

“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.”



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# Natural Currents

## DISTRICT LOOKS FOR INPUT ON SOILS OF LOCAL IMPORTANCE

What are Soils of Local Importance? To begin with, the term is used to describe the mapped soil types that are important to the local community due to their agricultural value. The process of identifying soils of local importance is part of a national effort by the USDA to help identify – and then protect – agricultural land that is at high risk of conversion to non-agricultural uses.

The idea is straightforward enough, however the terminology does tend to be a bit confusing. Soils of local importance are the lowest tier of a classification system established to capture first “prime farmlands of the US,” then “unique farmlands,” then statewide “Soils of Importance,” and finally “Soils of Local Importance.” Redundant? Not exactly; this tiered system allows both states and local units of government—like Homer Soil and Water—to identify soils they know to be important in the areas for which they are responsible and with which they are familiar. Having a tiered system like this is especially important in Alaska, where we have no soils that qualify as “prime” or “unique.” by national standards such as those that apply in Iowa or California. Additionally, Alaskan state government has not identified or adopted soils of statewide importance – leaving it up to soil and water conservation districts, boroughs, and other local units of government to designate the soils that are important to their local farmers, ranchers, foresters, and others who produce food and fiber.

The Homer District is taking the lead in identifying soils of local importance within District boundaries. This process involves a *(continued on pg. 5)*



Cattle grazing in an area of Beluga silt loam, strongly sloping. This area is below the escarpment that marks the edge of the Caribou Hills. Rough broken land occurs on the escarpment. This photo is from the 1971 Homer –Ninilchik Soil Survey.

## YOU'RE INVITED! WORK PARTY SCHEDULED FOR THE HOMER DEMONSTRATION FOREST

The summer trails in the Homer Demonstration Forest increasingly require “local knowledge” to find and follow. Sure, if you're already familiar with the area, spend the winters skiing on the groomed trails, or remember the Homestead Trail from previous outings, then hiking these trails is a stroll in your backyard. But the other day, I had the experience of “walking in the shoes” of visiting tourists who were sent to these trails by the Chamber of Commerce. Let me tell you, in mid-July, with the grasses chest high and the routes poorly marked, this is no place to wander if you aren't already familiar with the trail system. I found this nice couple just below Diamond Ridge Road looking for the Baycrest trailhead – they had found the Reuben Call bench OK, but from there things got a bit confusing, and their 1-hour hike was becoming a 3-hour tour of the neighborhood.

The truth is that these trails need some serious TLC – in other words, maintenance. Here is the problem – these trails for the most part rely completely on volunteer stewardship by a few local people, and they could really use some help.

Luckily, two high school seniors completing their community service hours are getting organized to “leverage” their time by planning a work party. These two students have completed some of the work already – painting old, faded signs, replacing some of the broken boardwalk, and cleaning out the arboretum. With some additional prep work, they hope to get things set up for a well-organized day of trail work to see how much can get accomplished with the help of volunteers.

We hope to see Homer trail users who support year-round use of these trails show up in force to make this a great day. We'll welcome all levels of experience and ages – and plan to celebrate our accomplishments with a feed at the end of the “party.” All trail supporters with any time to spare, please join us!



Interested in joining the party—No RSVP necessary—but please feel free to call our office with questions. Meet at the trailhead at 10:00 Saturday morning August 16th—lunch to be served at 2:00.

## AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION EASEMENT PROGRAM

The NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) is a new program that consolidates three former easement programs – the Wetlands Reserve Program, Grassland Reserve Program, and Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program. ACEP provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve agricultural lands and wetlands and their related benefits.

Under the Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) component, NRCS helps Indian tribes, state and local governments, and non-governmental organizations—including individual landowners—protect working agricultural lands and limit non-agricultural uses of the land. Under the Wetlands Reserve Easements (WRE) component, NRCS helps to restore, protect and enhance enrolled wetlands.

Agricultural Land Easements protect the long-term viability of the nation's food supply by preventing conversion of productive working lands to non-agricultural uses. Land protected by agricultural land easements provides additional public benefits, including environmental quality, historic preservation, wildlife habitat and protection of open space.

NRCS provides financial assistance to eligible partners for purchasing ALE that protect the agricultural use and conservation values of eligible land. In the case of working farms, the program helps farmers and ranchers keep their land in agriculture. The program also protects grazing uses and related conservation values by conserving grassland, including rangeland, and pastureland. If you would like to discuss how NRCS can help fund efforts to protect your ag lands or would like to discuss NRCS easement programs, please contact Karen Dearlove, Easement Specialist, in the NRCS Kenai Field Office. Her contact information is (907) 283-8732, ex 114, or [Karen.Dearlove@ak.usda.gov](mailto:Karen.Dearlove@ak.usda.gov).

## “HAY” PRODUCERS ARE YOU INTERESTED IN WEED FREE FORAGE?

The Homer District will be providing an inspector to certify crops for the 2014 season. Weed Free Forage (WFF) certification is a voluntary program coordinated with Alaska Division of Agriculture, and is offered at no cost to the producer (other than the purchase of specially colored twine for baling). Specified standards must be met and the inspection performed within 10 days of harvest. Program standards have been adopted from the North America Weed Management Association (NAWMA) and can be reviewed on DNR- Division of Agriculture's website at <http://plants.alaska.gov/invasives/weed-free-forage.htm>.

