (1)(j), which states that as a part of Work Plan implementation, the Work Group must “conduct periodic evaluations, institute adaptive management, and provide a written report of the status of plans and accomplishments to the county and to the commission within sixty days after the end of each biennium.” Therefore, the report for FY 2019–2021 is due no later than August 30, 2021.

Table 1 provides of the location in this report where information on the status and progress towards meeting the intent of VSP can be found. The numbers in the left column correspond with the elements found in VSP Policy Advisory #05-18.

Table 1
Summary of Progress Towards Meeting VSP Intent

No.	VSP Intent	Ferry County VSP Biennial Report (FY 2019–2021)
1	The protection and enhancement of critical areas within the area where agricultural activities are conducted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Section 2.1 describes outreach to landowners by the Ferry CD that has encouraged participation in stewardship strategies and practices to protect critical areas and promote agricultural viability. • Section 2.2 describes conservation strategies and practices that have been implemented since Work Plan approval.
2	The maintenance and improvement of the long-term viability of agriculture	Section 2.6 describes how implementation efforts and other factors are affecting agricultural viability.
3	Reducing the conversion of farmland to other uses	Section 2.6 discusses challenges related to farmland conversion.
4	The maximization of the use of voluntary incentive programs to encourage good riparian and ecosystem stewardship as an alternative to historical approaches used to protect critical areas	Section 2.2 summarizes projects implemented by landowners since the approval of the Work Plan, which include funding from five different voluntary incentive programs benefiting ecosystem stewardship.
5	The leveraging of existing resources by relying upon existing work and plans in counties and local watersheds, as well as existing state and federal programs to the maximum extent practicable to achieve program goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Section 2.2 summarizes voluntary incentive programs that provide funding to benefit ecosystem stewardship. • Work Plan Appendix D: Existing and Related Plans, Programs, and Regulations describes available resources, plans, and programs being utilized or available to support VSP implementation.

No.	VSP Intent	Ferry County VSP Biennial Report (FY 2019–2021)
6	Ongoing efforts to encourage and foster a spirit of cooperation and partnership among county, tribal, environmental, and agricultural interests to better assure the program success	Section 2.1 summarizes the methods the Ferry CD is using to reach out to interested parties and landowners, including public meetings and regular website updates to encourage partnerships in the community.
7	Ongoing efforts to improve compliance with other laws designed to protect water quality and fish habitat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Section 2.3 describes monitoring efforts from the Ferry CD that include the use of data that is also used to determine compliance with existing water quality and fish habitat laws. • Section 2.2 summarizes projects implemented by landowners since the approval of the Work Plan.
8	A description of efforts showing how relying upon voluntary stewardship practices as the primary method of protecting critical areas and does not require the cessation of agricultural activities	Section 2.6 describes how participating in VSP allows landowners to protect and enhance critical area functions while also increasing agricultural viability.

2 Summary of Actions and Accomplishments

This section includes a summary of activities the County, Ferry CD, and others have implemented or completed that support VSP Work Plan implementation and monitoring between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2021.

2.1 Outreach

2.1.1 Completed Outreach Activities

Ferry County has delegated to the Ferry CD responsibility for managing and facilitating the VSP process. Continued public outreach and education is integral to implementing the Work Plan. Each year, Ferry CD has committed to reaching out to 10% of the producers that operate the farms and ranches in the County. County records show that 175 landowners perform agricultural activities on 788 separate parcels of land. The primary agricultural activities in the County are livestock raising and hay production. 132,450 acres of private land is designated timber land. Much of this land is agriculturally significant, since it grows timber for harvest, and it is also used for grazing. Unlike some other counties, there is no firm line between timber lands and farm/ranch lands.

The County is 1,434,878 acres in total area. 605,759 acres (42%) belongs to the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. 530,869 acres (37%) is owned by Federal, State or local governments. Just 290,348 acres (20%) is privately owned.

Ferry County presents a unique situation for outreach. No newspaper covers the entire County, and no radio station reaches the whole area. Internet coverage is very inconsistent in the areas outside the County seat, Republic. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has limited the Ferry CD's ability to perform outreach. In-person events and meetings were not held from March 2020-April 2021, and the technological challenges mentioned above meant that outreach was very limited in this time period. From April-June 2021, in-person events and meetings have often been limited in capacity and number as a public health precaution, further limiting the Ferry CD's outreach capacity. However, the Ferry CD has developed written outreach materials for mailing to agricultural landowners. A summary of the public outreach events and meetings held between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2021 is included in Table 2.

