Natural Currents

Board of Supervisors

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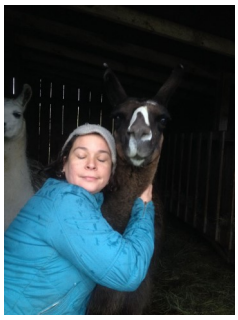
- Otto Kilcher
  Vice Chair
- Juley McConnell
  Treasurer
- Tim Alzheimer
  Secretary
- Jim Engebretsen

The invasive Bird Cherry Tree and Chokecherry Tree (*Prunus padus* and *Prunus virginiana*) are currently in bloom.



Staffer Nicole Arevalo at the Anchor River Llama and Alpaca Ranch (ARLA) in Anchor Point, owned by Kathy and Greg Simpson

Greetings from Homer Soil and Water!

There is never a dull moment here at Homer Soil and Water, and this spring is no different. Despite social distancing requirements and our tiny office, we still have plenty going on even with staff working from home. We lost one employee and got another, took on a huge project focusing on moose habitat enhancement, got more funding to expand our invasive species work and have been researching and networking a ton to support farmers in this time of COVID-19.

Though the NRCS offices are closed to face-to-face visitors, they are taking calls and still working with clients. We are functioning in a similar way. We have forwarded our phones, set up a contact-free soil sample drop-off, and are having more Zoom meetings than anyone ever thought possible. If you have questions, please feel free to contact our office and leave a message or contact one of us directly. As spring comes to Homer, we hope you all can get outside and enjoy our local natural resources!

Kyra Wagner, District manager
907-299-4920, kyra@homerswcd.org

Katherine Schake, Invasive species program manager
907-235-8177 ex 5, katherine@homerswcd.org

Brad Casar, Soils guy
907-235-8177 ext 111, brad@homerswcd.org

Devony Lehner, Natural resource specialist
907-299-3244, devony@homerswcd.org

Nicole Arevalo, Local food & agriculture
907-399-4161, nicole@homerswcd.org

Our Mission:

To provide education and leadership in the conservation and sustainable use of soil and water-related resources through cooperative programs that protect, restore and improve our environment.

Our office contains a wealth of information for land owners and managers
432 E. Pioneer Ave

In This Issue:

Safe & Sanitary Spring Soil Sampling

Bring your soil sample to our convenient outdoor on the go drop off station

Soil sampling Online at

HomerSWCD.org

✓ Fill out the soil test form online or at the porch of our office on Pioneer

✓ Make payment online with credit card or at the porch station with check

- **Bring in your soil sample** to Homer Soil and Water
- **Pay $32** for the first sample,$20 each for all other accompanying samples
- We send off your sample to the lab then develop recommendations for your specific purposes

Early spring sampler gets the worms:

- Soil results and recommendations take 3 weeks on average, so plan ahead
- Make sure your spring planting isn't delayed
- You get to build the healthiest possible nutrient balance for your soil
- There's no need to worry about over-fertilizing or under-fertilizing

Bring in your soil sample today!

For questions, call 235-8177 extension 5.

Homer Soil & Water
CONSERVATION DISTRICT
432 E Pioneer Ave, Suite C, Homer, AK 99603

Slow the Spread: Participate in National & Statewide Invasive Species Awareness Weeks through June

"Slow the spread" is an unexpected catchphrase of this spring. Due to the global coronavirus pandemic, we are all learning what invasive species managers have been doing for years.

The 10th annual National Invasive Species Awareness Week (May 16-23) seeks to slow the spread of invasive plants, animals, pests, fungi and other organisms in land and water. NISAW encourages local organizers to raise awareness of the threat of invasive species and what people can do to prevent their spread. In addition, PlayCleanGo Awareness Week (June 6-13), and Alaska Invasive Species Awareness Week (June 14-20) have similar missions to prevent and fight the progress of invasive species, so there is no time like the present to learn and act for the sake of our local invasive causes!

Slow the Spread: Homer Soil & Water Conservation District needs your help in finding invasive European Bird Cherry / May Day (*Prunus padus*) and Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*) trees this spring. Originally introduced as an attractive ornamental, we've discovered they jumped the fence, and now threaten moose and salmon habitat.

