

Natural Currents

“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.”



WINTER ISSUE:

- Annual Speech and Poster Contest Announced
- National Grazing Conference
- Beaver Creek Stream Bank Restoration
- Mapping Canary Reed Grass

Board of Supervisors

- Chris Rainwater, Chair
- Jim Van Oss
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- Pete Roberts

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District Staff

- Tara Schmidt, District Manager
- Alder Seaman, Trails Coordinator
- Blaine Spellman, Invasive Plant Program

NRCS OFFERS NEW PRACTICE HIGH SEASONAL TUNNELS

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service has introduced a pilot program to field test a new practice that looks promising for local cooperators. The seasonal high tunnels, also called hoop houses, are being assessed for effectiveness in increasing overall soil and water quality by reducing nutrient and pesticide transport. One of the most attractive features of hoop houses has to be the ability to extend the growing season by 2-4 weeks on both ends. The installation of hoop houses, combined with additional conservation practices, should improve crop quality as well as quantity.

Hoop houses are not a new concept, but their popularity has increased tremendously over the past few years, particularly among market- gardeners. Through growth of farmer markets the addition of this practice can prove to be a boon for the consumer, with an increase in the availability of locally produced, healthy food in a conservation friendly way. This is particularly exciting in our northern climates.

So what exactly qualifies as a hoop house? They are seasonal polyethylene covered structures framed with arched metal. Generally the end walls are framed in to create door and ventilation areas. They differ from green houses in that they do not have heating or electrical systems. In addition to modifying the climate to create more favorable growing conditions these structures provide protection from wind and frost to seedlings early in the season. To meet the NRCS practice standards the hoop houses need to be covered with at least 6 –mil- greenhouse grade UV resistant polyethylene. Center height of the structure needs to be a minimum 6 ft, and bow spacing at a maximum of 4 ft.

Cooperators can sign up to participate for this conservation practice through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program. NRCS will work with individuals to ensure all site-specific requirements are being met. To learn more about hoop houses or to sign up for this practice contact the Homer NRCS field office.



High Tunnels, also referred as hoop houses, are becoming increasingly popular as a low cost way to increase crop productivity.

ANNUAL SPEECH AND POSTER CONTEST

Homer Soil and Water Conservation District will be sponsoring a local contest that ties in to the annual National Conservation Poster Contest, and this year's theme is: **CONSERVATION HABITATS=HEALTHY HABITATS**. The District would like to invite all District-wide elementary students to participate. Additionally we will be sponsoring a local Speech Contest for 7-12th grade students with the same theme. The theme is focused on the importance of healthy habitats in your community and your backyard. This poster contest offers students a great opportunity to provide a local voice for important conservation issues.

Cash prizes will be awarded to the posters earning 1st -3rd place in the following three categories; K-1, 2-3, 4-6. First place posters from each category will be entered into the state-wide competition, with the potential to move onward to the national level.

The posters are evaluated on the following criteria:

Conservation message (50%)

Visual effectiveness (30%)

Originality (10%)

The speech contest is open to students 7-12th grade; again cash prizes will be awarded for 1st-3rd place. First place speech contestant will be invited to the Spring AACD Conference for a shot at the state title.



For complete contest rules and entry forms please feel free to contact our office at 2325-8177 ex 106

BEAVER CREEK CULVERT REPLACEMENTS



Current crossing along Beaver Creek. This culvert will be replaced with a bridge this in the late Spring.

The Homer District is on schedule with the second phase of replacing culverts that have been identified as barriers to upstream and downstream migration of fish, restricting access to available habitat in Beaver Creek, a tributary to the Anchor River. This site had previously been identified by Alaska Department of Fish & Game as a partial barrier to juvenile. ADFG culvert inventories along with the inventories of Kenai Watershed Forum identify over 120 culverts on the Peninsula that need to be replaced.

This project is being completed in partnership with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Kenai Watershed Forum and Cook Inlet Region Corporation. The District is currently finalizing plans for the installation of a clear span bridge to replace a poorly placed culvert off Beaver Creek Rd (see photo). We hope to develop the request for proposals to implement the design and have it ready by late winter.

