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## **Harney Soil & Water Conservation District Regular Monthly Meeting March 26, 2026**

Present: Board Chair (BC) Jeff Hussey, Secretary/Treasurer (S/T) Scott Franklin, Board Director (BD) Stacy Davies, BD Sue Ramsay; HSWCD District Manager (DM) Jason Kesling, Range Biologist (RB) April Mack, RB Kaylee McCall, SONEC Braden Morris, CWMA Tyler Goss, LIT Coordinator (LIT) Priscilla Doan Admin Assist (AA) Barbara Pearson

Present, Remote: HSWCD Sage Grouse Coordinator (SGC) Sarah Mundy, ODA Ag Water Quality Marie Snodgrass, Contractor Lowell Goid

Present, Guest: Robb Frank, Harney County Commissioner

Absent: Vice Chair (VC) Susan Doverspike, BD Carol Dunten, BD Ken Bentz

BC Hussey called the meeting to order at 3:31 pm. Those participating remotely were asked to identify themselves.

### **Item #1: Meeting Agenda (action item)**

There were no proposed changes or additions. S/T Franklin moved to approve the agenda as presented; BD Ramsay seconded. All present who were eligible to vote were in favor; there was no one opposed, and the motion passed.

### **Item #2: January, February Financial Reports**

DM Kesling explained to the board an unclassified \$100 payroll expense, shown on the February financial report: The District pays its staff via direct deposit, and that is the expense for the service. The District's payroll and bookkeeping is via QuickBooks desktop, and the DM said it will continue with that program (a comment was made during this discussion that QuickBooks online is not satisfactory). BD Davies moved to approve both financial reports as presented;

S/T Franklin seconded. All present who were eligible to vote were in favor; there was no one opposed, and the motion passed.

### **Item #3: January, February Monthly Minutes**

DM Kesling said that due to a miscommunication, the February meeting minutes were not sent out until earlier this week. The meeting minutes submitted to the board were reviewed by various staff members for accuracy. As some board members have non-district emails, he asked board members to let him know if they are not receiving meeting materials. There were no questions or corrections. BD Davies moved, and S/T Franklin seconded approval of the January and February meeting minutes as presented. All present who were eligible to vote were in favor; there was no one opposed, and the motion passed.

### **Item #4a Falls Fire Hazard Tree Project and 4b Wise Flat Juniper Treatment**

DM Kesling provided an overview of both projects, which originated through the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The BLM asked the District to manage the projects to get them completed quickly. The Falls Fire Tree Hazard is to remove trees post-fire to rebuild the fence; The Wise Flat is a sage grouse cut near Glass Butte.

CWMA Goss then said three contractors submitted bids close to the budgeted amount: O-O, H-Timber, and Strain. The BLM preference was for H-Timber.

S/T Franklin asked about other submitted bids, and CWMA Goss said they were submitted over budget. DM Kesling said those packets were available for review upon request. CWMA Goss said that H-Timber has worked for the BLM in the past.

LIT Doan explained the updated scoring sheet. She said the District is still working on the contractor process with the Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA), but that agency has not yet responded to HSWCD's questions. The scoring ranking completed by Doan and Goss needed to be corrected and was done during the meeting. CWMA Goss also explained the map and priority places. The map was created by the BLM. He said an actual, physical bid tour was not done due to the spread-out nature of the trees that needed to be removed.

LIT Doan provided an overview of the Wise Flat project. All contractors listed were qualified and eligible. The budget provided was \$27,300, and there was no landowner preference.

Following discussion about the updated bid scoring sheet, possible reasons for various bid amounts, and project deadlines, it was determined that H-Timber

received the highest-ranking bid score. The highest-ranking score for the Wise Flat project was Pacific Coast. See attached scoring sheets.

DM Kesling said that for any project budget under \$100K (such as the Falls Fire and Wise Flat), the awards would normally be decided by himself, BD Bentz, and perhaps a staff member, but he felt this would be a good exercise for the board in working with the updated scoring sheet.

