

NATURAL CURRENTS

News at the Homer Soil & Water Conservation District



District Manager Notes

BY KYRA WAGNER

We always have such amazing projects going on down at the District office. From trail work to farmer support, habitat improvement to invasive weeds, we have our hand in many aspects of our local landscape. We have the opportunity to answer the unmet conservation needs of our area and that takes many forms.

We could never do all this alone. We have the opportunity to work with an array of partners, building trust, building projects and building community. We have great staff who get to work on awesome projects with amazing partners. We couldn't ask for more. Read on to see all the new faces, projects, and updates.

A Heartfelt Thank You for Your Time With Us

Occasionally we do have to say goodbye to coworkers. After six years, Katherine Schake has moved on from her position as the Program Manager for the Invasive Species Program here at Homer Soil and Water. But we are super excited to be partnering with her in the future as she fulfills her new role as the manager at the Kachemak Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve.



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Controlled Trials with Chicken Tractors to Manage Orange Hawkweed

BY CASEY GREENSTEIN

In 2019 I had a yard full of orange hawkweed, in 2022 it was gone. I didn't dig it up, tarp it, or use chemicals. How did I get rid of it? I didn't. My chickens did.

Homer SWCD applied for funding to see if we could recreate these results on a smaller spatial footprint, in a shorter amount of time, and controlling for variables that could skew the results. The Hickerson Cemetery on Diamond Ridge was the perfect laboratory. It has an even, flat, mowed carpet of 90% hawkweed with a handful of other species in the mix.

While it's well known that chickens will scratch and peck down to bare ground, there's little documentation of how long it typically takes, or what grows back the fastest and most abundantly. This experiment tested different time intervals – two weeks, four weeks, and six weeks – to compare the impacts chickens have on plant regrowth. Chickens were housed in 8x3 foot tractors (mobile coops).

After two weeks in one spot, the vegetation was mostly gone, but once the chicken tractors were moved, the area regrew quickly with lots of grasses and dandelions. Happily, there was far less orange hawkweed.

After four weeks in one spot, the vegetation was completely gone and didn't grow back for four weeks. This time only a few stems of grasses and dandelions emerged.

After six weeks in one spot, nothing reemerged in the following four weeks. Looks like our feathered friends ate up all the rhizomes and seeds in this amount of time.

These results are promising, showing that regrowth in the short term is mostly grasses and dandelions, with far less orange hawkweed. However, in time, rhizomes and stolons could creep back in, and seeds could arrive from nearby flowers.

We'd like to do more controlled experiments in the future, for example to see if reseeding after chickens with native plants prevents hawkweed reestablishment. We'd also like to study how chicken poo changes soil chemistry, and in turn, plant growth. Are there other soil amendments we can add to change species composition? What about rotational grazing, where chickens are moved on and off the same patch of ground multiple times? Stayed tuned for future studies diving deeper into the role chickens can play in invasive species management and environmental conservation.

Thanks to the Western IPM Center for funding this project, to the City of Homer for their support and access to the Hickerson Cemetery, and the amazing staff at the Homer Soil and Water Conservation District for making this happen!

Watermelon Trail Improvements and Trail Reroute Update

BY MARCIA MACONE & MATT JAMES

An Informational Kiosk has been placed above the Beaver Creek Bridge, welcoming hikers and riders to the Anchor River & Fritz Creek Critical Habitat Area



Geoblock and Trail Improvements

In an effort towards protecting and healing widely used watermelon trail in the Critical Habitat area, Geo block has been placed on solid vegetative soil for 4 wheelers to use when transiting the trail. Logs have been added in rutted out areas allowing safe and solid four- wheeler passage





BEFORE



AFTER



Watermelon Trail Improvements: Trail Brushing and Clearing

BY MARCIA MACONE AND MATT JAMES

Newly Found Anadromous Stream

THANKS TO THE HSWCD TRAIL
CREW

The creek at the base of Chili Dog Hill has
been found to have Dolly Varden.





New Signage

The Critical Habitat Area (CHA) has new signage to help keep overweight side-by-sides from transiting the CHA this is required by ADF&G and will assist in keeping the trails from further degradation.



Meet Marcia!

