

Palouse Prairie Flyer

Newsletter of the Palouse Prairie Foundation

Photo by Matthew Dolkas

Spring Equinox 2017

Respect your roots

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Upcoming Events & Notices

Wetland and Riparian Restoration in the Potlatch Watershed (Faux Beaver Dams)

Idaho Native Plant Society, Whitepine Chapter. 7:00 pm Tuesday **April 25, 2017**, 1912 Center Great Room, Moscow

Trish Heekin (Planner, Latah Soil and Water Conservation District) and **Susan Firor** (Principal Restoration Engineer, TerraGraphics Environmental Engineering) will present an overview of restoration projects completed over the last decade in the Potlatch Watershed. The impetus for these projects is protection and enhancement of habitat for endangered steelhead. But they take a larger view of habitat.

Field trip to visit Potlatch Watershed restoration projects, **June 10, 2017**



The Palouse Prairie Foundation promotes preservation and restoration of the Palouse Prairie ecosystem.

Palouse Prairie Foundation
P.O. Box 8952
Moscow, ID 83843

Steptoe Butte Update

Submitted by Joan Folwell

On September 2, 2016, 437 acres were put up for sale near the top of Steptoe Butte. On October 5, 2016, they were auctioned off at St. John, Washington. Two couples made the highest bid. They are Kent and Elaine Bassett of Clyde Hill, Washington, and Ray and Joan Folwell of Pullman. The partners were highly motivated to bid spurred by information in an initial report by botanist James Riser. Dr. Riser was conducting a survey for the Whitman County Palouse Prairie Remnant Inventory on this property for the Palouse Conservation District. He identified two populations of the federally endangered Spalding's Catchfly and a population of the Broad Fruit Mariposa Lily which was once common but had not been observed in the county since 1910. Although he had surveyed less than 20% of the parcel, Dr. Riser observed that most of the acreage was Palouse Prairie of varying quality that had never been "tilled or drilled." Aware that less than 1% of the original prairie remains, the partners were intent on purchasing the parcel to prevent any development that would destroy the prairie. From the beginning, their plans were to transfer the land to another entity which would be able to manage it responsibly and make it available to the public.

Steptoe Butte is an iconic Whitman County geologic feature. It is an ancient quartzite peak that protrudes through the basalt and loess hills deposited by more recent geologic activity. It is registered as a National Landmark. Visitors come from near and far to enjoy the magnificent views of the Palouse countryside from its 3612-foot summit. The summit is accessed by the road in Steptoe Butte State Park. The park hosts many users including photographers, hang gliders, star gazers, car rally participants, and Coeur d'Alene tribal members, as well as the generally curious.

March 2017

< Steptoe Butte

The parcel represents the largest known remnant of Palouse Prairie in Whitman County. In comparison, Kamiak Butte State Park, another remnant, is 298 acres. The plant survey will continue during the 2017 summer field season. A weed survey also will be conducted by BFI, Inc. of Moses Lake, WA. CEO Jerry Benson, a well-known prairie restoration expert, says that he is enthusiastic about being involved in a project on the butte. Weed maintenance may also begin this year under his supervision.

This parcel has other interesting aspects. There are two apple orchards located there that were planted by local pioneers, including James “Cashup” Davis, in the 1870s and 1880s. There were a great many more apple varieties available to the homesteaders in that era. Many of those varieties have been “lost” as modern varieties were developed and marketed. A self-described apple detective, David Benscoter of Chattaroy, WA, is devoting his retirement years to scouring the countryside to locate these heritage apple varieties and to identify them. To do this, he sends samples of apples to experts in Oregon and Maine who compare the apple’s appearance to watercolor portraits and verbal descriptions found in old nursery catalogs; this is a painstaking process. To date, he has officially identified four “lost” varieties. The Whitman County Historical Society (WCHS) has formed a committee to administer funds from a benefactor for David to continue his investigations. There are plans to have some of these heritage apple trees available for sale at WCHS events this summer.

