



# PALOUSE CONSERVATION DISTRICT

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## **WRIA 34 RCPP Enhanced Riparian Buffer Pilot Program White Paper**

The Palouse River Watershed Regional Conservation Partnership Program (WRIA 34 RCPP) is a partnership directed towards helping producers and landowners establish voluntary incentive-based conservation practices that enhance producer operations, and improve soil health, water quality, and wildlife habitat. The WRIA 34 RCPP is coordinated by 18 partners including the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC), eight Conservation Districts (CDs), Washington State University, University of Idaho, Washington Department of Ecology, the Palouse Land Trust, the Pacific Northwest Direct Seed Association (PNWDSA), the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and the Palouse-Clearwater Environmental Institute. Through support by WSCC and NRCS, the Palouse Conservation District, the lead partner for the Partnership, is employing coordinators, conservation planners, and field crews working in five counties and two states to help reach these conservation goals. Over five years, the Partnership will provide a total of \$11 million in funds for technical assistance and on-the-ground projects including riparian buffer installation, conservation tillage, and conservation easements through multiple funding sources such as NRCS programs like Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), as well as WSCC and Department of Ecology cost-share programs.

This diversity of partners and funding enables the Partnership to provide unique and innovative services, including: 1) conservation planners from multiple partners working together to combine their diverse experience in soil health, water quality, and wildlife habitat to provide enhanced technical assistance, 2) qualifying producers receiving funding to implement conservation practices necessary to be certified through the PNWDSA's Farmed Smart Certification, a value-added marketing opportunity, and 3) providing planners access to multiple funding sources that can be combined to offer producers and landowners competitive conservation practice payments and incentives for implementation.

An important objective of the Partnership will be to install over 250 acres of riparian buffers, as these projects directly address multiple WRIA 34 RCPP resources concerns including water quality, soil health, and wildlife habitat. Specifically, the establishment of buffers would significantly reduce sedimentation, lower water temperatures, and filter out chemicals and heavy metals, while improving habitat for important pollinators, upland game, and Endangered Species Act (ESA) listed species that use the Palouse and Snake Rivers.

As part of this effort, the WSCC and the Washington State Legislature are contributing \$302,400 biennially to support an innovative pilot project to provide incentives to producers and landowners implementing riparian buffers within the Palouse Watershed

(Enhanced Riparian Buffer Program). The goal of this pilot program is to provide producers and landowners with support in planting, propagating, and maintaining native tree and shrub plantings (for riparian forest buffers) and grass and forb stands for filter strips (grassed riparian buffers).

Enhanced riparian programs have proved to be huge successes in other areas of the nation, both in terms of landowner participation and resource benefits. The Palouse River Watershed RCPP Partnership Enhanced Riparian Buffer Program is modeled after an example from Southeast Washington where a similar program has achieved landowner participation rates of up to 80% in focused watersheds along targeted riparian areas and reduced water temperature 10°F over a 13-year period.

A subcommittee of the Partnership, predominantly represented by a collaboration of technical assistance providers and landowners, has been established to identify watershed-specific incentives designed to maximize producer and landowner participation and resource benefits. The subcommittee has proposed the following incentives for producers and landowners implementing enhanced riparian buffers, which allow landowners to choose the best option for their operation, property, and personal preferences.

#### **Base Incentive:**

- Riparian buffer maintenance of up to \$400 per acre per year actual cost through WSCC funds.
- Riparian buffer maintenance for additional years (EQIP and/or WSCC as funding allows).
- One time signing incentive payment of \$200/acre for riparian forest buffer implementation and \$100/acre for filter strip implementation.

#### **Enhanced Incentive Options:**

- a) Soil Rental Rate - Incentive payment of 2x the Farm Service Agency (FSA) soil rental rate for riparian forest buffers and 1.5x the FSA soil rental rate for filter strips.
- b) Conservation Easement - Incentive to help landowners conserve riparian buffers and surrounding land in perpetuity through conservation easements (administered through the Palouse Land Trust) by helping fund due diligence costs, including professional surveys, title insurance, and a stewardship donation.
- c) Production Value - estimate of net income from production lost to acres converted to buffer, based on projected yield, which may be calculated by crop insurance rate or similar indicator (\*this option will be available when adequate tool is developed, and may not be available for all years or contracts).

**Maintenance:**

In eastern Washington and northern Idaho, riparian forest buffer implementation faces unique challenges from invasive plant species which are very persistent in the landscape, particularly during re-establishment on degraded riparian areas. The growth habit of these invasive species challenges the distribution and diversity of desired plants. Tree and shrub communities and associated understories are often replaced with dense monocultures of grasses and noxious weeds. Many of these invasive plants are either unusable as wildlife habitat, supply little support to stream function, or block access to desirable species.

Because of the nature of the invasive plant species in these habitats, maintenance treatments for only 1 year will typically not result in the adequate control of these plants, resulting in poor establishment of desired buffer species. This is in part due to the presence of large, vigorous rhizomatous systems, or because elimination of the current cover results in the immediate release of an abundant seedbank of long-lived weed seeds. In order for this type of restoration to be effective, these ecosystems must be treated repeatedly over at least 2-5 years. Following this aggressive treatment regime, the weed species will be reduced to levels more feasibly controlled through normal annual weed management procedures completed by the agricultural producer or landowner. Landowners may have the option of contracting with a local field crew including members from Vets on the Farm for buffer implementation and maintenance.