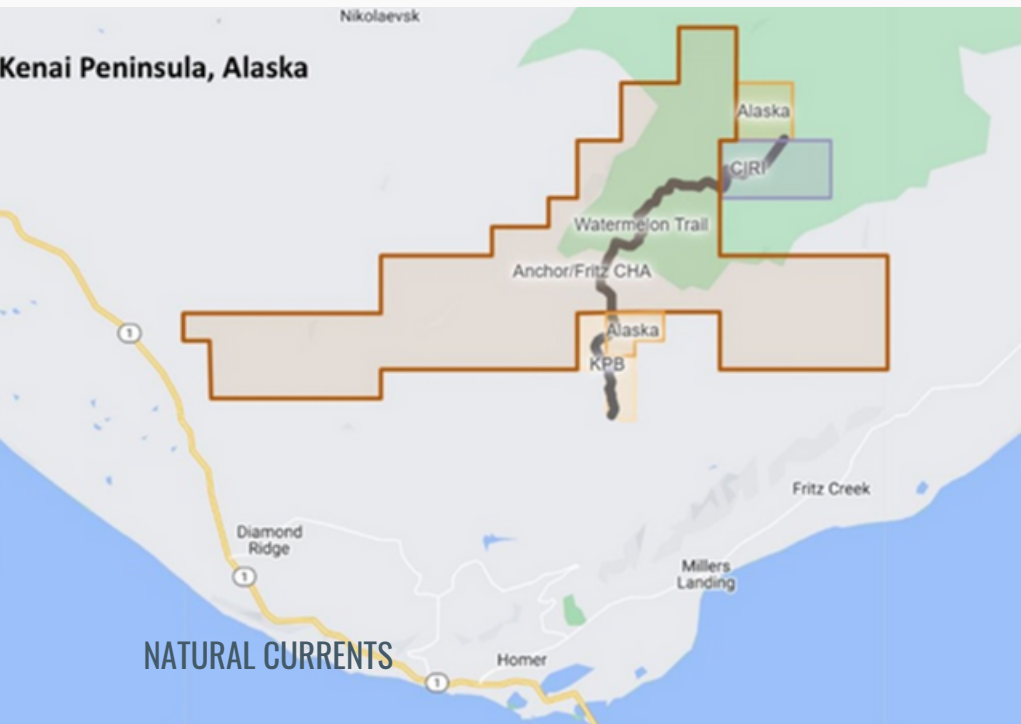
The newest addition to our trail crew, Marcia has been helping out on the Watermelon Trail work this summer. She has spent most of her years in Homer out on boats during the summer, so she has been thoroughly enjoying the chance to do something on land. She is organizing a Trails Summit for this November 14. In her free time, Marcia is actively building trails on her own land and with the Homer Trails Alliance as well.

Watermelon Trail: Assessment, Prescription and CIRI Reroute

BY MARCIA MACONE

Happy Trails, Inc. presented an Assessment and Prescription (A & P) for the Watermelon Trail, at 2.5 mile Ohlson Mountain Road in the Kenai Peninsula uplands near Homer, Alaska. Map and research work for this trail was conducted February-May 2023, with field work conducted by Jon Underwood June 12-17, 2023. The scope of this A&P covers the first 8 miles of the trail, with specific attention to miles 2-8. Jon conducted this A & P under the direction Matt James of the Homer Soil and Water Conservation District and Sue Rodman of Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

The portion of the Watermelon Trail that trespasses on CIRI property does it have a legal easement. The CIRI parcel adjoins the CHA, and if the trail is to be re-routed to a sustainable alignment on the CHA, re-alignment on the CIRI property is also required. This also requires re-alignment onto land managed by AKDNR-DMLW on the north side.





Kickstarting the Native Plants Program for Southcentral Alaska

BY CASEY GREENSTEIN

Homer SWCD and partner agencies receive countless requests for native plant materials – from replanting trees lost to the spruce bark beetle, to seeding native grasses on roadsides, to providing native alternatives for ornamentals gardens and supporting pollinator habitat. We're excited to announce new funding to make this happen!

Funds have been awarded to Homer SWCD from the Bureau of Land Management, Chugach National Forest (in partnership with the Anchorage SWCD), and the Rural Business Development Grant (RBDG) program. These funds will allow us to begin researching supply and demand, biological and ecological considerations, capacity building, and creating new partnerships. The latter – RBDG – is specifically geared toward job creation by reducing barriers to implementation for individuals to start their own native plant business.

In this inaugural year, we've already collected seed from 11 species and did a site visit to an area of Resurrection Creek in Hope that needs revegetation. Additionally, the City of Homer continues to be a partner in conservation, and we have planted trees along an eroding streambank in Karen Hornaday Park and grasses around the sculpture at Bishop's Beach.

