Homer Soil & Water Conservation District

June 2009

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."

SUMMER ISSUE:

HOMER DISTRICT LAUNCHES INVASIVE PLANT ERADICATION PROGRAMS

Invasive Cost-Share Program: Homer District has ambitious plans for the next two seasons that will assist private landowners in both developing and implementing management plans for control of non-native invasive weeds. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services' *Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program* has funded the Homer District to establish a cost-share program that will control non-native plants on private lands. To qualify for cost-share reimbursement, landowners will work with a District employee to determine the invasive species present on their property, the extent of those infestations, and the infestations' potential to threaten wildlife habitat. With this information, the Homer District will develop an integrated management plan (IPM) for the landowner to control their non-native invasive weeds. District staff will provide technical assistance to ensure efficient and cost-effective management.

The District has developed a protocol to prioritize funding, which will determine the percentage of cost-share reimbursements a potential project will be eligible to receive. This prioritization will take into account the type of non-native invasive weed on the property, the size of the infestation, the location relative to critical habitat, and the expected contributions control will have on the protection and/or restoration of wildlife habitats. Interested landowners who would like to address invasive species on their property should contact our office to schedule a site visit.

Weed Crew : In addition to the cost-share program, the Homer District has received funding through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to employ a field crew of 3-4 invasive plant technicians. These "weed-warriors" will mechanically remove invasive plants that border sensitive wildlife habitats and enhance early-detection and rapid response (EDRR) efforts across the Kenai Peninsula. The weed-warrior crew will collaborate with Cooperative Weed Management Area partners to provide on-the-ground invasive weed control, inventorying, and mapping of new invasive weed infestations across the Peninsula. This summer's work load for the crew will be targeting infestations for control, focusing on species such as white sweetclover, common tansy, reed canary grass, canada thistle, japanese knotweed, and perennial sowthistle.

This "weed warrior" crew will focus on detection of new invaders on the Kenai Peninsula. New invaders are uncommon species that have a high potential of impacting natural ecosystems.

The Orange Invasion

Hawkweed in your Lawn and Garden

Summer is here and all around we see faces full of smiles and hear grand aspirations for lawns and gardens. Not to dampen anyone's optimism, but we are also observing the first sprigs of this year's non-native invasive weeds. HSWCD does care about controlling non-native species because they represent one of the world's largest impacts to biodiversity and genuinely threaten Alaska's unique ecosystems and subsistence resources.

Some invasive weeds are more costly to the environment and to your pocketbook then others. Orange hawkweed (*Hieracium aurantiacum*) is a particular menace here in Homer. Easily identified, orange hawkweed is the only weed in Alaska with an orange flower. Hawkweed is a non-native herb that was brought to Alaska to give color to home gardens. Unfortunately, hawkweed has escaped cultivation and is now spreading like wildfire on lands that surround Homer. For instance, several acre sized patches of hawkweed have been reported on Skyline Drive and Diamond Ridge. Smaller spot infestations are popping up all over lawns in Homer. Once established, hawkweed can quickly develop into monoculture, out competing turf grass and native plants alike.

The typical hawkweed invasion goes like this, "I saw a beautiful orange flower in my lawn and decided to mow around it. In one year that small orange spot grew to a patch and I began to get worried. I mowed the patch and then it got worse. What do I do?"

Controlling hawkweed is difficult because it spreads underground via rhizomes and can re-sprout from impossibly small root fragments. As a result, if you try to control hawkweed by mowing alone, it only makes the problem worse. You can pick the flower heads to prevent them from going to seed but those pesky rhizomes will keep spreading and choking out desirable vegetation. Because hawkweed threatens our local ecosystems and is difficult to get rid of it HSWCD developed a management strategy to control this pest.

In 2007, Homer SWCD worked cooperatively with a homeowner on Diamond Ridge whose lawn was overrun with hawkweed. After consulting with experts, we decided an integrated management approach was best for controlling hawkweed infestations. Our approach involved application of fertilizer, broadleaf herbicide, turf-mix grass seed, and regular mowing. The application of fertilizer, turf-mix, and mowing were done to stimulate

Orange hawkweed is a non-native plant that is rapidly spreading throughout Homer.

grass growth and increase grass competition with hawkweed. The broadleaf herbicide targeted and controlled the hawkweed and had minimal impacts to the burgeoning grass population. After two years, the landowner reported that 98% of the hawkweed in his lawn was controlled.