Table 2
Public Outreach Meetings Since July 1, 2019

No.	Date	Meeting	Location	Participants	Notes
1	September 11, 2019	Ferry County Weed Board	Kettle Falls, WA	9	Introduction of new VSP Coordinator, Presentation, VSP Overview
2	April 27, 2020	Ferry CD Plant Sale	Republic, WA	110	Distributed VSP Materials to Individuals In-Person When Delivering Plants.
3	May 27, 2021	Ferry CD Board of Supervisors	Republic, WA	8	Online Presentation on VSP and strategies for improvement.

2.1.2 Ongoing and Future Outreach Efforts

VSP success relies on producer participation to implement conservation actions, which has been challenging during the past biennium (largely because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated communication difficulties in the county). The implementation budget for each biennium provided to the County includes funding for education, outreach, and technical assistance with activities that include stewardship plan development, reporting, and educational materials (see Table 6-2 in the Work Plan). Ongoing and future outreach and implementation efforts include maintaining regular Work Group meetings, conducting outreach, providing technical assistance, continuing to develop the monitoring and reporting framework, and identifying adaptive management needs.

Ongoing and future outreach efforts are summarized as follows:

Work Group Meetings: The VSP Work Group has met quarterly over the course of the reporting period. The Work Group has focused on implementation and ongoing outreach activities. The 2017-2021 5-Year Status Report was also approved by the group in March 2021. Work Group meeting agendas and minutes are available on the Ferry CD VSP website.

Email Updates: The VSP Coordinator has provided periodic email updates to Work Group members and these emails will continue, with information updates sent out quarterly, at a minimum.

Informational Forums: The Ferry CD will partner with the Ferry County Weed Board to invite speakers to provide technical information for practices that impact critical areas.

Ongoing Individual Stewardship Plan Development: In the 2019–2021 biennium the VSP Coordinator will also working with the Ferry County Weed Board and Work Group members to develop new strategies designed to increase participation in Individual Stewardship plans.

- GIS Outreach, Monitoring, and Reporting:** To support ongoing outreach, implementation, and future monitoring and reporting requirements, the Ferry CD will partner with Ferry County to improve its GIS capability. Targeted outreach to agricultural landowners with critical areas will continue using GIS mapping to prioritize implementation. VSP flyers will be mailed to producers with follow-up outreach in person or by phone is planned as an on-going effort. Ferry CD will also use GIS to map implemented practices on the VSP webpage and host data collected as a part of tracking monitoring efforts. See Figure 1 for the Phased VSP Outreach and ISP Development Flow Chart.