As the program grows, keep an eye out for new education and outreach materials, as well as opportunities to volunteer.



Moose Habitat Enhancement

BY MATT JAMES

This winter, Homer Soil and Water Conservation District, in continued partnership with the Alaska Department of Fish & Game, completed a wildlife habitat project involving 65 acres of spruce forest land in the North Fork Road area near Homer. The scope of this project was to enhance habitat for moose and other wildlife while reducing danger of wildland fire.

Spruce bark beetles killed thousands of acres of forest on the southern Kenai Peninsula, creating a landscape that is prone to fire, poor habitat for moose, and difficult for people and moose to navigate.

With frozen ground to limit erosion, rutting, and soil compaction, a masticating head on an excavator and skid steer mulched the fallen spruce trees, reducing the 'heavy' part of the fuel load into chips and chunks. The debris from the mulched trees will help reduce the reinvasion of grass by acting as a smothering, pre-emergent layer, allowing tree and shrub species to regenerate over time. Additionally, patches of soil were scarified to remove the bluejoint grass (*Calamagrostis*) and expose mineral soil so that birch and willow can regenerate, the preferred forage plants for moose. This type of wildlife habitat enhancement speeds up forest succession in an environment where few natural disturbances occur.

Homer SWCD will continue to work with or partners at ADF&G to identify and oversee future habitat and trail projects located within GMU 15C and adjacent areas.

This project is funded through a federal aid grant administered by the US Fish & Wildlife Service through the Wildlife Restoration program.





European Green Crab Rapid Response Exercise

BY JEN CHAUVET

In August, a group of invasive species folks (including HSWCD) and land managers from across the state came together in Homer to talk about the (inevitable) spread of European green crab up the coast of Alaska. (You might recall that European green crabs were first discovered in Alaska in Metlakatla in 2022.) Using Kachemak Bay as an example, the group spent two and a half days walking through a scenario and brainstorming the details of possible response actions. We also practiced monitoring techniques, like crab trapping and molt surveys at the Pier 1 beach on the Homer Spit. The exercise, which was funded by the US Fish & Wildlife Service, will help inform a European green crab response plan for Alaska. Stay tuned for that!

If you think you see a European green crab, take lots of pictures and report it to ADF&G at 1-877-INVASIV.

Meet Louise!

Louise Tymrak joined the HSWCD invasive species team in February as the invasive species outreach intern. Born and raised in Homer, Louise is currently finishing up a degree in biology at the University of Alaska, Southeast. During her time with us, Louise spruced up the KP-CISMA website and social media presence with fresh content and put her creative energy into other outreach projects. We were sure happy to have her on board!



Mark your calendar: The Alaska Invasive Species Workshop

NOVEMBER 7-9, 2023 IN SITKA, AK

This year the workshop will be held hybrid-style, with the option to tune in virtually or attend in person.

Visit www.alaskainvasives.org for details and to register.



Bradley Lake

BY JEN CHAUVET

For the fourth year in a row, we visited Homer Electric Association's Bradley Lake Hydroelectric Site on the south side of Kachemak Bay to control and survey for high-priority invasive plants. Encouragingly, we continue to see a reduction in reed canarygrass and orange hawkweed! Because people regularly travel to the Bradley Lake area from Homer, prevention practices will always be a necessary priority. And the unfortunate discovery of a previously unknown patch of white sweetclover this summer emphasizes the importance of continued monitoring to catch new infestations early on.



Meet Abby!

Abby Dekoekkoek has joined the HSWCD team as our natural resource technician and will be surveying and responding to high-priority invasive plant infestations across the Kenai Peninsula. She has a B.S. in Environmental Science from Western Washington University and brings prior experience in invasive species removal and salmon habitat restoration projects. We're thrilled that Abby has joined us in early detection and rapid response of invasive species!

Invasive Chokecherry Tree Removal

BY JEN CHAUVET

We once again joined up with the invasives crew at the Kenai Watershed Forum to remove invasive chokecherry trees (*Prunus padus* and *P. virginiana*) across the peninsula. We're still working on the data, but preliminarily, we removed over 50 flowering and immature trees, plus hundreds (thousands?) of saplings and seedlings from the communities of Seldovia, Cooper Landing, Seward, Moose Pass, and the Homer and Soldotna/Kenai areas. The program has been particularly successful in Seward, where community members and the city have enthusiastically supported and assisted with the removal of chokecherry trees from parks, schools, trails, alleys, and private properties.



