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**Harney Soil & Water Conservation District Regular Monthly Meeting  
April 27, 2023, 3:30 pm  
Harney County Courthouse Basement Conference Room**

Present: Board Chair I(BC) Jeff Hussey, Vice Chair (VC) Scott Franklin, Secretary/  
Treasurer (S/T) Ryan Peila, Board Directors (BD) Ken Bentz, Stacy Davies; HCWMA  
Tyler Goss; HSWCD District Manager (DM) Jason Kesling; Sage Grouse  
Coordinator (SGT) Sarah Mundy; Range Biologist (RB) April Mack; HSWCD/NRCS  
Biologist (H/N) Danielle Reynolds; Admin Assist (AA) Barbara Pearson

Absent: BD Carol Dunten, Susan Doverspike

BC Hussey called the meeting to order at 3:33 pm.

Item #1: Approve Meeting Agenda

There were no proposed changes. VC Franklin moved and BD Bentz seconded approving the agenda. All present who were eligible to vote were in favor.

Item #2: Review/Approve January, February, and March Financials

There were no questions. It was decided to vote on all three months' financial reports vs. one month at a time. S/T Peila moved to approve; VC Franklin seconded. All present who were eligible to vote were in favor.

Item #3: Review/Approve January Meeting Notes

BC Hussey asked why there was nothing listed for February or March. DM Kesling said that the Annual Business Meeting did not constitute a regular monthly business meeting and the March meeting was canceled. There were no proposed changes to the January meeting minutes. VC Franklin moved and BD Bentz seconded approval of the January 2023 meeting minutes. All present who were eligible to vote were in favor.

Item #4 Review/Approve SDIS insurance

DM Kesling explained the existing insurance policy for employees, subject to yearly review. DM Kesling suggested renewing the policy as is—he felt it was as good as any other available. He will complete the form if the board approves. He said the policy has a 2% increase, which is comparatively low and there is no change in coverage. HSWCD has the highest coverage available, which has been in place since DM Suter was employed. Currently the district provides \$1300 in coverage for families; \$800 for single per month. Approval by the board is required. BD Bentz moved and VC Franklin seconded approving continued SDIS insurance coverage for HSWCD employees. All present who were eligible to vote were in favor.

#### Item #5: District Budget/Open Grants Overview Update

DM Kesling created a one-page/two-sided spreadsheet showing secured and open grants, which was in the board director notebooks. One side shows small grants; the other side displays closed grant, admin, attorney fund, rangeland drill and solar rentals, and bank balance and grants with zero balance. DM Kesling continued describing the spreadsheet and add additional comments on future grants that were not included within the spreadsheet.

When DM Kesling indicated there are grants for 5 to 5.5 years of funding, BC Hussey asked, “How far ahead is it practical to go?” The DM responded that he didn’t think in the history of the SWCD it has been this good and attributed this to current generous federal funding.

VC Franklin asked about The Drewsey Water Quality grant, now closed and on page two. SGC Mundy said that ODA identified portion of the river as an area of interest so the district applied for off stream water developments and juniper cutting. The project is completed. DM Kesling said the district will be doing a lot of outreaches and activities to show ODA we’re working on addressing know impacted areas. SGC Mundy said the district is not monitoring. The SIA is barely spent and many SWCDs do not want to monitor because they don’t want to be perceived as a regulator. VC Franklin agreed; “I don’t want the district to write letter to ranchers we are trying to help.”

BC Hussey asked what is this money directed for and DM Kesling said it is being used for outreach. He used SONEC Sam Artaiz’s position. He contacts ranchers to encourage voluntary conservation efforts. Approximately 20k will return to OWEB which was originally designated for monitoring. There are also three pending grants: FEMA (water projects, annual grass treatments and juniper cuts), second USFW infrastructure, which was \$50K last time and is expected to be the same, and third FIP 3.0 south of Diamond. There is potentially lots more money available in grants.

The next two pages of the grant review were charts of incoming funds and expenditures (July 2022- April 2023). With incoming, 50% of this was federal money in helping HSWCD and other SWCD districts with sage grouse conservation. (Basically, \$500K in funds with HSWCD serving as a conduit). Most of state-received funding is through OWEB. The Senate Bill monies would be from the State Department of Forestry.

The other page dealt with monthly expenditures for the same period. As noted previously the district received income for HSWCD and other districts, which was paid out to them. The bank account was about \$520K (approximately \$250K for implementation of the SOWR project). In an update on the SOWR project: SGC Mundy and RB Mack flagged today. The contractor wants to begin this project on Sunday, April 30<sup>th</sup>. BC Hussey said the only concern he has with funding is when employees are let go.

