

A Brief Report on the Alaska Invasive Plants Project

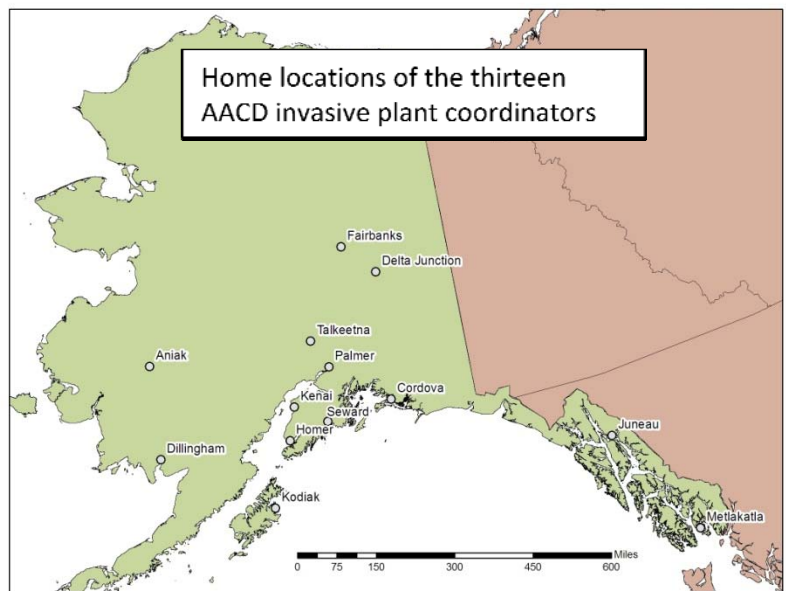
A \$1.14 million Recovery Act grant from the USDA Forest Service to Alaska Association of Conservation Districts

In September of 2009, the Alaska Association of Conservation Districts entered into a cooperative agreement with the US Forest Service to accept \$1.14 million to implement the Alaska Invasive Plants Project. The overall goal of any Recovery Act funds is to create jobs and equip those hired with the skills and training needed to move into better, more permanent employment.

The purpose of this project was to oversee and coordinate invasive plant programs throughout Alaska via coordinator positions stationed in Soil and Water Conservation Districts. IP coordinators received training in issues related to invasive plant surveying, control and management, as well as training in public outreach methods and grant writing. Supported by a roving weed crew, the coordinators conducted invasive plant surveys, control, education and outreach projects in their regions. The purpose was to generate high-quality jobs, with high priority placed on training so that these jobs would function as springboards to future employment.

In addition, AACD contracted the Alaska Natural Heritage Program through the University of Alaska to conduct the second phase of the Alaska invasiveness ranking project. The ANHP ranking system has provided land managers, agencies and the general public with a valuable tool for invasive plant management prioritization. Expanding the list of species screened by this system strengthens our ability to protect and manage Alaska's natural areas and resources.

A total of 18 people have been employed through this project: 14 for a year or more, and three more as a summer roving work crew. In the course of the project, a project manager, 13 invasive plant coordinators, and a research analyst were hired and trained. The staff were scattered around the state, as shown on this map. Locations were: Wasilla, Palmer, Upper Susitna, Kenai, Kodiak, Homer, Seward, Aniak, Dillingham, Metlakatla, Juneau, Cordova, Fairbanks and Delta Junction.



The project has been successful beyond our expectations. More than 2,000 students and 5,000 adults were provided with information about invasive plants, their effect on Alaska's natural habitat, and how to control them. Nearly 1,000 volunteers worked on remediation projects. Over 1,000 bags of weeds were removed around the state, and over 100 acres were treated by various means, including pulling, digging, spraying, burning, tarping and whacking. Over 5,000 acres were surveyed for invasive plant infestations, and thousands of new records were provided to the Alaska Natural Heritage Program for inclusion in its database. We established relationships in numerous rural villages, including two that are developing distinct Native conservation districts, and provided training and remediation plans through

the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and in the community of Tyonek. We provided written work plans for numerous private and public property owners and managers, including a community garden, several municipalities, an arboretum, a number of farmers, and many others.

Of the 15 regular employees hired, eight were unemployed at the time they were hired, and another four were underemployed. At this time, four of the 15 have secured funding for future employment and two others have decided to pursue other plans. We have provided grant-writing training to all employees and are encouraging them to pursue new sources of funds to expand the work on identifying and reducing invasive plants in Alaska. Our goal is to replace the 15 full-time and 3 part-time jobs we will lose at the end of this grant with 30 new jobs in Alaska. We are hopeful that we will find funding for at least half our goal by the time most of the ARRA-funded employees go off payroll at the end of March.

Although we are proud of the work we have accomplished with this grant, we believe that the field work and outreach successes will be ephemeral unless the work is followed up for at least two more years. Many of the plants we worked to reduce or eliminate are known to be resilient and to require follow-up treatment for three to five years, some even longer. Unless this work is taken up by others or funded by similar projects, we fear that what we have gained in the fight against invasive plants this past year will be lost.

In addition to continuation of the work funded by this grant, we see another pressing concern that is in its infancy in Alaska: the identification and remediation of aquatic invasives. The discovery last summer of a serious infestation in the Chena Slough near Fairbanks, and the anecdotal reports of aquatic invasives in other areas of Alaska bring us grave concern. We hope that, at a minimum, a comprehensive statewide survey for aquatic invasives is begun in the very near future.



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