

Special Environmental Concerns

12. Natural Areas

Authority: [7 CFR §650.23](#); [GM 190.410.23](#)

Natural areas are defined as land or water units where natural conditions are maintained insofar as possible. Natural conditions usually result from allowing ordinary physical and biological processes to operate with a minimum of human intervention. Manipulations may be required on natural areas to maintain or restore features that the areas were established to protect.

Natural areas may be designated areas of Federal government, non-Federal government, or privately controlled land. Designation may be formal, as provided for under Federal regulations for areas of Federal land to be administered as natural areas, or by foundations or conservation organizations specifically created to acquire and maintain natural areas. Designation may be informal in the case of private landowners who designate a specific area as a natural area and manage it accordingly. Several professional societies concerned with renewable natural resources encourage establishment of natural areas withdrawn from economic uses and recognition of natural areas maintained and managed in economic enterprises.

Natural areas are established and maintained for a variety of purposes including:

1. Furthering science and education. Natural areas provide sites for research and outdoor classrooms for study of plant and animal communities in environments with particular ecological conditions.
2. Monitoring the surrounding environment. Natural areas serve as gauges against which to evaluate changes in land use, vegetation, animal life, air quality, or other environmental values.
3. Providing recreation attractions. Natural areas are valued by many people for their scenic, wild, and undisturbed character but must be protected, as needed, to prevent disturbance or alteration of the resources.
4. Preserving unique values. Natural areas may be established to protect scenic, biologic, geologic, or paleontologic features.
5. Serving as a genetic base for native plants and animals. Natural areas may be established to preserve examples of land and water ecosystems with their full range of genetic diversity of native plants and animals including threatened and endangered species.

Coordination and Implementation

NRCS employees providing technical assistance to land users must inform them about the impact their decisions may have on adjacent or nearby natural areas. Land users will be encouraged to consult with concerned agencies, societies, and individuals to arrive at mutually satisfactory land use and treatment.