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**Harney Soil & Water Conservation District Regular Monthly Meeting**

**April 24, 2025**

Present: Board Chair (BC) Jeff Hussey, Vice Chair (VC) Susan Doverspike, Secretary/Treasurer (S/T) Scott Franklin, Board Directors (BD) Stacy Davies, Ken Bentz; District Manager (DM) Jason Kesling, Sage-grouse Coordinator (SGC) Sarah Mundy, Range Biologists (RB) April Mack and Alex Dohman, SONEC Partner Biologist (SPB) Braden Morris, Admin Assist (AA) Barbara Pearson

Present, remote: BD Sue Ramsay

Absent: BD Carol Dunten

VC Doverspike called the meeting to order 3:33 pm as BC Hussey had not yet arrived.

**Item #1: Approve Meeting Agenda (Action Item)**

There were no proposed changes to the agenda. BD Davies moved, and S/T Franklin seconded approving the agenda as presented. All present eligible to vote were in favor. The motion passed.

**Item #2: March Financial Report (Action Item)**

DM Kesling explained the report. The District has more open grants than shown but if there had been no financial activity with the grants in March, the grants were not included in the report. Money was received from the USFWS for CWMA. SOWR II Juniper funds for salary were also obtained. The District collected $40K in the past month. AA Pearson noted the 2022 pickup was recently paid off.

BD Ramsay asked if there were any frozen grants (noted for historical purposes—the comment was made due to the incoming Presidential administration’s budgetary actions). DM Kesling said that two grants that had been frozen were in the process of being unfrozen since the grant agreements were already in place with NRCS. NRCS Partner Biologist Kaylee Littlefield’s position had been froze but an agreed contract was in place. The federal government did not unfreeze grants with no contract in place.

VC Doverspike asked if any positions that might otherwise be filled had been left open. DM Kesling said no and added with recent federal budget uncertainty he had been approached by several people regarding employment with the District due to various reasons.

BC Hussey arrived at 3:38 pm and then took the lead of the meeting.

BD Davies moved, and BD Bentz seconded approval of the financial report as presented. All present eligible to vote were in favor. The motion passed.

**Item #3: March Meeting Minutes (Action Item)**

There were no corrections or additions. BD Davies moved, and S/T Franklin seconded approval of the minutes as presented. All present eligible to vote were in favor. The motion passed.

**Item #4 Employee Review (Action Item)**

DM Kesling said he began employee evaluations in April, which was the time he became District Manager, and he has continued this practice since. HSWCD staff employed for a year or more are evaluated. He changed things somewhat in asking HSWCD staff to participate in his evaluation as District Manager. No board directors responded to his request to evaluate him, but SGC Mundy and RB Mack completed evaluations.

DM Kesling said additional staff may be needed in the future, depending on funding issues which are getting sorted out. There are no grant delinquencies; staff have been doing what is requested. DM Kesling provided a summary of the evaluations and recommendations on salary step advances for most employees (this was included in the board directors’ notebooks). He offered to go over the evaluations individually upon the board’s request.

BD Bentz moved, and VC Doverspike seconded approving the employee evaluations as presented. All present eligible to vote were in favor. The motion passed. Following the vote BD Bentz told DM Kesling he appreciated the employee evaluation format presented for the board directors.

**Item #5: SDIS Benefits Renewal (Action Item)**

DM Kesling explained the budget renewal within the packet. The budget will allow for the increase set by SDIS. He recommended keeping HSWCD employees with the same level of coverage as the existing plan. The board needs to respond by July 1, 2025, so the matter can be tabled for now if necessary. S/T Franklin moved, and BD Bentz seconded renewing insurance coverage through SDIS. All present eligible to vote were in favor. The motion passed.

**Item #6: Cost of Living Adjustment (Action Item)**

DM Kesling provided the background leading to his request, and an overview was provided in the directors’ notebooks. He researched the Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) with other districts in the state.

The district does have the money now and there may be some additional funds in the future (such as post-fire fencing projects). There was further discussion explaining administrative funds included with grants, as well as an explanation of the pay scale provided in the board directors’ notebooks. After further discussion it was moved by BD Davies and seconded by S/T Franklin to accept the recommended COLA adjustment. BC Hussey, VC Doverspike, S/T Franklin, BD Bentz and BD Davies were in favor; BD Ramsay was opposed and the motion passed.

**Item #7: Delegation of Authority Review**

Materials on this issue were included in the board directors’ notebooks and there was discussion during last month’s meeting. DM Kesling thought the subject might be worthy of discussion (he was gone during the March meeting). BD Davies thought the Delegation of Authority as an agenda item is more of a review more than change required, VC Doverspike asked if no changes were made does the document need an updated date? After further discussion it was decided AA Pearson would note the reviewed date for historical purposes.