Controlling invasive species takes vigilance and sustained effort. Gaining the upper hand on a large hawkweed infestation will likely take 3 to 5 years of hard work. However, the reward means protecting your lawn and garden from invasion. Furthermore, managing weeds in your lawn will help prevent invasion into sensitive ecosystems.

For more information on HSWCD's hawkweed control program, please contact our office. Before applying any herbicide please contact us or the Cooperative Extension Service for recommendations. Remember, too much herbicide can be a terrible thing for Alaska's fish, wildlife, and your families well being.

Snow Survey School In the Homer Deomstration Forest

In early April, employees from the Homer Soil and Water Conservation District and the Homer Field Office teamed up to teach 25 local 3rd graders about snow survey efforts in the Homer area. The kids took a field trip to the Homer Demonstration Forest and hiked around the interpretive nature trail on snow shoes. One stop along that trail is a snow survey course, where District Manager Tara Schmidt and Range Conservationist Karin Sonnen met the class and discussed the importance of knowing information about the snowpack.

Karin Sonnen, NRCS Range Specialist, demonstrates snow survey sampling techniques to a group of 3rd grade students from West Homer Elementary School

The kids learned about the snow sampling kit including the special scale that measures inches of water, and how to sample the snow to discover the amount of water there, waiting to melt in the spring. They each had an opportunity to take a sample of the snow, read the scale, and determine the equivalent amount of water.

Additional topics discussed were the scientific process and the importance of multiple samples and repeatability, how a thin layer of volcanic ash affects the snow, wildlife needs involving access to feed in the wintertime, and melt water flow and its results effecting soils, plants, reservoirs, rivers, and fish habitat.

Homer FFA Students Travel to DC for Leadership Training

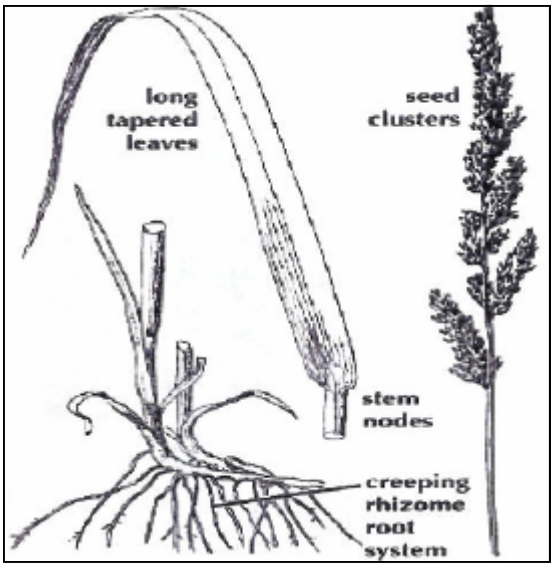
Homer FFA Chapter recently sent 4 of its members to attend the National FFA Organization's Washington Leadership Conference. This workshop was an all expense trip earned through the teams second place finish in the Natural Resources competition last fall at the National FFA Convention. The conference is a five-day event that trains FFA members to make a positive impact in their school, local community, state and country. Civic participation and the value of community service is a focal point of the training.

Attending were Homer High School students Ben Blue, Corrine Ogle, and Connections student, Lilli Connor and alumni Katie Connor. In addition to 5 intensive days of workshops and training sessions there was some time to visit out National landmarks and outstanding museums.

FAA Advisor Al Poindexter with State Officers Corrine Ogle and Ben Blue on a recent trip to Washington DC

Developing a Management Program For Reed Canary Grass

This summer the Homer District will be completing a 3-year EPA funded project that both assesses the extent of reed canary grass on the Kenai Peninsula and determines an effective treatment for reed canary grass control. This invasive was first introduced to the State of Alaska as a forage crop. It was originally viewed as a beneficial crop because of its ability to grow in wet soils. However, reed canary grass is an aggressive non-native plant that has spread into wetlands, rivers and other wet areas across the Kenai Peninsula. Since this invasive has a high rate of transpiration, reed canary grass can dry ponds and severely reduce stream-flow. As reed canary grass has been spotted growing along small salmon streams on the Peninsula, Homer District is concerned about the potential of this invasive disrupting salmon passage and reducing spawning beds.