Report invasive plants! On Monday, May 18th Homer Soil & Water launched our 2020 *Prunus* Survey & Cost Share Program, and we need your help in mapping the locations of these trees! Those landowners who report invasive *Prunus* trees on their property will be eligible for a cost-share program if the invasive tree is removed. Contact HSWCD Invasive Species Program Manager, Katherine Schake: katherine@homerswcd.org or call 907-235-8177 ext. 5 to learn more.

Don't know how to identify invasive *Prunus* trees? Watch this video from Cooperative Extension Service. "Invasive species don't respect boundaries, which makes them a continent-wide problem that starts at home," said Belle Bergner, director of the North American Invasive Species Management Association. "The good news is that solutions start with everyone looking out their windows from home at what is on your property. If you are able to get to your local park, lake, or river, go with clean shoes and gear. Find a local event to learn how our invasive species managers and nonprofit organization leaders work hard making sure our lands and waters are friendly to native species of North America."

(Continued from pg.3)

We encourage the following 11 actions for everyone who believes natural spaces are worth protecting from invasive species and wants to contribute to the cause:

1. **Learn about invasive species** in your region. The Kenai Peninsula Cooperative Weed Management Area and the National Invasive Species Information Center are trusted resources. Share what you know on social media (Use the hashtags #NISAW and #InvasiveSpecies!) and follow our Facebook page.

Did you know, we inspect equipment and heavy machinery for invasive plant hitchhikers before it travels across Kachemak Bay – thank you Homer Electric Association for preventing the spread of invasive species!

2. **Clean hiking boots**, waders, boats and trailers, off-road vehicles and other gear to stop invasive species from hitching a ride to a new location. Learn more at PlayCleanGo.org.

Did you know, the Kenai Peninsula CWMA has eradicated Elodea from five lakes on the Kenai Peninsula! But we need your help to keep Alaska's lakes free from aquatic invasive plants! Please clean, drain & dry your floatplanes and boats after every use.

3. **Avoid dumping aquariums or live bait** into waterways. Learn more at Habitattitude.org.
4. **Clean your fishing equipment**, boats and floatplanes, and don't dump live bait. Learn more at StopAquaticHitchhikers.org.
5. **Don't move firewood.** Instead, buy it where you'll burn it, or gather on site when permitted. Learn more at DontMoveFirewood.org.
6. **Slow the spread** of invasive pests by taking extra care when traveling, gardening or moving recently killed plant material. Buy your plants from a reputable source. Avoid using invasive plant species at all costs. Learn more at HungryPests.com.
7. **Buy forage**, hay, mulch and soil that are certified "weed free."
8. **Plant only non-invasive** plants in your garden, and remove any known invaders.
9. **Report** new or expanded invasive species outbreaks to authorities. Report to your local Soil & Water Conservation District, Alaska Department of Fish & Game Online Reporter, or call 1-877-INVASIV (1-877-468-2748).
10. **Volunteer** to help remove invasive species from public and natural areas.
11. **Ask** your political representatives at the state, local and national level to support invasive species control efforts.

Everyone can help *Keep Alaska Wild and Free from Invasive Species*! Contact Katherine Schake katherine@homerswcd.org or call 907-235-8177 ext. 5 for more information.

Conservation Districts work as a grassroots form of local governance authorized under state law. They create bridges between individual cooperators (landowners committed to sustainable use of the natural resources they manage) and other partners, including non-governmental organizations and all levels of government. The aim is to combine and coordinate resources to achieve shared conservation goals. The District model was established in the 1930s by Congress as a way to promote coordinated conservation approaches to healing soils during the "Dust Bowl" of the 1930s.

Join as a cooperator! It is similar to membership in your favorite group. Being a cooperator says that you use good practices on your land (like the ones demonstrated in the Soil Health Study) but it also gets you the benefits of a voice at the District level through your vote or your presence on our board.

Ag UPdates

Want to stay connected to all the Ag Happenings on the southern Kenai Peninsula?

HSWCD sends out a monthly Email newsletter featuring all the Ag related meetings, trainings and networking events that we hear are coming to our communities. You can sign up on our web page or click HERE to sign up.

Check out our archived and latest Ag UPdates newsletters HERE.

THIS SPRING!

Help us find and remove the invasive European Bird Cherry trees in Homer!