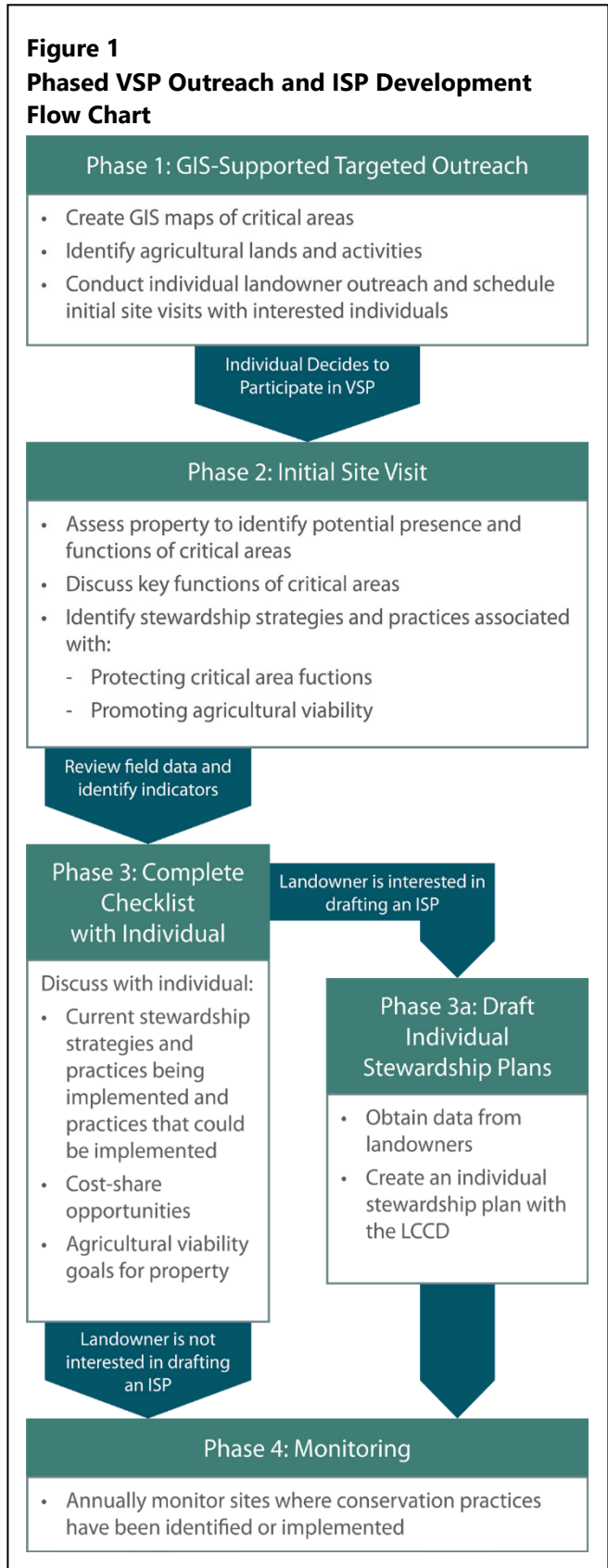


Table 3 provides an update of ongoing and planned outreach activities as described in the Work Plan (Appendix E of the Work Plan).

Table 3
Status of Public Communication and Outreach Activities

Type	Completed and Ongoing Activities
Maintain and Update Email List	Ferry CD continues to maintain an email list containing all interested subscribers.
Update Website and Media	<p>Ferry CD created a webpage specifically for VSP and has continually updated the site. All meeting notices and materials as well as documents will continue to be provided on the Ferry CD VSP webpage. Future developments planned to the VSP webpage include the ability for landowners to identify critical areas on their property and submit information about their voluntary conservation via an online form.</p> <p>Ferry CD also posts announcement and updates on social media, including Facebook.</p>
News and Success Stories Publications	Ferry CD publishes news and success stories on their website. Information about VSP has been and will continue to be included.
VSP Checklist	The VSP Overview & Checklist was included as Appendix F of the VSP Work Plan. This checklist will help facilitate participation in VSP and tracking of currently ongoing conservation strategies and practices. The VSP Checklist may potentially be converted to an online fillable document in the future and be modified as needed.
Notifications, Handouts, and Landowner Maps	With GIS support, Ferry CD will be conducting outreach to agricultural landowners who may have acreage that intersects with critical areas. Recognizing the limits of technology in the county, the Ferry CD will develop educational handouts outlining common best management practices that protect and/or enhance critical areas.
Individual Stewardship Plans	Ferry CD continues to work with producers to help them prepare stewardship plans for their farms and support them in implementing these plans. See Figure 1 for the Phased VSP Outreach and ISP Development Flow Chart.
Reporting on Stewardship Strategies and Practices	Ferry CD will continue to work with NRCS and the Farm Service Agency to annually collect information related to ongoing and new practices implemented. Additionally, Ferry CD will also work with individual producers to annually collect information on self-funded practices implemented. Data will be used in developing biennial and 5-year reports. Information will be collected during the GIS-supported landowner outreach and VSP webpage participation.
Educational Opportunities	Educational materials focused on particular critical area issues and agricultural practices are available to producers at their convenience. These can be used at booths at fairs, public meetings, or farmers' markets.

2.2 Conservation Practices

The Ferry County Work Plan was formally approved in November 2018. In the timeframe

covered by this report, Ferry CD was only able to offer in-person technical assistance for about nine months (July 2019-March 2020). Larger conservation efforts in the county were also hampered by an ongoing vacancy at the NRCS Republic office. Normally the CD would partner with the NRCS in technical assistance and outreach, and NRCS conservation projects help work toward VSP goals; therefore, this vacancy has had a large impact on the VSP programs.

Summary of agencies and their involvement in the VSP program:

- **Voluntary Stewardship Program:** VSP funding is allocated to each participating county for implementation to meet the goals and objectives of their work plan.
- **Ferry Conservation District:** Ferry CD allocates resources with the goal of meeting the needs of local landowners to conserve soil, water, and other natural resources.
- **Washington State Department of Ecology:** The Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology) provides funding for water-quality improvement and protection projects through various grant programs and partnerships with local conservation districts.
- **Washington State Conservation Commission:** The WSCC supports conservation districts through financial and technical assistance and has grant programs for landowners to complete natural resources enhancement projects.

During the five-year reporting period that includes 2019-2021, participation in key stewardship strategies more than offset the county's reduction in conservation practices. Protection and enhancement objectives for 2021 and 2026 (participation acres) have been met based on reported acres in stewardship activities from 2011 to 2020. A more comprehensive list of implemented stewardship strategies and practices through other publicly funded sources such as NRCS, and privately funded projects is reported in the 2017-2021 5-year status report.