What does reed canary grass look like? Stems can be 2-6 ft tall, leaf blades can be 3/4 inch wide and up to 1 1/2 ft long. Reed canary grass stays greener into the fall than most native grasses making it easier to identify in the later seasons.

Efforts will be spent this summer mapping this grass along our salmon bearing steams and their tributaries. The Homer District is also focusing on developing an integrated pest management plan (IPM) to best manage this invasive plant. IPM is an environmentally sensitive approach to pest management, utilizing a combination of control techniques that integrate comprehensive information on the life cycles of the pest and their interactions with the environment. Last summer we set up several test plots utilizing different control techniques.

Some sites were simply mowed, some others were mowed and sprayed with an herbicide, and some sites were covered with black tarp to block out all sunlight. Though it's a little early to definitively determine the best control technique, results so far are looking promising.

Homer Soil Survey Crews Map it up in SW Alaska

The Homer Soil Survey office has had a busy and productive early summer. Currently the three soil scientists and three summer hires (botanists) are working on two projects, the Kodiak Archipelago soil survey and the Nushagak-Mulchatna Watershed soil survey. The big news on the Kodiak survey this summer is the welcome addition of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge to the list of cooperators. In July and August the survey crew will map 262,000 acres of Native and Federal Refuge lands in the Karluk and Sturgeon River watersheds on Southwest Kodiak. This area is important brown bear habitat and supports important salmon runs. The maps produced, showing the distribution of soil and vegetative landscape components will provide a sound basis for the land managers of this region to make good land use decisions.

Mapping on the Kodiak Soil Survey

Calvin and Coyle Trail to get Facelift

The Homer District celebrated National Trails Day this year with a ribbon cutting ceremony at the site of the new trailhead for the Calvin and Coyle Nature Trail. Thanks to funding from the State of Alaska Recreational Trails Grant the Homer District, in collaboration with the Kachemak Heritage Land Trust, will be giving this trail new life.

This once popular community resource has fallen off the local map for accessible day hikes due to a combination of wind throw from the spruce bark beetle infestation, wet soils and lack of general maintenance funding. Trial improvements scheduled for this summer include a trail re-route to drier ground, installation of two-plank boardwalk to cross the wet areas, and an addition of over 1/2 mile of new trail. New trail will be built on the Buxton property, between Paul Banks Elementary and the existing nature trail, a parcel that has been donated to the Land Trust since the original Calvin and Coyle Trail was established. This trail ends at the wildlife viewing platform at the edge of Beluga Lake.

Once trail construction is complete the plan is to install interpretative signs along the nature trail focusing on local ecology. The Kachemak Heritage Land Trust will work with staff from Paul Bank's Elementary School to tailor interpretative displays toward elementary age students..

City Council member Dennis Novak, with the aid of Zoe, Katie and Leah Coyle cut the ribbon to celebrate trail work along the Calvin and Coyle Trail to commence this summer.

The Homer district will be looking for individuals who would like to volunteer some time on this project; if you are interested in community service projects please contact our office.

Beaver Creek Bridge Set For Installation

District Supervisors Chris Rainwater and Pete Roberts flagging a suitable location for a bridge along the Watermelon Trail.

The HSWCD has been awarded a grant from the Department of Environmental Conservation ACWA program to continue trail improvements at the Beaver Creek crossing on the Watermelon Trail off Ohlson Mtn Road. ATV traffic has degraded this crossing, causing damage to important juvenile fish habitat. The District has lined up a bridge for installation upstream of the current crossing location, and is in the process of designing bridge approaches. The SNOMADS, a local motorized trail user group, have helped make the project possible by donating their time and expertise in finding and preparing the bridge structure. The District plans to install the bridge and do a streambank restoration of the old crossing. Our

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

UPCOMING EVENTS & DEADLINES

July 10th Signup opens for Invasive Plant Cost Share Program

July 14th HSWCD Board Meeting 5:00 @ USDA Service Center

August 21-23 Kenai Peninsula State Fair

NRCS has a continuous sign up period for both the EQIP and WHIP programs. The next round of application review and funding will be December of 2009.

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

Homer Soil & Water Conservation District

4014 Lake Street, Suite 201
Homer, Alaska 99603

Phone: 907-235-8177 x 5
Fax: 907-235-2364
Email: hswcd@xyz.net
www.homerswcd.org

Meeting the needs of the local Land User