Targets for survey and removal are:

***Prunus padus* – European Bird Cherry / May Day Tree**

***Prunus virginiana* – Chokecherry**

Introduced as landscaping trees, but now we know:

- **Aggressive invaders of local forests and waterways**
- **Threatens moose and salmon habitat**
- **Spreads to remote areas by birds (they love the fruit!)**
- **Removal can be tricky, contact us to learn best practices**

For more information & reporting trees, email Katherine Schake: katherine@homerswcd.org or call (907)235-8177 ext.5

A **$100 reward** to purchase alternative ornamentals is available to the first 20 people who remove invasive *Prunus* trees on their property.

Homer Soil & Water Conservation District

Kenai Peninsula CWMA Cooperative Weed Management Area

Homer Soil Health Study Results Are In!

In 2016 the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) made funding available to develop a soil health study to study cover crops with Soil and Water Conservation Districts around the state. The Homer office decided to work with four farmers on these soil health trials to trial two specific conservation practices, cover cropping and reduced tillage, in vegetable production systems both in high tunnels and outdoor farm plots. Some farmers and gardeners here on the lower Kenai peninsula utilize these two conservation practices but little research has been done to see their impact on our soils and feasibility in the intensive vegetable production systems we have here.

At each farm, a late season cover crop and different reduced tillage techniques were implemented. The intentions of planting a fall cover crop were to maintain productive vegetable space while also getting the benefits of a cover crop late season. Cover crops in the study showed a series of benefits in fall planting such as weed suppression, organic matter improvement, moisture absorption, and erosion prevention.

Though cover crops do tout a wide array of benefits, the trials showed the feasibility of fitting in a fall cover crop has a truly short window in our part of the world. In hopes to plant a cover crops by mid-August, we often weren't able to get the cover crop established until early to mid-September. Turns out, A mid-August cover crop planting date is a difficult timeline to hit for producers depending on spring weather conditions, summertime farming schedules, and simply the motivation that time of year to spend time preparing ground and planting seed. Cover crops planted after the first week of September produced only 2-4 inches of growth, and sometimes had spotty germination. Although, even the small growth did often show improve-

(Continued from Pg.5)
-ments in erosion prevention and springtime moisture control.

Having living roots in the ground up until the winter sets in and early spring, the cover crops helped reduce moisture in soils to make for drier, warmer springtime soils. Springtime moisture control was an unexpected benefit to some farmers, and a big improvement to farms that cultivate wet ground that often take a month to dry up enough to start working the ground. In combination with reduced tillage a dramatic improvement in soil drainage can be found.

Some growers involved in the soil health study were keeping permanent raised beds intact, covered in weed barrier, and mixing in nutrients each season only where plants are to be planted. Others were attempting to convert from multiple roto tillage events each season to a no till system, which proved to be quite challenging.

When farms use consistent heavy tillage practices, the soil requires tillage to maintain adequate drainage and air space for plant growth. The transition from this system to a reduced till takes time because of poor soil structure (air flow and water movement) when all the clods have been broken up into fine bits. At some farms, the first season without tillage created heavily compacted soils, but as time moved on these soils were able to start building structure and life with the help of organic matter and soil microbial life. By years 3 and 4 we noticed improved water infiltration rates, lower bulk density, and comparable production to that of the control plots.

Many other discoveries were noted and discussed in the soil health study report which can be found on the HomerSWCD website. A big thanks to all our farmers for working with us to trial these practices and making valuable growing space available for the soil health study! Heroes to the local farming community are those that trial new ideas and practices for others to learn from so that we can build a healthy productive farming community.

Meet the Chef!

Local farmers,
local chefs,
getting together,
bon appetit……..

On February 20th local farmers were invited to a facilitated conversation with Chef Chris Miller of Land's End Resort to discuss his vision for local food on his menu. Everyone met at Grace Ridge Brewing and got to have a casual face to face with Chef Chris, hashing out the details of working together. Topics included what local foods he is interested in, what quantities, seasonal availability, the summer menu, recent changes that allow more room for the restaurant to grow their local foods purchases, and how to best contact him. We would like to thank Grace Ridge Brewing for being such excellent hosts.