**Eligibility:**

Producers and landowners may receive incentives for implementing riparian buffers in non-Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) eligible areas enrolled in NRCS RCPP EQIP. If funds are available, producers and landowners may also receive incentives for riparian buffers used as significant contribution in WRIA 34 RCPP, and implemented through other funding sources such as Continuous Conservation Reserve Program, WSCC funds, or Department of Ecology funds. The practice(s) approved by the WRIA 34 RCPP will use NRCS standards and specifications for planning, implementation, and maintenance. Producers and landowners who are not eligible for CREP in CREP eligible areas may also receive incentive payments.

**Monitoring:**

With voluntary participants, the practice(s) will be monitored and evaluated for environmental impacts by the Research and Monitoring Coordinator and Partners, with help from producers and landowners. Data will be provided to WSCC to allow environmental impacts comparison of enhanced incentivized riparian buffers to riparian areas farmed with current practices and CREP program riparian buffer areas. Photo monitoring points will be established on all buffers.

**Contract:**

The standard WSCC cost-share process will be used for incentive payments as mechanism for dispersal. Language will be included in agreements with producers and landowners confirming that incentives are subject to funding availability, with a goal of

providing incentives through June 30, 2020. Enhanced riparian buffers must remain in place for the life of the NRCS practice, or incentives will be required to be repaid by the producer or landowner along with associated legal fees, as outlined in the cost-share agreement.

Projects accepted for the incentives program will be installed by June 30, 2017 (or by the end of each subsequent biennium, provided funds are renewed to the Partnership). Maintenance and implementation checks will be conducted by WRIA 34 RCPP Planners or Vets of the Farm crew members in the growing season (spring) of every contract year, using an established protocol such as the NRCS practice documentation requirements coupled with annual photo monitoring. If the buffer passes the yearly implementation check, incentives payments will be made based on project implementation date in relation to the calendar year, for projects implemented within the timeframe of the WRIA 34 RCPP (June 30, 2015 - June 30, 2020).

### **Capacity:**

Based on projected signups, the Partnership has estimated that producers and landowners implementing WRIA 34 RCPP projects will need to hire or contract the combined time of at least two crew leads and two seasonal four-person crews for around ten months of every sign-up year. In addition, at least two vehicles and additional field equipment will be needed to support monitoring, implementation, and maintenance.

### **Conclusion:**

The Palouse River Watershed RCPP Partnership combines Partner and RCPP funding to provide enhanced TA and FA to encourage buffer establishment on 250 acres of the Palouse River Watershed that runs through private lands. The purpose of this effort is to buffer, protect, and restore the natural resource for producers and landowners and improve water quality to meet Washington and Idaho TMDL standards. Primary objectives for buffer establishment include reducing the sediments, farm chemical residues, DDE, DDT, PCBs and heavy metals along with fecal coliforms and the associated algae blooms in the Palouse River and the Snake River Watersheds. Special focus would be placed on reducing high water temperatures that have placed the Palouse River Watershed on the Washington State Department of Ecology's 303(d) impaired water list. Additionally, there is a great pollinator benefit associated with establishment of native flowering trees, shrubs, and forbs in riparian and wetland areas. A strong voluntary buffer installation program in the Palouse River Watershed would go a long way toward addressing all the above water quality issues, benefitting the public and ESA listed species that use the Palouse and Snake Rivers.

Producers and landowners who are eligible for CREP will be encouraged to utilize CREP for buffer establishment and will not be eligible for the enhanced riparian incentive pilot program. In the Palouse River Watershed, the eligible CREP acres are not all contiguous and are spread out over the watershed as defined by the CREP pilot in Whitman County. This incentives program would help to fill in the gaps not covered by CREP providing the Palouse River Watershed with a larger buffer effect over a greater distance. Riparian buffer projects that are installed contiguously or close together in a watershed have a compounding effect on filtering out pollutant loads as compared to

smaller stand alone buffers. They also have a greater benefit for wildlife by creating corridors for travel and habitat, and reducing island effects. Riparian buffers that are installed through CREP will help to meet the RCPP buffer goals.

We hope this pilot program is the first step towards integrating the many ideas that producers and landowners provided during the Riparian Management Incentives meeting on December 11, 2015, and subsequent WRIA 34 RCPP Incentive Subcommittee meetings while meeting the WRIA 34 objective of implementing the gold standard of riparian forest buffers. Our main goal is to have a competitive riparian incentive that will cover the loss of production on valuable ground. In all, the WRIA 34 RCPP Partners are here to assist the producers and landowners who are willing to take the voluntary steps necessary to employ additional conservation practices in their operations and on their properties. This enhanced riparian buffer pilot program is a way to assist landowners and land managers financially in building wildlife habitat, restoring soil health, and maintaining water quality across their land.