CONSERVING NATURAL RESOURCES IN ALASKA

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Who We Are

Inspired by a shared desire for a healthy environment, NRCS collaborates with tribes, villages, farmers, ranchers, and other individuals and groups to protect natural resources on private lands.

Working side-by-side with our customers, we identify natural resource concerns, such as wildlife habitat, water quality and fish passage, soil erosion, and lowland degradation. Together, we develop unique conservation plans for restoring and protecting resources.

Funds to implement these plans are made available from supplemental appropriations (EWP) and Farm Bill programs (EQIP, WHIP, CSP) that share the cost of conservation for the benefit of all.

NRCS in Alaska helps maintain nutritious local food, wildlife habitat for subsistence lifestyles, and a healthy ecosystem.

NRCS Photo

A Wild River's Wicked Erosion

NRCS is Helping Stabilize the Yukon River While Protecting Infrastructure in Alaska Native Bush Communities

Erosion on the wild, remote Yukon River is wrecking havoc in the region's 76 Bush villages. To alleviate the problem, NRCS Alaska worked to stabilize riverbanks -- saving infrastructure, improving water quality by keeping soil and debris out of the river, and protecting habitat for five species of salmon.

Using the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP), NRCS Alaska and partners achieved the following in 2009 and 2010:

- Preserved village infrastructure including a school, sewage lagoon, electrical lines, and a historic cabin. NRCS also provided emergency access to an air strip for Medevac services.
- Developed a working relationship with previously unreached Bush communities. More than 11 percent of tribes in the US are within the Yukon watershed. All 2009 and 2010 Alaska EWP contracts were with Alaska Native partners.
- Contributed to the environmental health of the third longest river in North America. The watershed, about twice the size of California, supports moose, caribou, mountain sheep, snowshoe hare, beaver, and migratory waterfowl and is home to the longest inland run of Pacific salmon.
- Supported food security for the region's subsistence lifestyle; the Yukon and its surrounding lands provide more than 50 percent of the food for the area's Bush village inhabitants.
- Contributed more than half a million dollars to Stevens Village, Fort Yukon, Eagle, Tanana, Tanacross, and Emmonak, funding jobs and equipment.

EWP is designed to relieve imminent hazards to life and property caused by floods, fires, windstorms, heavy rains, and other natural occurrences.

Restoring Tundra

Issue: Protecting Sensitive Habitat by Repairing and Hardening Mud-Rutted Trails

What NRCS Alaska is doing:

Hardened subsistence trails keep four wheelers from further damaging wet tundra areas and mud ruts from expanding to the point of fragmenting habitat. With a hardened trail in place, the often-frozen tundra has an opportunity to heal, waterfowl nests are protected from crushing wheels, and access to traditional hunting and gathering grounds is maintained. The Yupik community of Hooper Bay embraced their trail, educating villagers through posters and a trail head sign describing how staying on the trail will save the vulnerable tundra and wildlife living there.

Program used: EQIP and WHIP

Above: Tundra degraded by ATVs. Left: GeoBlock provided a hardened trail, allowing the fragile tundra to heal from unconfined ATVs.

Building Conservation Capacity in Tribes

Issue: Communicating with 229 Federally Recognized Tribes in Alaska about Conservation on Village, Corporation, and Allotment Property

What NRCS Alaska is doing:

NRCS is guiding the development of new tribal conservation districts. Working in a government to government agreement, tribal conservation districts provide the foundation for long-term, seven generation, conservation planning on tribal lands. NRCS Alaska is working with three tribal conservation districts and assisting three more to become established. The current districts are Asa'carsarmiut, Kuigglugmiut, and Tyonek, based in the communities of Mountain Village, Kwethluk, and Tyonek, respectfully. An association of tribal conservation districts is also expected to be organized in the next year.

Tribal Conservation Districts

Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack singed the nation to nation agreement instating the Kuigglugmiut Tribal Conservation District while visiting Bethel, Alaska.

Healthy Wildlife Habitat Equals Healthy Villages

Issue: Managing Wildlife Habitat for Subsistence Lifestyles

What NRCS Alaska is doing:

Beans are to berries and beef is to moose like what subsistence is to commercial lifestyles. A farmer will raise beans and beef but a subsistence based village will pick berries and hunt game. Both means go to the same end: supplying food. Alaska Natives use subsistence the same way western cultures use farming, so NRCS in Alaska recognizes subsistence as a method to qualify for Farm Bill Programs and uses the programs to improve and conserve the resources required to maintain a healthy subsistence way of life. For example, the practice wildlife habitat management is used to improve browse for moose.