For the Falls Fire bid, BD Davies moved, and S/T Franklin seconded approval of H-Timber to be awarded the contract. All present who were eligible to vote were in favor; there was no one opposed, and the motion passed.

For the Wise Flat bid, BD Davies moved, and S/T Franklin seconded, awarding Pacific Coast with its bid of \$19,329.06. All present who were eligible to vote were in favor; there was no one opposed, and the motion passed.

At 4:03 pm, Lowell Goold joined the meeting. It is not known when he left the meeting.

**Item #5: NRCS Section 1619 Compliance (action item)**

DM Kesling said normally the NRCS District Conservationist Rachel Beaubien would present on this item, but she is out of the office due to the school spring vacation. The document presented to the board members was a non-disclosure agreement between NRCS and District staff and board members.

This was an action item as the board members were asked to sign the document instead of taking a vote. Present board members signed the document, and DM Kesling said he would contact the absent members for their signatures.

**Item #6: Malheur/Harney MOU (action item)**

*Historical note: DM Kesling proposed to manage the Malheur Soil & Water Conservation District (MSWCD). See February 2026 meeting minutes for further information.*

DM Kesling recapped from the last board meeting that it was requested that an MOU be prepared and presented to the board, explaining how duties and salaries would be determined. MSWCD has reviewed and signed the MOU. The MOU notes an exchange of funds for salary and software. It does not mean he will take over MSWCD at this time. DM Kesling will present a staffing plan at the April 2026 meeting, which will list how he will schedule office hours.

BC Hussey said the MOU was presented based on the recommendation of a highly qualified person (Rob Gaslin, former auditor). S/T Franklin asked about the

duration of the MOU and was advised June 2028 (DM Kesling said it would provide the District with an exit if it was no longer in agreement). BC Hussey was concerned for the future of MSWCD if the District did not step in to assist. DM Kesling agreed, saying that the changing dynamics of the grant world are making it more difficult for districts to manage. The HSWCD is doing great and can assist. BC Hussey added about MSWCD, "They are struggling, and us helping can keep them afloat." There was further discussion about MSWCD's fiscal health and how DM Kesling and HSWCD could assist. BD Davies moved, and S/T Franklin seconded, approving the Malheur/Harney MOU. All present who were eligible to vote were in favor; there was no one opposed, and the motion passed.

### **Item #7: Staffing Plan and Employee Pay Schedule (discussion)**

DM Kesling said when he approached the board with the possibility of him managing MSWCD, one suggestion was having an assistant manager at HSWCD. Following the vote in favor of the MOU, DM Kesling then asked to discuss this.

RB Mack had attended the February meeting and later expressed to DM Kesling interest in serving as an Assistant Manager. SONEC Morris has also offered to assist with water projects in Malheur County.

BD Davies said the challenges he saw regarded record keeping and billing, and splitting staff time on projects. He asked DM Kesling if there was a system in place to address this. DM Kesling said he would extend HSWCD practices to MSWCD. Davies asked if the system in place is defensible and if it takes a lot of time. He urged the DM to view it as a courtroom. DM Kesling explained the timesheet process for district employees and how salary is allocated toward projects/grants. A Board member expressed concern about HSWCD paying for salaries toward MSWCD projects.

BD Ramsay asked if the books for the two agencies would merge, and DM Kesling said no. He plans to invoice monthly or quarterly. There will be two sets of accounts, invoices, checks to be signed, and a board to acknowledge/sign. It will be documented the entire way through.

BC Hussey asked staff present at the meeting for their thoughts:

RB McCall said she was excited, especially for the landowners living near the county line.

CWMA Goss said, "I think it is a great thing. A lot of knowledgeable staff that can problem solve."

RB Mack referred to her comments at February's meeting, adding, "Jason has everything running smoothly. We are all in our own groove and can handle things without Jason."

LIT Doan said it has her full support.

SGC Mundy said sage grouse projects are already partners with MSWCD. "It helps us all to help them."

AA Pearson agreed with both DM Kesling and RB Mack that the DM is not a micromanager; his concern is that the work gets done.