Speaking of Steptoe Butte history, the very top of the butte was the site of the Steptoe Butte Hotel built by Cashup Davis in 1888. It closed in 1908 and burned down several years later under mysterious circumstances. If one looks at a Google Earth map of the south side of the butte, an outline of the switchback road going to the summit can still be seen. Water for the hotel was delivered by horse-drawn wagon up that formidable road.

Steptoe Butte affords great bird watching opportunities. It is listed as a birding hotspot on the Washington Audubon Washington State Birding Trail as well as on eBird. Over 139 species were observed there last year; that is almost as many species as the two higher species count sites in the county which have the advantage of being water locations. The area is also prized by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife as the best production area for upland game birds.

The partners recently attended a meeting sponsored by the Washington State Parks Commission in Colfax. The meeting was an opportunity for the public to voice ideas and concerns about Steptoe Butte State Park. Many attendees advocated for the addition of the partners’ prairie parcel to the park. This could be accomplished because the parcel is directly adjacent to the park on three sides. This represents the first step in a process that requires a report of the meeting results to the state park commission, an approval by the state park commission for the acquisition, and then a request to the legislature for purchase funds. In the meantime, the partners will be examining other opportunities to accomplish their goals.



How Will “VSP” Protect Whitman County Palouse Prairie Remnants?

Joan Folwell, VSP Work Group member

What is “VSP”?

VSP stands for the *Voluntary Stewardship Program*. Whitman County has opted into joining this program with the goal to provide a non-regulatory, incentive-based approach for agricultural producers that balances the protection of critical areas on agricultural lands while promoting agricultural viability. In other words, the intent of the program is to provide ag producers with incentives to employ best management practices on land adjacent to critical areas while not impacting their ability to earn a living. Critical areas include wetlands, fish and wildlife conservation areas, aquifer recharge areas, geologically hazardous areas, and frequently flooded areas.

How does VSP benefit Palouse Prairie remnants?

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife determines the fish and wildlife conservation areas that are listed as critical areas. As one of those critical areas, WDFW has listed shrub-steppe as a Priority Habitat. Palouse Prairie is officially recognized as one type of shrub-steppe. These priority habitats are chosen for their unique and significant value to diverse assemblages of species and, as such, require proper conservation and management. This list is used by government at all levels across the state to create regulations for land use. The Voluntary Stewardship Program must also acknowledge that the shrub-steppe habitat requires this protection and propose strategies accordingly.

What is the status of VSP now?

The Washington State Legislature has funded the first phase of the program to be completed in June, 2017. Twenty-nine counties will have submitted their individual work plans for approval to state agencies. These work plans will address how to protect critical areas as well as maintain ag viability, describe goals and set measurable bench marks to show that the programs are effective, and provide a blueprint for implementation. Currently, there is a county work group committee of 11 stakeholders (producers, county personnel, environmentalists) plus a consultant firm that is writing the work plan that is to be completed this June. Funding to implement this plan has been approved by the Washington State legislature this spring.

What is the future of VSP?

Realistically speaking, there are some problems yet to be solved with VSP. VSP depends on voluntary participation through incentives; those incentives have not been determined. If VSP is not successful because the incentives are not attractive or the incentives do not receive adequate funding, the automatic result will be elimination of this program. This will cause more stringent regulations to meet environmental protection – not voluntary compliance – for agricultural producers. Maybe this threat will provide the incentive to make VSP a workable program.

Stay tuned for more!

Palouse Prairie Remnant Surveys in Whitman County: 2015–2016

Palouse Prairie Background

Poorly defined in general -- has included other western grasslands (i.e., in MT)

Daubenmire (1970) defined as western bunchgrass ecosystem with three climax vegetation zones:

- *Pseudoregnaria spicatum* - *Festuca idahoensis*
- *Festuca idahoensis* - *Symphoricarpos albus*
- *Festuca idahoensis* - *Rosa nutkana*

Soils might be a better descriptor

Vegetation varies/varied by site

Generally found on loess-derived soils

Floristically speaking: bunchgrass or meadow steppe with significant shrub and herbaceous components typically occurring on loessal soils

Not clear how differs from Canyon Grasslands

Originally ~16,000 km² (broad sense) to 6,000 km² (narrow sense)