Weed-Free Gravel Certifications

BY JEN CHAUVET

With continued funding from the City of Homer, we inspected and certified three local gravel pits through the Alaska Division of Agriculture's Weed-Free Gravel Program. In 2022, the City of Homer began to require the use of certified weed-free gravel on city projects - we applaud the city for its continued dedication to minimizing the introduction and spread of invasive plants in Homer!

If you're a gravel producer or gravel pit manager and want to learn more about the certification process (it's easy!) or a landowner/land manager looking to purchase certified weed-free gravel, get in touch! Email Abby at abby@homerswcd.org.



Weed Questions?

Have questions about what to do with invasive plants in your yard? We've got you covered!

Visit www.kenaiinvasives.org for tips on how to manage the most common and harmful invasive plants – orange hawkweed, hempnettle, reed canarygrass, bird vetch, and more.

Port Graham Invasive Plant Workshop and Survey

BY JEN CHAUVET

In June, we had the opportunity to visit the community of Port Graham for invasive plant surveys and to lead a community workshop and weed pull. We were joined by Dustin Carl from the Chugach Regional Resources Commission (CRRC). Dustin's enthusiasm and dedication to the project have been essential in helping us through the details - thank you, Dustin!

Over 20 folks of all ages showed up for lunch, the workshop, and a conversation about invasive plant problems and priorities for the village. Afterward, a group of community members - made up primarily of an enthusiastic group of youngsters and teens - took us on a village tour of invasive and native plants, plus the community garden. On day two, a dozen hardy folks, including those energetic youths, came out in the rain to pull orange hawkweed from behind the health clinic.

Casey and Jen surveyed the road that leads out of the village and through Native Allotment Lands - thanks to Deb McMullen of the Port Graham Village Council for the ride and great stories! Aside from the ubiquitous common dandelions, the first 12 miles of road were encouragingly weed-free! Meanwhile, Abby and Patrick joined a crew of contractors, engineers, and biologists from Port Graham Corporation and the US Fish & Wildlife Service on a wild adventure out the old road to Rocky Bay, the site of a massive rehabilitation project and an unfortunate orange hawkweed infestation.

We're now working with the village council to create an Integrated Pest Management Plan for the Port Graham area, and we hope to collaborate with Port Graham Corporation in the future to address the orange hawkweed infestation on the outer coast.

Thank you to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for funding this project, CRRC for administering it, and mostly, to the community of Port Graham for the warm hospitality!





Know Your Land

BY MONICA KOPP

We had a great year of Know Your Land talks, hosting our free 1-hr workshops every other Thursday from January all the way into June. Thanks to a partnership with the Kenai Peninsula College's Kachemak Bay Campus and their brand-new Sustainable Agriculture Program the workshops were hosted in a hybrid format, both in-person at the college and on Zoom to reach a wider audience. We had participants from all over the Kenai Peninsula and as far away as Ketchikan, Sand Point, and Kotzebue! We covered a broad range of topics including an NRCS program overview, irrigation, soil health, high tunnels, cover crops, and crop rotation. Our most popular event was an orchard tour led by Dave Erickson at the Walter Johnson Memorial Orchard in June. We are very excited to be back hosting events in person, generating lots of friendly conversation after the talks. We even had an impromptu presentation on Korean Natural Farming from Don McNamara of Oceanside Farms after his talk on cover crops and crop rotation! This stuff is what we're all about – bringing farmers, gardeners, and land stewards together to energize, network, info-share and feed our local food network while protecting our farmland and watersheds. Stay tuned for more Know Your Land talks coming later this fall and into the winter!

Ag Corner

BY MONICA KOPP

Always lots going on in our little office in the Frontier building! We were busy this spring, grant season, planting seeds for future funding to keep our programs running and hopefully expand a bit. We are excited about all the great partnerships happening in our local food system. Here's what we've been up to!



KPC Sustainable Ag Program

BY MONICA KOPP

As of this spring, Kachemak Bay Campus is now home to a brand-new Sustainable Agriculture Program! There have been a few staffing changes since the program started, but they now have two competent educators to run the program - [Carey Restino](#) of Homer Hilltop Farm and *surprise!* our own Monica Kopp is also now also working part-time for the KBC program! We're super excited for the expanded educational offerings this program will bring to our community and for the awesome outdoor classroom at their new high tunnel.