There was further discussion about the MSWCD board, maintaining definite financial boundaries, and potential burnout for the DM. DM Kesling felt this, a potential tax base for the District, and Bio Armor are exciting changes to his role. BD Davies suggested that DM Kesling train current employees to become a replacement for himself: "Train more managers." DM Kesling said this is also the time for yearly evaluations, which will be presented at the next board meeting. Along with Cost-of-Living Allowances (COLA) he would like to discuss salary changes for himself and RB Mack with their new roles.

#### **Item #8: SDIS Renewal (action item)**

Paperwork regarding this was in the directors' notebooks and provided to them prior to the meeting electronically. This is regarding the benefit package for HSWCD staff. DM Kesling said SDIS projects a 6.5% increase in medical coverage and 5.5% increase in dental. Despite this, DM Kesling recommended the District continue the insurance program with SDIS. He did not think the District could benefit from changing providers and instead look to change the setup. Discussion followed regarding various insurances and coverage for spouses and family.

S/T Franklin moved, and BD Davies seconded to approve the SDIS renewal benefits package. All present who were eligible to vote were in favor; there was no opposition.

BD Davies asked when the District could vote on updating the medical benefits? DM Kesling said it would need to be done through the employee manual, and it is time for it to be reviewed.

What the staff needs regarding insurance benefits and how it affects their families was discussed. BD Davies suggested that the staff be surveyed and then the results be presented to the board. This was also recommended by BC Hussey. Some board members were hesitant to put staff on the spot at the meeting, but also wanted to know what would help them—higher insurance

coverage or higher salary? A few staff members present shared how the current insurance coverage affected their families.

BC Hussey urged that this issue be put on the agenda for a future meeting. "I do not want people just working for insurance." Subjects discussed modifying the handbook while surveying the staff, changing the amount the District pays for coverage, and on who (spouse, children, both), stipends, deductibles and the date of the change being implemented were discussed. S/T Franklin wondered what the county and local schools do about employee insurance coverage. Commissioner Robb Frank described it and said that stipends are not offered. He praised the HSWCD board for its concern for staff.

**Public comment:**

Commissioner Frank asked to move to public comments since he realized he had a scheduling conflict and was late for his next meeting. He related the following:

- 1) There is an upcoming CCAA/LIT meeting. He has a conflict and the date will not work for him. LIT Doan said, though it has been scheduled, a location has not been booked yet, so it could be rescheduled.
- 2) In the past, Harney County has had a grazing advisory board. The county is not federally required, even with state statute. The county is allotted \$30K, but he thinks it would be a good idea to bring up and include members of the Weed Board and SWCD Board onto the advisory committee. He invited a representative of HSWCD to participate. He provided a brief overview of the Taylor Grazing Act.

Commissioner Frank left the meeting at 5:06 pm

**Item #9: Bid for SWCD Audit (action item)**

DM Kesling said he did not put the audit out for solicitation because the amount is less than the required for a three-quote minimum. The business (Zwygart John & Associates CPAs, PLLC) is recommended by former auditor Rob Gaslin. BD Ramsay said she listened to the submitted bid presented to Harney County and she was very impressed with the company. DM Kesling said he had a lot of faith in Gaslin's recommendation.

Following the discussion on the types of audits (federal fiscal audit and single), BD Davies moved, and S/T Franklin seconded, approving the submitted bid for SWCD audit to Zwygart John. Hussey, Franklin, Davies, and Ramsay all voted in favor; there was no one opposed.

**Return to Public Comments**

ODA's Maria Snodgress said the Malheur/Owyhee Basin was added to her work region about a year and a half ago. She asked meeting participants to please contact her if they have any questions. She updated the board on the biennial review of the Malheur Water Quality Management Meeting held on March 10<sup>th</sup>. SONEC Morris attended, and she thanked him. She said there is good work going on in the area—the ag in that area is proactive, especially about water quality. There are new regulations/rules in place with CAPO, and she will follow up with that area inspector.

BD Ramsay moved, and S/T Franklin seconded, adjourning the meeting. All present who were eligible to vote were in favor. There was no one opposed.

Respectfully submitted,

Barbara Pearson, Admin Assist

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District Representative

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Date