The Ferry CD is working to field verify 10% of implemented conservation practice through monitoring and visual recognition annually. The GIS mapping, ISPs, and other outreach practices are incorporating the 10% verification process. Figure 1 shows the phasing Ferry CD intends to use to approach field verification and ISP development with interested landowners, which would include outreach, site visits, and monitoring. The Ferry CD currently conducts field verification following installation of all practices and projects that are facilitated by us. The purpose of field verification is to confirm that practices have been installed consistent with best management specifications.

2.2.1 Individual Stewardship Plan

Ferry CD continues to develop Individual Stewardship Plans with interested producers. This will be an area of emphases for the next reporting period.

2.3 Monitoring

Ferry CD is committed to monitoring performance, reporting progress, and implementing adaptive management measures as discussed in Section 5.4 of the Work Plan. Monitoring focuses on measurable benchmarks and indicators described in Section 5 of the Work Plan that are to be informally evaluated every 2 years to support the 5-year performance review. The monitoring performed for the 2017-2021 five-year status report indicated that implemented conservation practices exceed the Work Plan benchmarks. The Five-Year Report Technical Panel made recommendations on how to improve monitoring and the Ferry CD will work with the agency panel members. Results shown in Table 4 are consistent with Table 5-9 in the Work Plan.

Table 4

Producer Participation Monitoring

Participation Goal: Promote producer participation in voluntary stewardship of agricultural lands and critical areas to meet the protection and/or enhancement benchmarks and protect critical area functions and values at a County-wide watershed level.		
Objectives/Benchmarks	Performance Metric/ Monitoring Method	Biennial Status
Sufficient active participation by commercial and non-commercial agricultural operators (farmers and ranchers) over 10 years that achieves the protection of critical area functions and values at a County-wide watershed level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of acres reported in key stewardship practices • Number of VSP self-assessment checklists submitted • Sufficient producer participation necessary to meet protection and enhancement benchmarks 	Producer participation exceeds the benchmarks described in the Work Plan during the reporting period. For more information, see the 2017-2021 5-Year Status Report.
Passive participation by commercial and non-commercial agricultural operators in VSP stewardship practices is maintained or increased on agricultural land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapping and aerial photo evaluation of practices in place • Random sampling of farmers and ranchers in the field by technical assistance providers with willing landowners 	Ferry CD will partner with Ferry County GIS for tracking of critical areas and to assist in targeted landowner outreach. Figure 1 demonstrates the process for site visits and technical assistance.
Technical assistance and outreach are provided to agricultural producers to encourage stewardship practices and VSP participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of outreach and education events • Number of event attendees 	Outreach during COVID proved difficult. The only public opportunity was the Ferry County Fair in September of 2019. There were over 130 visitors to the VSP informational booth.

County-wide monitoring of resources, particularly water quality and quantity, was performed for the 2017-2021 5-Year Status Report which includes the biennial reporting period. Data sources used included the Washington Department of Ecology's 303(d) listings for the county, readings from USGS water gauges on the Kettle River, information from the Washington Department of Health on drinking water contamination, and a basic aerial imagery check. There was no apparent connection between agricultural activities and adverse effects on resources. Further information on VSP monitoring can be found in the Work Plan, Section 6.3.

2.4 Adaptive Management

No adaptive management is required at this time, consistent with the results of the 2017-2021 five-year status report and the WSCC Executive Director concurring with the County's assessment that it is meeting its goals and benchmarks as asserted in that report. However, the Ferry CD has self-identified areas of concern for the VSP program in the county and will proactively adjust its outreach strategies to successfully meet VSP goals and benchmarks over the course of the next five-year reporting period (2021-2026). These adjustments are distinct from the adaptive management actions discussed in the Work Plan, which are only needed if the County does not meet its goals and benchmarks as documented in a five-year status report. These adjustments are at the discretion of the Ferry CD and the Work Group and could change over time as needs and resources dictate. There were also recommendations from the Five-Year Report Technical Panel that will be considered going forward.

2.5 Reporting

The report is intended to be a summary of accomplishments and plans of commitments in the Work Plan between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2021. The most detailed descriptions of the County's progress on outreach and conservation practices during that timeframe can be found in the 2017-2021 Five-Year status report submitted to WSCC in March 2021. The report indicated that the County is meeting its protection and enhancement goals and benchmarks. The WSCC Executive Director concurred with that assertion and made recommendations on plan implementation.

