

1. OUTREACH STRATEGY

THE strategies and best management practices discussed in this Plan will only be effective if, of course, they are actually implemented. The success of the Work Plan will necessarily be dependent upon the District's and the Work Group's ability to reach out to Mason County's agricultural operators in a way that it is educational and helpful. Understanding what the Voluntary Stewardship Program is about and how it can not only protect important critical areas, but also protect and enhance agricultural activity will be the first step. Once information is disseminated throughout the agricultural community, the District can begin working with individual landowners to build relationships based on trust and understanding. The approach taken with each landowner will be specific to the type of critical area as well as the type of agricultural operation. It is anticipated that with this outreach model a solid level of understanding can be developed in the community that will lead to the successful implementation of this Plan.

The Work Group held a special session just to brainstorm outreach ideas. As members of the agricultural community, the Group is the most logical resource when it comes to strategizing outreach techniques. The Work Group was asked a single question, "How can we get the word out to the Ag Community about VSP?" A few bulleted items were used to provoke a thought process and meaningful discussion. Initially the Facilitator broke the bullets into two categories: marketing and building awareness. Marketing strategies include printed materials, local and regional events, professional partnerships, and media. Utilizing digital communications, increasing visibility through branding with a VSP logo, and designating VSP mentors can all contribute to building awareness.

During the Group's session, several ideas were presented and then organized into broader categories. These included:

OUTREACH EVENTS

Targeting Individual Communities – Mason County is primarily rural, with only one incorporated city. Throughout the landscape are pockets of small, informal communities with varied agricultural products and needs. Reaching out to those communities in ways that are unique to their individual situations will ensure that the VSP has a better chance of implementation.

Trained "Ambassadors" - This idea would be similar to a VSP Mentor. Either a District Staff person or even a member of the Work Group could act as an expert on the Program and disseminate information as opportunities occur. Farm tours would be another avenue for an Ambassador, or Mentor, to educate citizens on methods already in practice.

Events – Local community fairs provide an opportunity to reach a larger number of people in a short period of time and in a single location. Events in Mason County include Tahuya Days, Old Timers Historical Fair, OysterFest, Hama Hama Oyster Rama, Forest Festival, and Taste of Hood Canal. The District and Work Group can partner with Chambers of Commerce to explore the prospects for these events.

Farmers Markets – Mason County has three farmers markets – Shelton, Belfair and Harstine Island – selling locally grown food as well as locally made products. An Ambassador or Mentor present at these markets would reach the growers and consumers, and access a broader audience.

COMMUNITY BASED MEETINGS

Master Gardner Program & Small Farms – The WSU Extension Office hosts monthly meetings of the Master Gardeners of Mason County. Partnering with WSU, a District Staff person, or Group member, could distribute information on VSP to local small farmers and recreational growers participating in those meetings.

Livestock Auctions – Mason County does not have an auction house for livestock or farm equipment; however, there is such a facility in Chehalis just about one hour south of Shelton. The Chehalis Livestock Market may provide for an opportunity to reach farmers who've traveled to auction events. Additionally, that Market will also travel to a farm location to conduct auctions. Mason County farmers hosting an auction on their property may allow District Staff or Work Group members to attend for the purposes of distributing information.

Taking the Show on the Road – Many of the communities in Mason County have Fire Halls and Granges that are easily accessible and often used the surrounding residents. District Staff and Group Members could organize an open house or workshop to talk about the Program and how participation might affect them.

Service Clubs/Organizations – The Shelton Kiwanis and Rotary Clubs hold monthly meetings as well as many fundraising events. A District Staff person or Work Group member could ask to attend a monthly meeting to promote the program and distribute materials.

ADVERTISING

Piggyback Mailers – Whether it is a two sentence blurb, or a full page brochure, inserting VSP information into mass distributed mailers could cover a larger audience. Utility companies, the County Treasurer's Tax Statements, or even the local newspaper could serve as conduits for VSP information.

Posters/Flyers – Creating handbills or posters about VSP, or announcing events where VSP will be presented, could represent a visual and somewhat permanent display of information in locations frequented by the farming community.