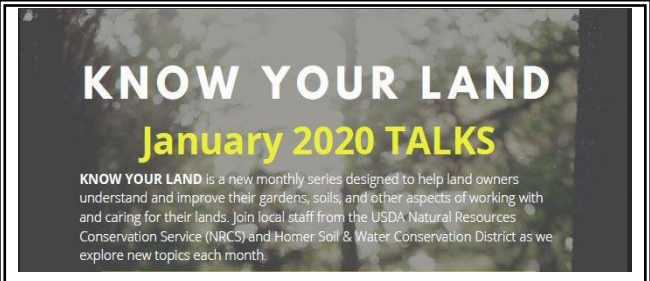
We recently hosted our second *Meet the Chef* event on May 6th, featuring Chef Grim of the Mermaid Café on Main St. in Old Town Homer (held outdoors to allow for a comfortable social distance). We look forward to future chef/farmer match making.

AFMA Virtual Conference– a huge success!

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Alaska Farmers Market Association quickly pivoted their annual three-day conference into a two-day virtual networking extravaganza. Homer Soil & Water staff joined the nearly 200 other attendees for two days chock full of great presentations and lots of FUN! Who knew doing a remote attendance conference could be so engaging and could strengthen bonds between farmers, market managers and local foods fans. The presentations from Lower 48 folks already adapting their markets to meet COVID challenges were fantastic and insightful and the local presentations helped us all gain a better sense of what's been going on in the Alaskan Ag community this last year. This screen shot from the end of conference group conversation on collaborating to build a stronger Alaskan Ag community says it all.

From the Ag Side





Know Your Land Talks

This winter Homer Soil & Water collaborated with USDA-NRCS to launch a new monthly series of public talks for local landowners. The talks were designed to help interested locals improve their gardens, soils and other aspects of working with and caring for their lands. Two topics were presented each month by staff from our two offices and plenty of time was reserved for Q&A between the audience and presenters. We aimed to accommodate most people's schedules by hosting each topic twice on presentation days– once during the afternoon and again in the evening– which allowed more people to participate.

Topics explored this winter/spring were:

- The NRCS High Tunnel Program
- Understanding the Soil Test
- Organic vs Conventional Fertilizers
- Insights on Local Food Production and Buying
- Crop Spacing to Increase Production
- Cover Crops
- Invasive Weeds and Weed Free Hay
- Micro-irrigation Systems
- Reduced Tillage

We are taking a break for the busy summer months, but we expect to resume the *Know Your Land* series in the fall. Stay tuned for new, exciting topics!

Homer Soil & Water Hosts the 2020 Women in Agriculture Conference

On Saturday, January 25th Homer Soil & Water joined with 34 other host sites (6 in Alaska) for the 8th annual Women in Agriculture Conference. The one-day event was held at the Kachemak Bay Campus of the Kenai Peninsula College and was delivered live via webinar with gatherings in Washington, Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Montana and Hawaii. This year's conference theme was "HEALTHY FARMS" and was built so local women farmers could network and learn from the speakers and from each other (though men were welcome to join too!). The day focused on learning how to cultivate your personal resiliency to handle all the "ups and downs" as farmer. It's no secret that things can be tough for farmers, whether it is things we can control or issues we try to command when we can't. The stress in farming has always existed, but the levels can soar during times of high costs and low returns. The day's lineup also included a panel of two local women farmers: Allison Gaylord of Alaska Beauty Peony Cooperative and Anna Meredith of Bridge Creek Birch Syrup. Both of these fantastic local Ag professionals led a group conversation on methods for handling challenges and discussing areas where we could use a little help. The final session was all about mindfulness and techniques to ground ourselves. We would like to thank our panelists and all of the women who joined us in dedicating a day to center on ourselves so that we can grow healthy, fulfilling lives in farming.


Allison Gaylord


Anna Meredith photo credit Homer News

Homer Soil & Water's soil testing services have GONE ONLINE!

That's right. Fill out the form and pay online. Then bring the soil samples to our handy-dandy, outdoor drop-off station. Brad and the gang will get you your test results and soil nutrient recommendations in about three weeks. Easy Peasy!

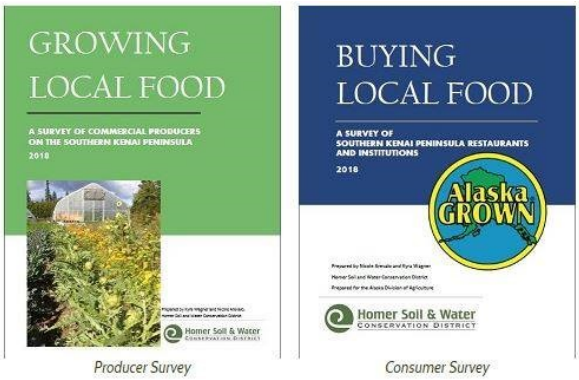
Find it all on our website www.homerswcd.org.

