

Highlights of the Agriculture Focus Group

The Agriculture focus group of 7 participants met on January 29th at the Children's Farm Home campus. The meeting was scheduled for a 1.5 hour period although several of the growers stayed and talked for nearly four hours. Staff explained to the group that the goal of the Groundwater Management Area is to reduce the amount of nitrogen/nitrate going in groundwater. To do this, we need to understand what knowledge/perceptions/barriers people may have. The purpose of the focus group was two-fold 1) Understand growers perceptions of groundwater, and 2) Probe barriers to farmers taking action to protect groundwater. During the initial 1.5 hour period the facilitator worked through a series of questions with the group. Key concepts that arose from the focus group discussion that have implications for future outreach purposes include:

- Grower participants are incredibly knowledgeable about geology, groundwater, well operations, etc.
- Some farmers have their own test plots, and are testing their own water.
- Nearly all participants had heard about the GWMA and understood that the overall issue was high nitrate. There was a lack of knowledge of some of the details such as when the GWMA was declared, how big it is, how it is funded, how the focus group is funded, etc.
- The Willamette River and urban runoff were perceived to be a major source of the N in groundwater. One participant told a story about HP having to shut down because of high N in the Willamette River during a rainstorm.
- The same rainstorm that impacted HP also caught many farmers off guard (lots of rain after a major fertilizer application period).
- Several participants felt that nitrate in groundwater is a cyclical and long-term issue with fluctuations occurring over time. They were curious if this is a natural cycle and where it is now?
- Field agents are the most trusted source of information. Even though they are trying to sell a product they know that if they "oversell" that they will not remain the trusted field agent and the grower will buy the products elsewhere.

- Agriculture has changed since the late 50s early 60s. The “Grandfathers generation” – only had manure – every farm would be considered organic. The group talked about fertigation that used to happen but is rarely used now. They don’t rinse out spray cans next to a creek like in the old days. Agriculture practices changed again and by early 90s everyone was pretty much on the same page that these practices are not acceptable.
- Post WWII it is assumed that the average lb/acre has already plateaued. Economics drive some of this. “We don’t want to put on more than what our crop will consume”. However, additional fertilizer is sometime added as insurance. The goal is to grow the best crop possible and not spend more money on fertilizer than needed.
- Growers cannot wait to see if the plant is “green” enough, because by then it is too late to add fertilizer.
- Sometimes, the modeling for Precision Ag fertilizer amounts will indicate adding more N to sandier soils (high permeability) which is contradictive to protecting groundwater.
- At least one participant thought that the schools with public water systems that either municipalities should bring water out to the schools, or the schools should be removed from the area because the water was not suitable. Same participant thought because there are no standards for domestic wells, that the area should be converted to residential use.
- Group felt residents need to be better educated about Agricultural practices and the substantial work farmers are doing to protect the land and water quality.
- The group stressed that if there is a problem show us what it is. Don’t force regulations on us – if there is a problem – let us address it! There are often multiple ways to address an issue and the “best” solution can vary depending on a variety of variables (farmer, soil conditions, etc.).
- Some techniques pose barriers. For example, cover crops take time and money. First you have to plant it, grow it, and then kill it before planting the “real” crop. Slow release fertilizer tends to not “pencil out” in terms of additional cost.