#### Item#6: Employee Evaluations

All employees (except recently hired Breanna O'Connor and April Mack) received evaluations. Recently hired staff will receive evaluations upon completing six months of employment and then will be evaluated yearly, beginning in April 2024. Danielle Reynolds and Sam Artaiz positions are funded through the district and NRCS and so were jointly evaluated by DM Kesling and District Conservationist Zola Ryan. A synopsis of staff evaluations were presented to the board along with recommendations of salary increases. The board also has the opportunity to evaluate the District Manager and these evaluations as well as DM Kesling's self-evaluation were included in the board notebooks. DM Kesling told the board he appreciated their feedback and the employee self-evaluations--everyone was very positive. DM Kesling proposed a 3% step increase for the reviewed employees. VC Franklin asked when was the last time there was a step increase and was advised last April. BD Bentz moved and S/T Peila seconded approval of employee evaluations and step increase. All present who were eligible to vote were in favor.

#### #7 COLA

DM Kesling submitted a proposal for a 10% COLA salary increase. He presented his evidence in a chart based on U.S. annual inflation rates. DM Kesling told the board he felt district salaries was falling behind, undermined by current inflation. He presented a new step rate table for salaries. This would mean staff with evaluations would receive 13% increase, and April Mack and Breanna O'Connor would receive a 10% increase. BC Hussey asked how this compared with other SWCDs and discussion followed. DM Kesling responded that other district COLA increases ranged from 7-13%. VC Franklin said he was in favor as long as it is sustainable. DM Kesling responded that the level of salary is sustainable for a 5-year period that is significantly longer than historic SWCD staff

salary funding projections. S/T Peila noted since he has been on the board no employees have departed. VC Franklin moved and S/T Peila seconded approval of the COLA increase. All present who were eligible to vote were in favor.

#### #8 Department of State Lands School Funds Management Planning (Update)

This was presented as information the DM thought board should be aware of. He shared a map showing where state-owned lands are located in Harney County and said the DSL is going through management plan process. The potential changes could be considered based on renewal energy, wildfire risk reduction, etc. This could also mean the opportunity for state allotment ownership can change, which could affect some ranchers in our area. DM Kesling asked if the board thought he should continue to participate in the discussion. BD Bentz felt the board should pay attention to what is going on. He compared this as similar to interaction with the BLM as possibly eroding Taylor Grazing Act. DM Kesling said the DSL lands are designated to generate funds for schools and their intent is maximize profits from those lands.

BC Hussey asked what is the DSL's thought for medusahead? DM Kesling indicated SOWR money was used to fund treatment; HCWMA Goss has worked with Randy Wiest of DSL to address this. He urged the Board to serve as a conduit for people who may be affected by this and the DM will continue to follow the process and update the board as the plan progresses.

#### Item #9 BLM Sage Grouse Amendment Update

A draft of high-level summary of alternatives of the amendment had been presented to the board with highlights from the DM. He referred them to (page 4) grazing associated with sage grouse habitat. Currently landowners and managers are under 2015 amendment. Alternative #3 has the most restrictive/most conservation oriented, similar to a scenario as management to a national park. If a variation listed "Unavailable", then grazing would not be allowed. Discussion followed. DM Kesling urged board members to read up on it, reminded them BD Dunten and Bentz are representatives of the HSWCD in this matter. He felt it was not at a level for alarm or action at this time and as the document continues to be developed with more detail the staff and board will be able to directly comment on the plan.

#### Item #10: MASA as an Employee Benefit.

DM Kesling received information on MASA through recent RFP meeting. He asked AA Pearson to provide a brief overview since her family is already a member. MASA membership is available in a group setting vs. individual subscription, and AA Pearson established her membership when she was briefly employed through the Burns Paiute Tribe. Presently there are air ambulances

that cover Harney County but they do not recognize one another, which could result in a catastrophic charge not covered and left to the patient to pay. DM Kesling wanted to provide this coverage to employees as part of the employment package. The basic coverage would be \$160 per employee per year that covers the entire family. He will see if coverage can also be offered to board directors, but the directors likely will be able to join our membership and cover their own membership. DM Kesling will follow up with Eric Nusbaum.

4:23 pm Stacy Davies arrived.

BD Bentz moved and VC Franklin seconded offering MASA coverage for HSWCD employees as part of their benefit package, realizing it could also be available to board members. All present who were eligible to vote were in favor.

Public comments:

Rangeland Biologist April Mack was introduced.

VC Franklin move to adjourn; BD Bentz second. All were in favor. The meeting ended 4:31 pm

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District Representative

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Date