HSWCD Co-Hosts Online Forums for Local Farmers

In response to COVID-19, our team has been collaborating with other Ag support organizations and farmers from across the state to host a variety of ZOOM presentations and discussions. We are part of a team dedicated to helping Alaskan Ag producers to navigate the waters of growing and selling local food (and thriving) this year. Follow us on Facebook for upcoming opportunities and for access to ZOOM meeting recordings.

Kyra Presents on Food System Studies at KPEDD's 2020 Economic Outlook Forum

District Manager Kyra Wagner presented with Kenai Peninsula Borough land management officer Marcus Mueller at the Kenai Peninsula Economic Development District Industry Outlook Forum, held January 8th in Seward. They discussed Homer Soil & Water's findings from our two recently released studies on the local food system and on the Borough's work on developing an agricultural lease program. Many in the audience were eager to learn more about agriculture and its economic potential on the peninsula.



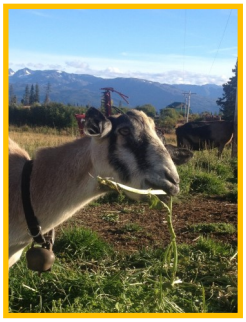
Producer Survey Consumer Survey

Homer Soil & Water's Food Systems Studies are OUT!

Our team interviewed 39 producers on the southern Kenai Peninsula who raise food for sale and 38 local commercial buyers who purchase large quantities- our local restaurants, grocery stores, the hospital and the senior center. The reports we produced offer a detailed snapshot-in-time of local, for-sale production and also perspectives on buying local foods. A great way to better understand Ag in our area and opportunities/challenges in getting to out to the people. The studies are available to read on Homer Soil & Water's homepage www.homerswcd.org.

Pick Me ! Pick Me!..... No, really pick me. I'm a rapidly spreading invasive weed. If you see me in your yard, pull me up, roots and all, **BUT ONLY** if you have just a few plants and can dig out the entire area. Pulling or mowing is not recommended if you are dealing with more than a few orange hawkweed plants because this will likely leave tiny root fragments and disturb the soil. That will result in new hawkweed plants. For more on how orange hawkweed spreads and how to control it visit:

https://akfarm-pests.community.uaf.edu/2016/06/15/orange-hawkweed/



Facebook? Really? Why?

There are many legitimate criticisms of Facebook (Wikipedia has a long and provocative article on this topic), and many people avoid Facebook because of how information from its pages has been shared for others to use. The problem is that Facebook is still, and by far, the most popular social media service around. This is probably in large part because FB offers so many ways to share information widely and to enable others to build on and discuss the information that's shared. The sidebar below offers a brief description of the three types of FB pages, each of which offers different tools for making information available and connecting with audiences. So at least for now, Facebook is a logical platform to use if your goal is to reach out to as many folks as possible who might be interested in what you're sharing. As a result, Homer Soil and Water is one of the over 2.6 billion monthly active Facebook users.

Facebook Groups are a particularly effective way to reach out to individuals and organizations wanting to learn more about a topic of shared interest. Homer Soil and Water plays an active role in several FB groups. We welcome you to check these out. If links below don't access the sites, you may need to set up or log into a FB account. (See the sidebar below for more information about Facebook Profile pages, which give you an account.)

Homer High Tunnel Growers was created in April 2011 to be a local forum for "all things High Tunnel" when the NRCS began to provide cost share funding for this conservation practice. As this FB group notes: "*The more we post, the more successful we'll all be. From high tunnel suppliers, shipping, installation, organic compost producers, seed choices to pest management suggestions. All questions and info are welcomed.*" The group is "private," so only members can see who's in the group and what they post; the group now has 1,830 members.

Anchor River Updates was established in May 2018 as a public group—meaning anyone with a FB account can see who's in the group and what they post, and anyone can add themselves as a member if they want to start posting. Homer Soil and Water established the Group as part of a collaborative project to improve streambank conditions in the Anchor River State Recreation Area below the Old Sterling Highway bridge.

