

Hydric Soil Interpretations

In this section, hydric soils are defined and described. Soils classified as hydric are listed in the table: "Hydric Soil Interpretations - Hydric Soils List".

The three essential characteristics of wetlands are hydrophytic vegetation, hydric soils, and wetland hydrology (Cowardin and others, 1979; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1987; National Research Council, 1995; Tiner, 1985). Criteria for each of the characteristics must be met for areas to be identified as wetlands. Undrained hydric soils that have natural vegetation should support a dominant population of ecological wetland plant species. Hydric soils that have been converted to other uses should be capable of being restored to wetlands.

Hydric soils are defined by the National Technical Committee for Hydric Soils (NTCHS) as soils that formed under conditions of saturation, flooding, or ponding long enough during the growing season to develop anaerobic conditions in the upper part (Federal Register, 1994). These soils are either saturated or inundated long enough during the growing season to support the growth and reproduction of hydrophytic vegetation.

The NTCHS definition identifies general soil properties that are associated with wetness. In order to determine whether a specific soil is a hydric soil or nonhydric soil, however, more specific information, such as information about the depth and duration of the water table, is needed. Thus, criteria that identify those estimated soil properties unique to hydric soils have been established (Federal Register, 1995). These criteria are used to identify a phase of a soil series that normally is associated with wetlands. The criteria used are selected estimated soil properties that are described in "Soil Taxonomy" (USDA, 1999) and "Keys to Soil Taxonomy" (USDA, 1998) and in the "Soil Survey Manual" (USDA, 1993).

If soils are wet enough for a long enough period to be considered hydric, they should exhibit certain properties that can be easily observed in the field. These visible properties are indicators of hydric soils. The indicators used to make onsite determinations of hydric soils in Alabama are specified in "Field Indicators of Hydric Soils in the United States" (Hurt and others, 1996).

Hydric soils are identified by examining and describing the soil to a depth of about 20 inches. This depth may be greater if determination of an appropriate indicator so requires. It is always recommended that soils be excavated and described to the depth necessary for an understanding of the redoximorphic processes. Then, using the completed soil descriptions, soil scientists can compare the soil features required by each indicator and specify which indicators have been matched with the conditions observed in the soil. The soil can be identified as a hydric soil if at least one of the approved indicators is present.

Map units in the Hydric Soil Interpretations table meet the definition of hydric soils and, in addition, have at least one of the hydric soil indicators. This list can help in planning land uses; however, onsite investigation is recommended to determine the hydric soils on a specific site (National Research Council, 1995; Hurt and others, 1996).

Hydric Soil Interpretations (cont.)

Map units that are made up of hydric soils may have small areas, or inclusions, of nonhydric soils in the higher positions on the landform, and map units made up of nonhydric soils may have inclusions of hydric soils in the lower positions on the landform.

These map units, in general, do not meet the definition of hydric soils because they do not have one of the hydric soil indicators. A portion of these map units, however, may include hydric soils. Onsite investigation is recommended to determine whether hydric soils occur and the location of the included hydric soils.