Parades – Yes ... parades. Several organizations participate in the Mason County Christmas Parade. Some simply walk in groups with banners or flags, and others ride in cars, trucks, and wagons. The District could partner with an ag-relevant group to promote the Program, utilizing the same ride or join a walking group. Or, with enough momentum and gumption, the Program could be represented on its own with a "float" – decorated vehicle and some enthusiastic walkers.

Reader Boards – There are several shopping centers in the County that digital reader boards, as well as some banks and schools. It may be possible to advertise public meetings or workshops promoting VSP on those boards.

WORKING WITH AG-RELATED BUSINESSES & ORGANIZATIONS

Professional Partnerships – The District could explore opportunities to partner with local agriculture and farming businesses including retail/wholesale seed, farm equipment and hardware distributors. For example, incentivized sales on BMP related purchases would receive discounts. The buyer receives needed supplies for improving viability and protection critical areas, and the seller receives more business as more buyers are encouraged to participate.

Real Estate Market – People moving into Mason County, or just moving into a new home in the County are generally working with a Realtor or real estate agent. New buyers often receive “welcome” gifts when their purchase property that includes information on utilities, schools, public safety and local amenities. The VSP could take advantage of this tradition by inserting program materials into the mix. This would allow the new owners to become familiar with their land and their options for responsible care and cultivation.

Into the Classroom – Agricultural sciences are included in many collage and primary school curriculums, as well as in school sponsored programs like 4-H. The District could approach school district staff to discuss options for promoting the Program in these types of classes. The census numbers for agricultural operators reflect a decline in younger farmers. Bringing new approaches to agricultural viability that includes environmental protection may actually encourage students to consider farming in their future.

Beyond the Classroom – The University of Washington (SeaGrant) and the Washington State University (Extension) both provide programs around the responsible stewardship of land and water. Events held by both Universities could serve as a platform in which VSP information could be combined with other related educational pieces.

Political Arena – Supportive local elected officials can be strong allies when it comes to making community wide changes. In some case, changing laws is necessary to provide more flexibility to farmers struggling to keep their operations viable. Reaching out to Commissioners and Councilmembers early can secure their support for future endeavors. In addition, elected officials are most informed by their constituents of problems, including those in the agricultural community. They can in turn provide necessary information to the District and Work Group members on what some of the issues may be.

PRINT AND BROADCAST MEDIA – INTERNET AND WEBSITES

Live From Shelton – As one of Washington most rural counties, Mason County has one official newspaper that is published once a week, and one radio station. The radio station, unfortunately for the County’s youth, is all talk. However, this station provides talking opportunities to its citizens everyday ... especially those who have something good to share. The Daybreak morning show on KMAS iFiberOne News Radio features representatives from various sects of the community being interviewed live on the radio AND on by video from their website. One or two Work Group members and/or District Staff can arrange to be interviewed on the radio to get information out to the station’s listeners.

In the Funny Papers – As mentioned above, Mason County as well as its single incorporated city, has one official newspaper that comes out once a week – Shelton-Mason County Journal. The District could approach the paper about running an ad or featuring the program in an article or both. Ads could be run to announce meeting dates and locations, or events that feature that Program. An article illustrating the Programs origin and its plotted course through agricultural community would provide written documentation for reference, and increase media coverage.

Website – Having an accessible and current website of information will be crucial in a world of real time everything. People want ... need ... to know what is up to date and relevant to them. A website is the “go-to” of just about any piece of information, and this rural County’s VSP is no exception. The District can provide a link from its home page, or generate a new address just for VSP. The website should be easy to remember and even easier to navigate. It should only provide information important to the farmer or operator using it, including an email address for questions, links to forms that can be filled in on line, project funding sources, and clear examples of what the Program is intended to accomplish. It should minimize the use of acronyms and bureaucratic jibber jabber. No matter how spectacular the Program is, if people are discouraged by unfriendly or overly burdensome website, their journey will end and so will the Program. The District may consider a profession web designer to create a site that reads well, is informative and not intimidating, and provides a logical flow of information.

