NRCS Improves Soils Data for Growing Customer Base

On Jan. 14, 2014, the USDA-NRCS updated soil data for each of the 3,265 soil survey areas mapped over the last 118 years. This massive effort took 15 months of programming that moved the many databases to a new data structure as well as updated all software to provide more efficient and cost-effective systems for future soil survey enhancements. The spatial (soil polygons) and tabular (physical and chemical properties) data for all soil survey areas are available free from Web Soil Survey (WSS). This is the first major update of software and data since WSS came online in August 2005.

Improvements to the spatial data include a complete spatial soil survey boundary layer and a map unit polygon layer with no gaps or overlays within the continental United States. This is a major accomplishment in the agency’s desire to move to a truly seamless SSURGO spatial database. The National Soil Survey Center’s GIS and digitizing unit staff improved the quality assurance procedures and applications to help eliminate spatial errors. Customers can now be assured that soils information is complete for use in spatial analysis.

USDA-NRCS has recently updated soil data for each of the 3,265 soil survey areas mapped over the last 118 years. This release also includes the first set of soil survey Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) update projects. This “harmonization” effort is the initial phase of the soil survey update process. The map units are evaluated on a regional scale identifying commonalities with the intent of improving soil data quality necessary to bring the more than 100 years of data to a common standard. This update process allows soil data to flow seamlessly across political boundaries, such as counties. Customers will begin to see the improvement with this release of the soils data as the map units transcend county and state boundaries. State soil scientists have exported 3,265 soil surveys to WSS. Each soil survey now contains a full complement of national interpretations, giving users the ability to analyze interpretations regionally, in multiple states, or across the United States.

Web Soil Survey now provides a tool to track updates for specific soil survey areas. Individuals interested in this feature can go visit WSS, click on “Subscribe” in the menu bar, and follow the online directions. Individuals interested in soil-related issues may subscribe to topics using a free subscription service called GovDelivery. For questions on using GovDelivery or WSS, e-mail soilshotline@lin.usda.gov.