**What?** You think your field has too many weeds to qualify? When fields are inspected, they are inspected for invasive and noxious weeds that presently contain, or could within the next ten days produce, viable seed. Weed leaves and stems may occur in certified products, but the intent is to minimize the risk of transporting seeds or reproductive parts.

**Why?** Weed Free Forage and straw producers can provide a value-added product by making available weed free forage and straw. Potential markets for WFF or straw include: mushers, manufacturing of erosion control materials, and feed or bedding for pack animals. More and more managers are implementing requirements for weed-free-certified products to be used on their lands or projects. Weed free products also provide an opportunity for the consumer to purchase a product about which they can feel confident in that they are minimizing the risk of inadvertently spreading invasive weeds into their landscapes.

**How?** If you would like to participate in the program, or would like to schedule an inspection, please call our office at (907)235-8177 ex 5 or email [matt@homerswcd.org](mailto:matt@homerswcd.org).



Requesting certified weed-free seed and forage is a great way to prevent the spread of invasive weeds.

### INTERESTED IN NO-TILL DRILLING?

The Kenai Soil and Water Conservation District has a no-till drill available for rent to local producers. No drill tillage has become an important conservation practices as it has proven to be an effective erosion control and moisture conservation measures. To be eligible to rent the drill individuals need to participate in a half day training on how to use ,and care for, the machine. We are looking to see if the there is enough interest in the Homer area to host a class down here in late August. If you would like to participate please contact our office so we can schedule the workshop accordingly. To learn more about the Kenai's equipment and rental agreement please visit <http://kenaisoilandwater.org/equipment-rental>

### WHAT IS AN INVASIVE WEED?

An invasive weed is a non-native plant that causes economic or environmental harm or even harm to human health. Nationwide, invasive species can cause economic losses exceeding \$122 million dollars a year. Invasive ornamental plants, including common tansy, oxeye daisy, orange hawkweed, and “butter and eggs,” are rapidly becoming a serious problem in Southcentral Alaska.

### SIGN-UP PERIOD FOR INVASIVE WEED COST SHARE PROGRAM NOW OPEN

The sign-up period for the Homer District Invasive Weed Cost Share Program is currently open. We are looking for local private landowners interested in controlling non-native plants. The program, funded through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services' Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, will provide financial assistance to landowners to control invasive plants that have the potential to impact wildlife habitat. Interested landowners who qualify will work with a district employee to develop an integrated management plan for control of these non-native plant (s). The program will provide the landowners with funds for non-chemical control methods such as hand pulling, mowing, and tarping. Some invasive plants that are good candidates for the program are Canadian thistle, reed canary grass, bird vetch, common tansy, sweet clover, and fall Dandelion.

## WHAT IS THE FARMLAND PROTECTION POLICY ACT (FPPA)?

The Farmland Protection Policy Act was originally passed in 1981 to help ensure that Federal programs would not promote the unnecessary and irreversible conversion of farmland to nonagricultural uses. The FPPA assures that, to the extent possible, implementation of federal programs is compatible with policies and programs adopted by state and local governments to help protect farmland and ranchland. The FPPA does NOT authorize the Federal government to regulate how private or nonfederal lands can be used, nor does it in any way affect landowner property rights.

“Farmland” as defined by the FPPA does not have to be currently used for cropland. It can be forestland, pastureland, cropland, or other land with agricultural potential, but not water or urban built-up land. A list of Soils of Local Importance (SLI) developed by a unit of local government—like Homer Soil and Water—AND approved by the NRCS State Conservationist can be used to identify lands eligible for FPPA protections. That's why Homer Soil and Water is developing a list of Soils of Local Importance within District boundaries. (See related article on SLI.)

### *When does the FPPA apply?*

If a project will be completed by, or with assistance from, a Federal agency AND the project may irreversibly convert farmland to nonagricultural use (directly or indirectly), FPPA requirements apply. Here are examples of projects that may be subject to FPPA requirements:

- State highway construction projects, (through the Federal Highway Administration)
- Airport expansions
- Electric cooperative construction projects
- Railroad construction projects
- Telephone company construction projects
- Reservoir and hydroelectric projects
- Federal agency projects that convert farmland
- Other projects completed with Federal assistance.

Here are examples of activities that are NOT subject to FPPA requirements. The first four categories cover most land use activities on private land and land owned by local units of government.

- Projects planned and completed without the assistance of a Federal agency
- Projects on land already in urban development or used for water storage
- Construction of on-farm structures needed for farm operations
- Construction of new minor secondary structures such as a garage or storage shed
- Federal permitting and licensing
- Construction within an existing right-of-way purchased on or before August 4, 1984
- Construction for national defense purposes
- Surface mining where restoration to agricultural use is planned.



The photo above shows farmland developed on Kachemak silt loam—a soil on the SLI list..