Fox River Flats and Beyond is a public FB group to which Homer Soil and Water is actively adding information as it works with the Fox River Cattlemen's Association on updating plans related to the Fox River Flats state grazing lease. Grazing lease lands are open to many public uses, and as a result, Homer Soil and Water is making sure that folks who are interested can access information about this special area.

Caribou Lake Trail Planning Maps and Images was created by Homer Soil and Water in January 2020 "*...to provide maps and high quality images of the Caribou Lake Trail that can assist with trail planning and improvement, as well as protection of natural resources crossed by the trail.*" Homer Soil and Water is still uploading information to this site and finishing up a report about that information.

Although you have to have a FB Profile (account) in order to take advantage of FB Groups, you can create a Profile page with an email and name unique to that Profile and not connected to any personal information about you. There

(Continued from Pg.9)
are also many privacy settings you can use on your Profile page to minimize what others can learn about you. (See, for example the *Consumer Reports* article "How to Use Facebook Privacy Settings.")

Homer Soil and Water values the goal of providing access to useful information about the soil- and water-related resources around us, resources that so many of us value. Creating FB Groups focused on these resources, including on their sustainable use and management, is one way to promote this goal.

Types of Facebook pages

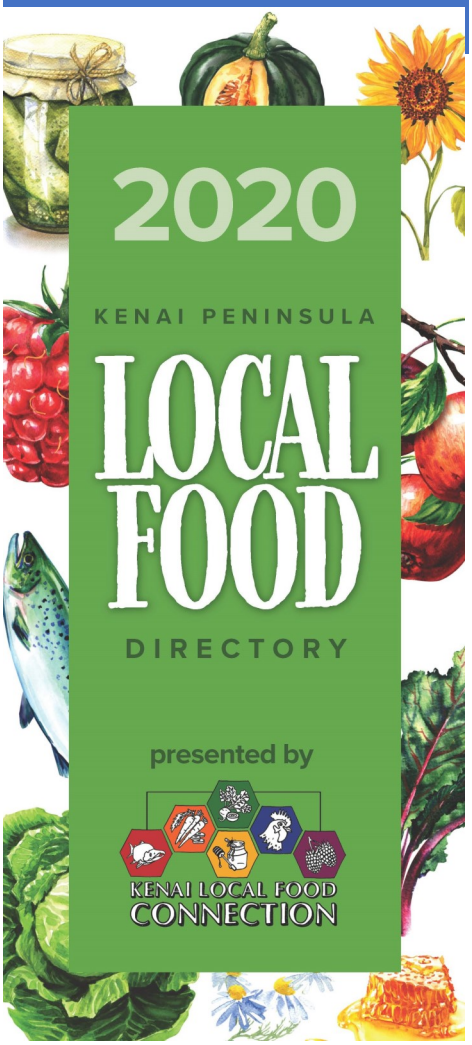
Profile – A Profile is a place on Facebook where you can **share information about yourself**, such as your interests, background, photos, videos, current city and hometown. Creating a profile page gives you a FB account. Depending on your privacy settings, some information may be visible to people without a FB account, but even if you can access a profile, you may not be able to read anything of consequence.

Pages – Pages are designed to be **official profiles for entities** such as celebrities, brands or businesses. They enable public figures, companies, brands, non-profits, etc. to (1) introduce their services and activities, (2) engage with their fans or customers, and (3) manage and track that engagement. You must have a FB Profile (account) to create a Page or help manage one, but by default, published FB Pages can be viewed by anyone, with or without a FB account. However, you have to have an account to post on a Page.

Groups – Groups **connect people who share an interest**, enabling them to post information, comments, and photos about that interest, as well as to participate in discussions. To keep posts civil and on-topic, Groups often have rules by which members abide. Groups have three privacy settings—public, closed and secret—but even "Public" groups are not truly open to the public; only people with FB accounts can access them. If you try to enter the URL of a Facebook group without first logging in to a FB account, Facebook will only bring you to a login screen. Groups are best if there's a lot of expertise or interest within your community about the Group topic; they provide a forum for discussions and connecting.

To find sources of locally grown food from farms, fish sites, retail stores, mobile food trucks , farmer's markets, and on-line markets

Click Below



Goodbye to Kris Nichols!

We'll all miss Kris, our Natural Resource Technician, since he's moved on to new adventures out of state. Best of luck!