Almost all converted to agricultural use by 20th century (94% to 99% converted)

Probably no more than 1% remain, maybe as little as 0.1%

Most recent studies focused on a few sites with public access

Most remnants small (< 5 acres) and privately owned

Palouse Prairie Remnant Surveys

Previously & currently underway in Idaho in Latah and Nez Perce Counties

Whitman County, WA by Palouse Conservation District

Assess private land

Phase 1: initial GIS-based inventory of potential remnants

- completed 2012
- 1,120 potential remnants
- 9,646 acres

Phase 2: contacting landowners

- mailings sent out to landowners asking for permission to survey remnants
- completed 2013/2014
- ~ 1,000 landowners contacted
- 1,200 acres with permission to survey

Phase 3: surveying remnants

- 115 potential remnants to survey
- 61 landowners
- surveys initiated summer 2015
- visited remnants and assessed for condition and rare plants

Remnant Survey Results

- 79 remnants surveyed (43 in 2015 & 36 in 2016)
 - 576 acres surveyed (189 & 221*)
 - weeds are everywhere, just a matter of degree
 - most remnants are not in great shape
- (* not including Steptoe Butte remnant, ~437 acres)

Condition rank based on native species cover:

- A: 75 – 100%: 59 acres (16 & 43)
- B: 50 - 75%: 57 acres (18 & 39)
- C: 25 - 50%: 124 acres (14 & 110)
- D: 10 - 25%: 11 acres (9 & 2)
- CU: < 10%: 158 acres (132 & 26) (converted upland)

Rare plants found:

Cirsium brevifolium

2015: 2 new occurrences

2016: >6 new occurrences

Pyrrocoma liatrifolmis

2015: 4 new occurrences

2016: >3 new occurrences

Silene spaldingii

2016: 2 new occurrences! Both on Steptoe Butte

Calochortus nitidus

Last seen in Washington in 1995 (in Asotin County), not seen since; last seen in Whitman County about 1916

Majority of Steptoe Butte protected!

Source:

Riser, James. January 31, 2017. *Palouse Prairie Remnant Surveys in Whitman County: a Summary of 2015-2016*. Palouse Conservation District. Presentation to Palouse Prairie Foundation and Idaho Native Plant Society, Whitepine Chapter.

Mini-Grant Spotlight: Native plantings at Moscow High School

August 2014, Valeria Aizen, Moscow High School

How the proposal supports the PPF mission

The improved xeriscaping garden at the Moscow High School outdoor commons would use native species to reduce the intake of water and to spread the idea that native species are more efficient and practical in our region than are traditional plants to the local community, so that then more native species can be used in the region. It also will teach students attending Moscow High School this generation and for generations to come about species conservation, plant and butterfly anatomy, and other valuable lessons available in an open classroom.

End products of the proposal

The end product of our proposal is a completed, beautiful xeriscape garden completely made out of native plant species of flowers and bushes and trees at the Moscow High School. The garden will hopefully take up less water than the traditional xeriscape garden that uses non-native plant species (which would be monitored by using a transpiration device), and would inform the students at the school and their families about possible gardening methods, and thus, the larger community of Moscow. This process would be continued for many years to come at the school for new students and current students.

Approximate start and end dates

The layout of the garden would start in mid-August 2014 to lay out the pathways and the locations of the different flowerbeds and watering systems and bushes. ... The plants would be planted then in late August and taken care of until ... late October. The project would then be continued in late May on to next August planting the seeds and watering the plants fully. ... The transpiration apparatus would be set up then during the summer to measure water usage.

The full concluding report would probably be available in September 2017.

Isabell Strawn and Mete Yuksel presented a progress report at the January 2017 PPF business meeting.

Began garden in fall 2014 to address depleting aquifers, Fall 2014 photo. Spring 2015, Fall 2015, spring 2016 photos. "Many of the plants been extremely successful to the point we spend much of our maintenance time cutting them back or getting rid of excess sproutlings. The blue flax in particular has done extraordinarily well."

Future plans: remove sandpit, survey, label plants, add a pollinator garden.