### *How does the FPPA work?*

When the FPPA applies, the Federal government uses criteria established under section 1541(b) of the Act, 7 U.S.C. 4202(b), to: (1) identify and take into account the adverse effects of its programs on the preservation of farmland; (2) consider alternative actions, as appropriate, that could lessen adverse effects; and (3) assure that its programs, to the extent practicable, are compatible with farmland protection programs and policies adopted by states, units of local government (like the Kenai Peninsula Borough and Homer Soil and Water), and other entities.

Criteria are spelled out in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Title 7, Part 658, which contains regulations to implement the Farmland Protection Policy Act (see <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/granule/CFR-1997-title7-vol6/CFR-1997-title7-vol6-part658>). Criteria include how to use (1) a “Land Evaluation Criterion—Relative Value,” which is based on information from a number of sources, including soil surveys, and (2) “Site Assessment Criteria.”

(*SLI continued from pg. 1*) careful review of current, potential, and historic use of land for agriculture on the southern peninsula and an identification of soil types that are best suited to support these activities.

During this process Homer Soil and Water is getting the help of technical specialists in the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, particularly NRCS soil scientists. With this help, we're developing a list of local soils that are best suited for farming, ranching, forestry, and other agricultural activities. Given conditions on the Kenai Peninsula, the soils we list may have some limitations, such as short growing seasons or moderate slopes, but they are nonetheless vital to local efforts to develop, sustain, and expand agricultural activities—both for personal use and commercial opportunities.

Identifying soils of local importance can help communities plan for and meet their future agricultural needs. Formally recognizing our productive agricultural lands helps convey the message that agriculture is an important part of our local community and economy, and that the land that supports it should not be taken for granted. This process can inform management decisions at the regional level – encouraging consideration of the compatibility of various land uses with existing or future agricultural use and ensuring a stable land base for the future of the agricultural industry.

Identifying soils of local importance is an important step in making available to local groups and individuals a number of voluntary tools designed to protect agricultural land. For example, identifying soils of local importance can make available federal farmland protection programs (see related articles on FPPA and NRCS easements). Tools that become available once SLI lists are adopted include programs enabling individuals to protect their agricultural lands by voluntarily selling appropriate easements through NRCS easement programs. If you would like to review SLI lists that are developed, or want to know whether soils in a particular area will be included, please contact the Homer Soil and Water Conservation District with your input. We hope to have our list of SLI submitted for approval by the end of this coming September.

Please visit our website at <http://www.homerswcd.org> to review a map of soil types being proposed as Soils of Local Importance. These SLI are based on land capability classes, as well as other criteria related to historic agricultural use and agricultural suitability. Access the map from our home webpage—in the *News and Updates* text box.

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## GET READY TO APPLY FOR REIMBURSEMENT OF AG-RELATED SHIPPING AND TRANSPORTATION COSTS!

The 2014 Farm Bill re-authorized the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) Reimbursement Transportation Cost Payment Program (RTCP). This program reimburses individuals for a portion of the costs they incur for shipping or transporting agricultural supplies, equipment, or material to distant destinations. For example, the program allows farmers, ranchers, and others pursuing ag activities in Alaska recover some of their ag-related shipping and transportation costs.

This year's program will cover costs incurred from October 1, 2013, through September 30, 2014 (Fiscal Year 2014). The sign-up period for Fiscal Year 2014 will begin July 21, 2014, and end September 8, 2014. Although ag producers must file their RTCP applications in an FSA office by September 8, 2014, they will have until November 3, 2014, to submit supporting documentation to FSA—such as shipping receipts.

Last month, a diverse group of 166 Alaskan producers received a total of \$265,000 to help offset the high cost of farming in Alaska by participating in FSA's Reimbursement Transportation Cost Payment Program for Geographically Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers. Farmers, ranchers, and other growers from all across the state—from Craig, to Bethel, to Kodiak and Manley Hot Springs—received payments up to \$5,589. These farmers produced a wide range of livestock and crops, including hay, vegetables, oysters, dairy products, grain, and peonies.

For more information on the RTCP program, farmers and ranchers in the eligible areas can contact the Northern or Southern County Offices for further assistance or visit the Alaska FSA website <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/ak>.

To find out more about the programs and projects, visit our website at [www.homerswcd.org](http://www.homerswcd.org).

The HSWCD Board meets monthly on the second Wednesday of the month. The July meeting is scheduled for 6:00. pm. We welcome all visitors!

## UPCOMING EVENTS & DEADLINES

August 13<sup>th</sup> HSWCD Board Meeting 6:00 pm @ USDA Service Center

August 16<sup>th</sup> Homer Demonstration Forest Work Party—10:00 am @ Rodger's Loop Trailhead

August 15<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> Kenai Peninsula Fair—Ninilchik

September 10<sup>th</sup> HSWCD Board Meeting 5:00 pm @ USDA Service Center

September 8 Deadline to file an application for Transportation Reimbursement Program through FSA

September 15<sup>th</sup> Deadline for NRCS EQIP applications for the first Y15 ranking period

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



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