Welcome Jessica!!

My name is Jessica Sharp and I just joined the HSWCD team as a natural resources technician. I will be primarily assisting with soil analyses and fertilizer recommendations. I have a long history of working with the Conservation Districts, including 7 years with Fairbanks SWCD and a brief stint with Homer SWCD several years ago. I enjoy natural resources conservation and am happy to be back to doing this sort of work again. You may be hearing from me if you submit a soil sample this spring or fall. Happy gardening season!

Meet The Staff

Kyra Wagner, District Manager

Kyra has moved from years of experience as a general community volunteer extraordinaire to the lead juggling acrobat in the office. In charge of accounting, grant writing and other general management, she loves seeing who the next person will be who walks through the door and what the latest issue may be.

Devony Lehner, Natural Resources Specialist

Devony is the queen of Web Soil Survey, NRCS programs, and all the resources needed to make wise decisions on your land. With nothing more than the purest intent to inform each and every landowner on the Peninsula of these resources, Devony is OUR greatest resource and institutional memory bank.

Brad Casar, Natural Resources Technician

Brad is our soils guy. If you have questions about soils he's the man to talk to. He holds a B.S. in international soil and crop sciences and international development, and is active in doing outreach to our community of growers and land managers on the southern Kenai Peninsula.

Charlotte Crowder, Biological Technician

Charlotte works with the NRCS Soil Survey team on their mapping projects as well as helping S&W process soil health study samples. As a botanist, she gets friendly with flowers, measures tree girths and rings, and records vegetation coverage at survey sites. And she really likes a nice afternoon tea.

Nicole Arevalo, Food Systems Analyst

Nicole was hired two years ago to conduct the Food Systems Study for the southern peninsula. A local foods buff, she holds a B.S. in anthropology from UAA and brings 18 years work experience in the food service industry ...and a little bit of time helping pick weeds and harvest vegetables at local farms.

Katherine Schake, Natural Resources Specialist

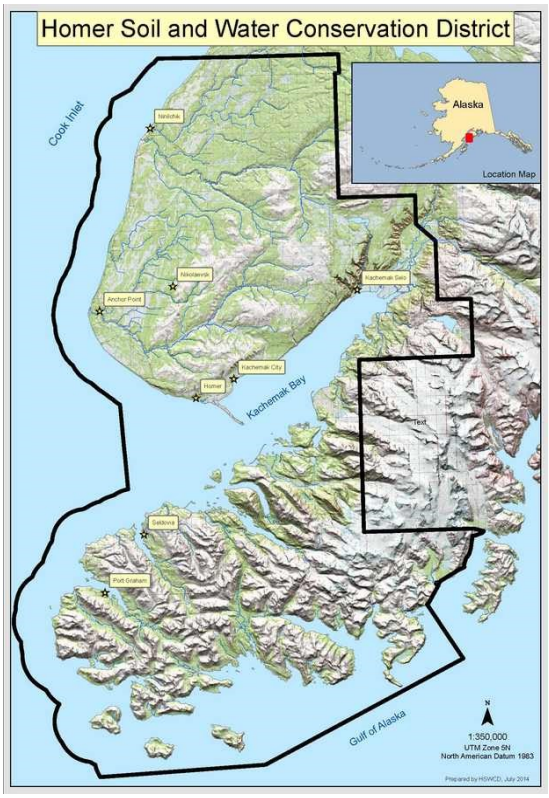
Katherine is our Invasive Plant Coordinator. She has guided hikes in Denali NP, managed mischief such as remote-sensing mapping projects, a statewide salmon data synthesis, and coordinated the Mat-Su Salmon Science Symposium. In her spare time, Katherine guides in Iceland, maintaining a passion for botany and birding.

Jessica Sharp, Natural Resources Specialist

Jessica is our newest addition in one sense, but also a returning one! She'll be helping with soil and fertilizer recommendations. See her introduction on Page 10 to meet her!

You are Invited to Attend our Board of Supervisors Meetings– Come See What's happening in the District

The HSWCD Board of Supervisors meets on the second Wednesday of the month at 5:00 pm. Meetings are held in the NRCS conference room next door to our office at 432 E. Pioneer Ave. in downtown Homer, AK.



In partnership with USDA-NRCS, the HSWCD is an Equal Opportunity Provider and Employer

Homer Soil & Water Conservation District

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