2.6 Agricultural Viability

Implementation of VSP remains the best opportunity to protect critical area function where it intersects with agriculture. However, the viability of agriculture has been, is, and will be challenged by critical areas. **Table 3-4** in the Work Plan describes threats to agricultural viability: Loss of land base to development, predation of livestock by wolves, costs of weed management, wildfires and landslides, new regulations. All these threats have increased during the reporting period.

As discussed in the Work Plan, conversion of agricultural land to other uses remains a serious

threat to agricultural viability. During the reporting (2019-2021) raw land values have risen dramatically with the driver being the migration of urban people to rural areas like Ferry County. COVID-19 has increased a trend that was already in place. The price of raw land is beyond what agricultural production can monetarily support. This does not allow expansion of existing operations and is a barrier to new operations being developed. Once agricultural land is converted, there has historically been little chance that is re-established.

Endangered species can impact agricultural viability. Gray wolves are state listed as endangered in Ferry County but not federally listed. The Wolf Conservation and Management Plan (Wolf Plan) passed by WDFW in 2011 established a recovery goal for the regions in the state which has been exceeded three-fold during the reporting period in the region that includes Ferry County. Wolf policy has had a bigger impact than actual depredations by wolves which was recognized as a threat to agricultural viability in the Work Plan. Wolf depredations of livestock can be compensated for if they meet strict criteria for determining how the animal died. Wolf policy developed by WDFW essentially requires more resources to be provided by livestock producers in the form of non-lethal deterrents than was anticipated by producers during the development of the Wolf Plan. The deterrents require an investment in time that most producers do not have available, and no amount of compensation will create more time. When asked, WDFW said they had no data on the costs, monetarily or otherwise, to producers to keep non-lethal deterrents in place. Pressure from wolves has also caused uneven forage utilization in private pastures and leased public allotments resulting in over-grazing in some areas. The Ferry CD is working with WDFW on understanding the landscape level unintended consequences of wolf policy.

Weeds were identified in the Work Plan as a threat to critical area function. In developing the Five Year VSP Report it became clear that weeds had a greater impact on both agricultural viability and critical area function than was expected. Uncontrolled weeds were noted in land that included converted agricultural land, parcels of land owned by absentee landowners and public land owned by various agencies. Infestations of invasive weeds on non-agricultural lands over time spread to agricultural lands and critical areas. This leads to a reduction of agricultural viability due to increased costs to control weeds that reduce production and product value. It also increases herbicide use which can potentially impair water quality and other critical area functions. Weeds in critical areas such as wetlands are difficult to control once they are established. The Ferry CD, in conjunction with the Ferry County Weed Board, will work to map invasive weeds in the county and develop a cost share strategy that lessens impacts to critical areas and increases agricultural viability.

Ferry County continues to have longer and more intense fire seasons. Temporary loss of grazing land, both private and public, due to wildfire has affected livestock producers. Infrastructure such as fences and watering facilities that are critical to agricultural viability have also been lost. The health of both livestock and producers has been put in jeopardy by high levels of smoke for long periods of time.

Lawsuits that are aimed at ending public land grazing in Ferry County are pending in the courts. The Work Plan states that "In Ferry County, the primary agricultural product is livestock, which is

entirely dependent on public rangelands for grazing.” On the plus side, there has been legislation aimed at keeping water rights within the county and preventing them from going downstream with the intent of maintaining agricultural viability.

2.7 Spirit of Cooperation

With the COVID-19 pandemic impacting many agencies’ operations and events, as well as staffing turnover and vacancies in Ferry County, the Ferry CD has had fewer opportunities to collaborate on VSP efforts. However, the conservation districts in neighboring Stevens and Pend Oreille counties have been vital partners to Ferry CD in implementing the VSP in northeast Washington. Collaborative projects between the three Districts include hiring a contractor to develop databases, discussing common goals and challenges for VSP in the three counties, and sharing staff resources. Ferry CD would particularly like to thank Dean Hellie, Adam Cares, and Alex Case-Cohen for their partnership and insight. In addition, Levi Keesecker of the Washington State Conservation Commission has provided valuable guidance on the VSP.

References

Anchor QEA, LLC, 2018. *Ferry County Voluntary Stewardship Program Approved Work Plan*. Approved by Washington State Conservation Commission on April 27, 2018. Prepared for Ferry County in cooperation with the Ferry Conservation District. Prepared with assistance from White Bluffs Consulting. November 2018.

WSCC (Washington State Conservation Commission), 2018. VSP Policy Advisory #05-18:

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