HSWCD CONTINUES STREAM CROSSING FIX-UPS ON THE WATERMELON TRAIL

The Homer Soil and Water Conservation District is continuing to provide improvements on the Watermelon ATV trail north of Homer. This easily accessible ATV trail offers a great connection from Homer, through the Fritz Creek Critical Habitat Area, to the Caribou Hills trail system. With recent improvements to the trailhead and parking lot for the Watermelon Trail completed by the Homer Snomads, this trail is expected to experience increased use. To better manage off-road traffic through the Critical Habitat Area, the Homer District has partnered with the Homer Snomads to complete some new trail routes.

ATV traffic had been crossing directly through the creek; consequently it has become wider and much shallower at this location. These changes to the stream dynamics cause habitat damage to important fish species, specifically Dolly Varden, coho, and chinook. With funding from the Department of Environmental Conservation's ACWA (Alaska Clean Water Actions) Program the District has completed the installation of a clear span bridge to keep ATVs out of the stream.

Now that ATV traffic is routed onto the bridge upstream, the original in-water crossing can be revegetated to improve habitat. This project will become a learning experience for a group of Homer High School students currently enrolled in the Natural Resources Technologies class. After completing a mini-streambank restoration workshop in the classroom students will have the hands-on opportunity to help restore the old Beaver Creek crossing. Signage will be installed on both sides of the crossing to remind users to stay on the bridge and off the restored banks.

STUDENTS PREP FOR ANNUAL ENVIROTHON COMPETITION

The Alaska Envirothon for High School Students will be held in Palmer in conjunction with the State FFA convention April 21-23. This year the Alaska Envirothon, part of North America's largest high school natural resource and environmental competition, is sponsored by the Palmer Soil and Water Conservation District. The Palmer District is looking for additional sponsors and donations to make this and the FFA convention the best event possible.

The competition is an all day field test consisting of Aquatics, Forestry, Wildlife, Soils and this year's current issue of protection of groundwater for agriculture and urban uses through planning. Each 5 member team will complete a 100-point, hands-on test in each section and then together solve and present their solution to a groundwater problem that they receive on site. The Governor and Commissioner of DEC are invited as guest speakers and judges.

The Department of Environmental Conservation, Division of Forestry, Dept. of Fish and Game, University of Alaska, Division of Agriculture, and USDA/NRCS have volunteered experts to assemble study materials and administer the tests. Students will be competing for awards, and the winning team will be receiving a travel stipend to compete on the national level in Fresno, California at the end of July.

Homer High has won the state competition for the past five years. Students who have participated in the past have gone on to pursue or receive degrees in Natural Resource Management, Environmental Law, Environmental Engineering, Agriculture Education, Smoke jumping, etc. The program not only emphasizes the science of natural resources but also instills entrepreneurial and leadership skills students do not receive anywhere else

NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON GRAZING LANDS

Over 1,000 grazer enthusiasts came together to attend the 4th National Conference on Grazing Lands, held December 13-16, 2009 in Reno Nevada. Representing Alaska and presenting the latest range information and technologies in the state were Rose Fosdick, Kawerak Reindeer Herder's Association, Nome; Nathan Mudd, rancher on Sitkinak Island; and Karin Sonnen, Range Specialist for the NRCS, Homer.

This conference, organized by the national GLCI, or Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative, provided an opportunity for those involved with grazing operations in every corner of the nation to come together

and present information on innovative practices that make their operations economically and ecologically sustainable. The majority of the presenters are producers, talking about their knowledge, successes, and failures with implementing ideas that have helped to make their operations successful.

Rose Fosdick and Karin Sonnen presented information on the Reindeer Industry on the Seward Peninsula, and Nathan Mudd talked about the conservation practices he has implemented with the help of EQIP, as well as the new mobile slaughter facility he has built and put into production through an NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant awarded in 2009.