Like Us – Social media is also a powerful tool. Using outlets such of Facebook or Twitter to display finished projects and success stories, and announce events and tours will help keep the Program in the foreground. People “liking” the site and following it on their own pages will make it visible to others. Information will spread from a “nonpoint source” and reach a larger audience.

What’s Trending – YouTube videos have become a popular go-to for entertainment and information. The VSP can take advantage of this trend by giving the Program a “face”, so to speak. Creating videos that showcase types of available BMPs, how they work, what they look like on the ground, and successful implementation on actual farms gives the Program tangibility. Farmers and agricultural operators not familiar with the BMPs discussed in this Work Plan may be unsure or even intimidated by the practice and not fully understand its benefits. Showing a simple, and short, demonstration video might help clarify the practice and increase interest. Videos of success stories involving real farms and real people in this County will also inspire awareness and participation.

Agency Links – The County’s VSP and Work Plan website could be linked with other agency and organizations that play a roll or have an interest in both critical areas and sustainable farming. District Staff can approach various representatives to determine the possibility and appropriateness of such links.

BUILDING AWARENESS THROUGH BRANDING

Slogans and Logos – The Voluntary Stewardship Program is a mouthful, to say the least, and not entirely descriptive of what it’s about. The acronym, VSP, is even less helpful. Since the Program is designed to reach the agricultural community and motivate them into making changes for critical areas or for farms, or both, its needs a promotion that speaks to them. Many successful businesses have slogans, logos and names that are easy to remember and immediately recognizable to the

community or the general public. The VSP needs to have something unique and relatable to first draw attention, and second to become a familiar reference associated with the Work Plan's goals and implementation.

SITE VISITS

Educating all District Staff on at least the basics of the Program allows them to offer possible assistance on site visits that may be initially unrelated. Agricultural operators often seek advice from District Staff without having any knowledge of critical areas that may be located on or adjacent to their property. Once detected by a non-regulatory agency (which is a PLUS) then the property owner can learn about some options for both critical area protection and agricultural viability.

CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS

District Staff are members of various civic and community organizations in the course of general business that can provide regular opportunities to inform not only agricultural operators but people who may know some. Materials on the Program can be made available, as well as a District speakers bureau describing the program, its benefits, and participation pathways.

BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

Mason County has a variety of elected and appointed citizen groups to address community issues and concerns. An informal presentation to these groups will also help disseminate information to either a farmer, or someone who knows one.

MATERIALS

The District can prepare simple, straightforward materials that provide information about VSP in an understandable and helpful format. Certain aspects of VSP can be confusing and bogged down with legal references; reaching out with information that is void of bureaucratic terminology and complicated formulas will be the most effective. Agricultural operators need information that is clear and relevant to their needs and desires. Materials created must be sensitive to this in order to be effectively understood, or even read beyond the first sentence.

SCHOOLS

Working with schools to educate children about their natural environment is something that the District is regularly involved in. Realizing curriculum are set by the state to a specific set of guidelines, there may be other ways to integrate farming and agricultural events or workshops to engage the County's future work force. One of the items addressed by the Work Group during the SWOT¹ process was a noticeable lack of interest and engagement by youth in agriculture as a

¹ Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

profession. Reaching children at earlier ages might motivate even a few to continue their education with an emphasis on farming and agriculture.

LANDOWNER MEETINGS

Members of the farming community may have casual meetings to discuss issues of particular importance to operators with similar production needs or products. If permitted, District Staff could use some of these informal meetings to broach the topic of VSP and provide assistance on joining the program or taking advantage of other opportunities for District assistance.

LOCAL BUSINESSES/GOVERNMENT OFFICES

Materials can be distributed at local retailers of hardware, farm supplies, and other small businesses patronized by the community. Government offices are also a place where citizen often go not necessarily out of want, but out of need. Offices of the Mason County Treasurer, Auditor, and Assessor are centrally located in downtown Shelton with a single shared lobby. Community members visit these offices daily and materials may be made available to them in places noticeable while waiting. The Auditor's office is of special importance as this office implements Open Space Program that acts as a tax incentive program for agricultural property.