Seed-saving in Homer: Building Resilience and Economy

BY MONICA KOPP

Our Specialty Crop Block Grant on seed saving is wrapping up its first year and we are loving the collaboration and opportunities happening as a result of this project. Saskia Esslinger taught a series of in-person classes on seed saving, permaculture, and food gardening at the Homer Public Library, and we have had a nice, intimate turnout for those events. One portion of this project is focusing on educating the public and encouraging involvement in the Homer Seed Library (which if you haven't checked it out, you should! It is located in the foyer of the Homer Public Library) through Saskia's "Seeds and Soil" classes.

The other portion is focused on providing intensive technical support to 5 growers in the Homer area who have dedicated time and space to growing and saving seed with the intention of building up the stock of the Seed Library and building up their experience to be able to scale up and produce seed commercially. With our short growing season and long days, Alaska is in a unique position for it to be possible for seed crop production to be more profitable than vegetable crops. Not only that, but our unique climate and day length makes it that much more important to have acclimated seed stock rather than relying on seed produced in the Lower 48.

We have been working with Leah Wagner of Foundroot, a seed company in Haines, who is very excited to be partnering with our growers to increase the availability of Alaska-grown seed. We are in the "drinking from a firehose" phase right now, learning all we can, but we have two more years to really see the fruits of our labor and will have a great base to expand upon. Maybe Homer can be a future seed hub for our state!

Meet the Chef is returning!

BY MONICA KOPP

We are also excited to announce that we recently received a Specialty Crop Block Grant to bring back Meet the Chef events in Homer! The purpose of this project is to increase connections, awareness, and understanding between large-scale buyers and farmers by facilitating gatherings between local chefs and farmers so they can share information about expectations, needs and what kinds of farm crops are available locally. We will also be filming a few chef demonstrations utilizing local produce to be shared statewide.

Soil Testing

BY MONICA KOPP

Don't forget to take a soil test the ground freezes this fall! Remember you are looking to get a good representation of your whole garden (or zones if they are managed differently). Take a number of subsamples from various areas that you will mix together to create the sample you bring into us. Expect a 2-3 week turnaround to receive your results and fertilizer recommendations. We ship out on Fridays so bring them before then for the quickest service!



Connecting Producers and Customers Virtually with the Alaska Food Hub

BY MONICA KOPP

Thanks to a Rural Business Development Grant, Homer Soil & Water partnered with the Alaska Food Hub to increase support and outreach for the online farmers market to boost availability of local food on the platform. Homer Soil & Water offered one-on-one assistance navigating the online platform and strategizing to sell on the Alaska Food Hub and hosted a workshop on how to sell on the Food Hub. The Alaska Food Hub Manager, Kyra Harty shot video this summer with a few seasoned Food Hub producers to create a couple “Tricks of the Trade” reels to expose new or potential producers to tested techniques and best practices. The Food Hub is designed to cater to producers large and small. Producers list their available products on Fridays, and the online marketplace is open from Friday through Monday. Tuesday, producers receive a Pick List, harvest only what sold, and deliver to the Food Hub on Wednesday where items are aggregated and picked up by customers. As a result of this project, 9 new vendors were onboarded onto the platform this season.

Expanding Support for Village-Driven Agriculture

BY MONICA KOPP

We are very excited to announce that Homer Soil & Water was awarded an Equity in Conservation Outreach Cooperative Agreement with the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). This project focuses on meeting the growing need and interest of tribal and remote communities to increase their food sovereignty and food security by utilizing small-scale agriculture. Homer is fortunate to have a thriving agricultural community with so much experience to share. The goal of this project is to connect our experienced farmers and educators with beginning and prospective farmers in tribal and off-road communities throughout Southcentral and Western Alaska. Our first year will be spent working closely with Alaska Village Initiatives and the Natural Resource Conservation Service to make contacts and build relationships with groups and individuals in rural communities and provide technical assistance and connect beginning and prospective farmers and community gardening projects with resources they need to get started. In 2025 and 2026, we will invite participants to Homer for small-scale farming workshops to provide hands-on experiential learning opportunities and connect face-to-face with farmers.