Photos at right (before and after) show the effects of conservation practice implementation of prescribed grazing after 4 years on Sitkinak Island. Coastal beach areas are rested from grazing during the growing season to utilize forage during the winter months.

ANNUAL PEONY GROWERS CONFERENCE

Alaska Peony Growers Conference

Fri. & Sat.,
Feb. 19 & 20, 2010
Anchorage, Alaska

Spend time with experienced growers talking about Alaska's new cut flower industry – from laying out fields to harvesting your crop.

Jesse de la Garza
Miami

Alaska's Position in the Worldwide Peony Market

For further details, Alaska Peony Growers Association (APGA) at <http://alaskapeonies.org>, Rita Jo: 235-4969, UAF Cooperative Extension Service: 786-6300

The Alaska Peony Growers Association will be having their 4th winter conference February 19th and 20th in Anchorage. Speakers from Miami, Chicago, and Portland, along with local growers, are scheduled to talk. Topic include growers responsibility of not bringing in disease and non- native plants or invasive weeds to Alaska, growing, soils etc. The conference is always well attended. Growing paeonia for the cut flower market appears to be a very popular and lucrative opportunity for maximum return on small parcels of land. For more information www.alaskapeonies.org or call Rita Jo Shultz 907 235-4969

REED CANARY GRASS MAPPING SHOWS THE EXTENT OF THIS INVASIVE PLANT

Homer District's Natural Resource Specialist (Blaine Spellman) spent last summer coordinating several small expeditions along local anadromous streams in order to collect information on the distribution of non-native reed canary grass (RCG). Blaine, with the help of Doug Koester, floated Deep Creek with pack rafts, and walked the length of many streams, including North Fork Anchor River. In all about 75 miles of stream banks were mapped by the Homer District.

RCG is an invasive plant that poses a serious threat to local salmon runs. In the Pacific Northwest, reed canary-grass has formed dense monocultures along 100s of miles of anadromous streams. This invasive can grow into streams where it collects sediment and gradually restricts the flow of water. Altering the hydrology of anadromous streams could prevent salmon from reaching spawning habitat and/or restrict the movement of fry. Other consequences of RCG invasion include loss of native vegetation, altered food web dynamics, and impacts to flood-plain succession.



Example of a reed canary grass establishing itself in the middle of a stream.



This map shows the distribution of reed canary grass along the North Fork of the Anchor River, each dot represents an infestation averaging 100 meters in length.

Information gathered through surveys by Homer District and other agencies affiliated with the Kenai Peninsula Cooperative Weed Management Area describe the extent of this invasive grass on the Kenai Peninsula. Although common on roads and in hayfields, few people believed RCG had moved into natural ecosystems. Mile upon mile of RCG has been documented growing along the following anadromous streams of the Kenai Peninsula: North Fork of the Anchor River, Kenai River, Slikok Creek, Beaver Creek, and Bishop Creek. While this presents a challenging situation, there is hope!

We have the chance to protect many anadromous streams on the Kenai Peninsula. For instance, only a few small infestations were found on the Anchor River and Stariski Creek, and no infestations were found on Rocky River, Deep Creek, Ninilchik River, Chakok Creek, or Crooked Creek. Continued monitoring and eradication efforts will be focused towards systems that currently have minor or no known RCG infestations. With hard work and perseverance we can protect many anadromous streams from invasion by RCG and protect our invaluable natural resources.

To find out more about the various programs the Homer District is involved with visit our website at www.homerswcd.org.

UPCOMING EVENTS & DEADLINES

- January 13 HSWCD Board Meeting 5:00 @ USDA Service Center
- January 21 Kenai Peninsula Cooperative Weed Manage Area TAC Meeting
- February 10 HSWCD Board Meeting 5:00 @ USDA Service Center
- February 18-19 Alaska Peony Growers Conference—Anchorage
- March 10th Deadline for Poster Entries for the Annual Poster Contest
- April 21-23 Alaska State Environment & State FFA Convention Palmer Fair Grounds

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



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*Meeting the needs of the local
Land User*