Program used: EWP, EQIP and WHIP

Children in Kongiganak smiled for the camera when NRCS employees were staying in the village for an EWP project.

Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA)

is the core approach NRCS has used successfully for 75 years to reach out to American landowners. Technical Assistance is the USDA's way of helping care for privately owned land, water and other natural resources.

More than 70 percent of America and nearly eight percent (47 million acres) of Alaska is owned privately. Alaska NRCS was allocated $2.4 million for CTA in 2010.

Technical Planning and Design:

- Agronomy
- Soils
- Engineering
- Rangeland
- Forestry
- Wetlands

Project Coordination:

- State Environmental Regulation
- Archeological Permits
- Necessary Environmental Consultations
- Professional Coordination

Cost Share Programs for Working Lands:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides assistance for a broad spectrum of conservation practices that promotes agricultural production, forest management and environmental quality as compatible national goals.*

Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) improves wildlife habitat on private agricultural, forest and Tribal lands.*

Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) uses 6 percent of EQIP, WHIP and CSP funds for an integrative, focused approach.

*In Alaska, subsistence activities qualify like agricultural activities for Farm Bill Programs.

Easement and Long-Term Rental:

Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) helps keep farm and ranch land in agriculture.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) restores wetlands and wetland habitat on marginal ag land.

Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) helps landowners restore and protect grassland, rangeland and pastureland, and maintain viable ranching operations.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) pays farmers to plant trees, grass and brush on highly erodible/environmentally sensitive cropland. NRCS provides technical assistance only.

Watershed/Community-Wide Programs:

Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP) undertakes emergency measures on watersheds damaged by fire, flood and other natural calamities to prevent erosion and runoff that could endanger lives and property.

Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) improves economics and quality of life in an area through prudent use and conservation of natural resources.

Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) provides conservation measures and flood retarding structures in authorized watersheds.

Stewardship:

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) encourages producers to embrace long-term comprehensive conservation to maintain and improve existing practices.

Bush Alaska

Getting From Here to There

Alaska is big, bigger than Texas, California, and Montana combined. From the capitol city of Juneau to the Arctic hub, Barrow, is 1,100 miles, a little further than it is from Denver to Seattle at 1,020 miles.

More than 80 percent of communities in Alaska are not connected to a highway or road system, according to the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities. Another way to think of it is, only between 10 and 20 percent of the state is accessible by road. To get to most places, airplane, boat, or snow machine is the method of transportation.

NRCS maintains 16 offices in Alaska, eight of which are located off the road system. NRCS is dedicated to serving the rural populations of all areas across the vast state.

Relative size of Alaska to contiguous US

Working in the Bush

NRCS has offices located in the Bush villages of Aniak, Bethel, Dillingham Fort Yukon and Nome. Here is what NRCS employees say about putting conservation on the ground in the Bush:

"Developing a rapport with my clients is the first, and the most important step for achieving NRCS conservation in Bush Alaska. It's not about programs, it's about people."

"More than 50 percent of my clients speak English as a second language and in the Yupik language there are no words for resource management. In the Native culture it was and is done intrinsically. The change in culture drives the need for NRCS assistance."

"The most challenging aspect of conservation in rural Alaska is changing your perspective. In this vast landscape minor changes cause significant resource concerns."

Yukon River Overview

The Yukon River watershed includes Denali, North American's tallest peak at 20,000 feet and the Yukon River Delta, one of the flattest and wettest areas on Earth.

Temperatures in the Yukon Territory range from negative 60 in the winter to 90 in the summer. The human population of the watershed is sparse, with approximately 110,000 people spread out over 328,000 square miles. Moose, caribou, mountain sheep, wolf, wood bison, black,grizzly and polar bear, ducks, geese and many other animals live there.

Other Major Rivers

Alaskan waterways historically and still provide subsistence foods, transportation, and migratory waterfowl habitat. Bush Alaska livelihood depends upon rivers, specifically, the Nushagak/Mulchatna and Kuskokwim in the southwest, Koyukuk, Kobuk, and Noatak in the northwest, Tanana and Yukon in the interior, and Colville on the North Slope.

2010 Farm Bill Program Funding

NRCS Program	Dollars Obligated	Number of Contracts/ Easements
Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)	$1.3 million	14
Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	$8 million	142
Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)	$48,000	14
Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)	$2.6 million	21

The dollar figures reflect Financial Assistance (FA) provided directly to landowners. Technical Assistance (TA) funding was also received by the Agency for professional planning and expertise to help carry out the conservation activities. Obligations as of 10/01/2010; 12/31/2010

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