Meet the Staff



Nicole Arevalo, Outreach Coordinator nicole@homerswcd.org

Nicole was hired in 2018 to conduct the Food Systems Study for the southern peninsula, bringing 18 years work experience in food service and a BA in Anthropology. Since then, she's been our Ag outreach person and the executive assistant to the President of the Alaska Association of Conservation Districts



Jen Chauvet, Invasive Species Program Coordinator jen@homerswcd.org

After two decades of work as a park ranger, naturalist, and environmental educator, Jen joined the HSWCD invasive species team in the fall of 2021, where she focused her time on invasive species outreach & education. Now she is leading the program, coordinating with partners across the peninsula



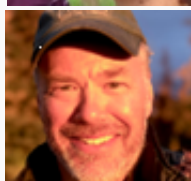
Abby Dekoekkoek, Invasive Species Program Specialist abby@homerswcd.org

Abby has joined HSWCD this spring after doing salmon habitat restoration and invasive removal work in Washington state. She is enjoying her time exploring the peninsula while working on the front lines responding to invasive species infestations.



Casey Greenstein, Native Plant Program Coordinator casey@homerswcd.org

Casey joined Homer Soil & Water in 2021 to bring her expertise to the invasives program and is now applying her background in botany and ecology to building a native plants program. On the side, she has a business doing contract work in contaminated site remediation and invasive plant management.



Patrick Houlihan, Invasives Program Field Coordinator patrick@homerswcd.org

For the last couple of years Patrick has loved working with HSWCD as Invasives Program Field Coordinator. He also still works with Alaska Department of Fish and Game where he has enjoyed all kinds of salmon and habitat related fieldwork for over 20 seasons.



Matt James, Forester mattjames@homerswcd.org

Matt was hired in June of 2020 as a Forester. He works closely with the ADF&G to complete moose habitat restoration projects on the Kenai Peninsula as well as working on trails issues. Matt is a long time Homer resident and came to us after a 25-year career of wildland firefighting with a 25-year career of wild



Monica Kopp, Ag Program Coordinator monica@homerswcd.org

Monica was originally hired for our NRCS Soil Survey field work because of her excellent background in botany and soils. Now we know her passion for agriculture and her dedication to the soil of her own new farm, so she is in charge of soil nutrient recommendations and technical support to producers.



Marcia Macone, Trails Program Technician marcia@homerswcd.org

As our newest team member at Homer Soil & Water, Marcia has been enjoying the outdoor work of clearing, assessing and improving our local trails this summer. She comes to us with years of experience working both for Crowley and on the Tiglax, but also a love of creating trails for access to the outdoors.



Devony Lehner, Natural Resource Specialist devony@homerswcd.org

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.



Kyra Wagner, District Manager kyra@homerswcd.org

Kyra has now been with the district for seven years. After years of experience as a general community volunteer she is now in charge of accounting, grant writing and other general management. She loves seeing who the next person will be who walks in and what the latest issue may be.



Board of Supervisors

Chris Rainwater
Board Chair

Otto Kilcher
Vice Chair

Jason Ritter
Treasurer

Charlie Trowbridge
Secretary

Jim Engebretson
AACD Rep

Board Elections

A CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

Interested in running for a seat on the board? Now is the time!

Nominations by petition will be accepted to fill eligible seats on the Homer Soil and Water Conservation District Board of Supervisors. Seat A and Seat B have a three-year term that expires on December 31, 2026.

Candidates wishing to fill any board seat must be a cooperator of the Homer Soil and Water Conservation District. The nomination period runs until 4:30 p.m., Friday, November 17, 2023. Petitions for nomination must be:

- Signed by the nominee certifying the nominee's willingness to serve, if elected.
- Signed by at least three (3) cooperators in the District who appear on the certified cooperators list.
- Received by the Alaska Association of Conservation Districts no later than 5:00 p.m., Friday, November 17, 2023.

An election will be held in December 2023, unless no new nominations are submitted.

Homer Soil and Water is an Equal Opportunity Provider and Employer.

For more information, contact Kyra Wagner, District Manager, at kyra@homerswcd.org or (907) 299-4920

Download a nomination form here:

http://www.homerswcd.org/user-files//Call_For_Nominations_2023.doc

Become a Cooperator

IT'S LIKE MEMBERSHIP

Have you signed a cooperator agreement with the District? The simple, 1-page agreement documents that the individual or organization wants to "cooperate" with District efforts by developing and managing their lands in ways that reflect land and water suitabilities, as well as good management practices. You must own or manage land on the southern Kenai Peninsula.

Cooperators can participate in elections and run for positions on the Board of supervisors. It's free and easy, sign up today!

You can fill out a form online at: <https://form.jotform.com/210335561361043>



Special Thanks
TO ALL OUR
PARTNERS!



National Association of
Conservation Districts

Western
IPM
Center