**Item #8: County Court Natural Resource Advisory Committee Invitation (Action Item)**

DM Kesling said that County Commissioner Robb Frank invited him to serve on the Natural Resources Advisory Committee for Harney County. Because of the Delegation of Authority, he said he didn’t want to serve without Board discussion and decision, which prompted him to include it in the agenda. BD Davies asked what was discussed during those meetings and wondered if it was a wise use of his time. VC Doverspike said sometimes the topic was wolves or other natural resources or current topics. RB Dohman said he has attended previous meetings. In addition to wolves, recreation on the Steens or other subjects are discussed. VC Doverspike felt whoever led the meeting determined the discussion. There was further dialog on the nature of the meetings and if it would be appropriate for the DM to attend. BD Davies noted if DM Kesling did participate it would be an evening away from his family vs. a board director volunteering. The meeting is held monthly on the first Tuesday of every month. The action item was tabled for now. DM Kesling will invite Robb Frank to the next scheduled meeting to allow the board to inquire further.

**Item #9: HC-41 and HC-36 Review and Approve (Action Item)**

DM Kesling explained the SSP process to board members who were not knowledgeable on the CCAA program. Upon approval, a board representative would need to sign. SGC Mundy presented on HC-41. This site is over 17K acres. There are uplands, meadows, and streams on the property. She explained what steps could be taken to assist the landowner with conservation efforts. The landowner’s name is confidential due to CCAA protocol. DM Kesling explained the delay with the land being enrolled in the CCAA were due to previous years’ staff changes, updates, and streamlining of data received and stored. There was further discussion regarding the CCAA program and what it means to the landowner and the county. BD Davies moved, and S/T Franklin seconded approving HC-41 as presented for enrollment into the CCAA program. All present eligible to vote were in favor. The motion passed.

RB Mack presented HC-36 to the Board. The portions of the land are being used for hay production; there is also sage steppe and timber. There are a lot of junipers that need removal, as well as Medusahead and cheatgrass. The land contains 178 miles of fence, some close to a lek. Additionally, other conservation methods (weed and juniper treatment), fence markers will be implemented to protect sage-grouse. The land is very similar to HC-41, with similar needs. BD Davies moved, and S/T Franklin seconded approving HC-41 as presented for enrollment into the CCAA program. All present eligible to vote were in favor. The motion passed.

DM Kesling said that the District office has set a goal of three SSPs per employee per year (of those filling that role). He said the District has hit its stride with the present employees. RB Dohman has an HC ready to present to the Board; RB Mack said she is preparing three other HCs. DM Kesling said the Drewsey area looks good now, but the District will have to return in 5-10 years. The District is now moving toward enrollment on the north Steens, south state, and county borders.

**Item #10: CCAA Public Records Request (Possible Action Item)**

DM Kesling explained the background information on this agenda item. A record request was sent by email to the District by a journalist (see information in directors’ notebooks). He urged board directors to read through information. He said the other districts in the state received a similar request and USFWS received a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request about the CCAA program. He said the Baker County Watershed Council is a nonprofit organization and its lead articulated OWEB for public records. One section of House Bill 4093 was passed when the CCAA was created allows for confidentiality.

The third page of the information in the directors’ notebook is an email from USFWS outlining the CCAA agreement and the need to notify landowners when public requests are made. The last pages of the notebook section show the HSWCD public record policy and request form. Depending on the requestor’s need this could take a month or more to gather the information. It would entail determining the staff employed at the time.

ODA’s Eric Nussbaum (who DM Kesling consulted with prior to the meeting and planned to attend) was unable to connect to the meeting due to technical issues on the SWCD side of call in option.

BD Davies suggested notifying landowners as soon as possible. Some landowners would be protected through attorney-client privilege. He also agreed to send basic information such as Baker Watershed. BD Bentz noted that when the 28 landowners signed up to participate in the CCAA, they were told this information would be confidential—we can’t go back on this. He said he agreed with BD Davies. VC Doverspike said she also agreed. The agreements were made with the understanding of confidentiality.

There was discussion regarding attorneys, who could represent the District. Karen Budd-Fallen or her office was mentioned or the recent law group that reviewed the district’s contract boilerplate.

BC Hussey said landowners have the choice to opt out of the CCAA and he was concerned if landowners were told of the request many will opt out of the program. BD Davies said the District needs to make it clear we stand by confidentiality.

The Board consensus was for HSWCD to follow Baker’s lead and provide 2014-2024 report summary. If any landowner information is included, it is to be redacted (including land description) and only state what has been done to date. Any further requested information would need to be discussed with an attorney and each individual landowner.

BC Hussey said that acceding to this request could put the CCAA program backward. RB Mack said landowners have indicated to her they want their information redacted; she is currently working with a landowner who has asked her five to six times if his/her information would be kept confidential. She noted in many HC files there is already a signed form in place indicating if a landowner wants information redacted. DM Kesling said staff would go through the HC files to see if a signed release of information was in place.

BD Bentz said board directors present would support the DM.

No action item, no voting.

**Item #11: Public Comment**

No public comment.

**Item #12: Adjourn**

S/T Franklin moved to adjourn the meeting; BD Bentz seconded. All present eligible to vote were in favor. The meeting ended at 4:58 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Barbara Pearson, Admin Assist

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| District Representative |  | Date |