

Priority Conservation Area Evaluation

French Creek Wildlife Management Area

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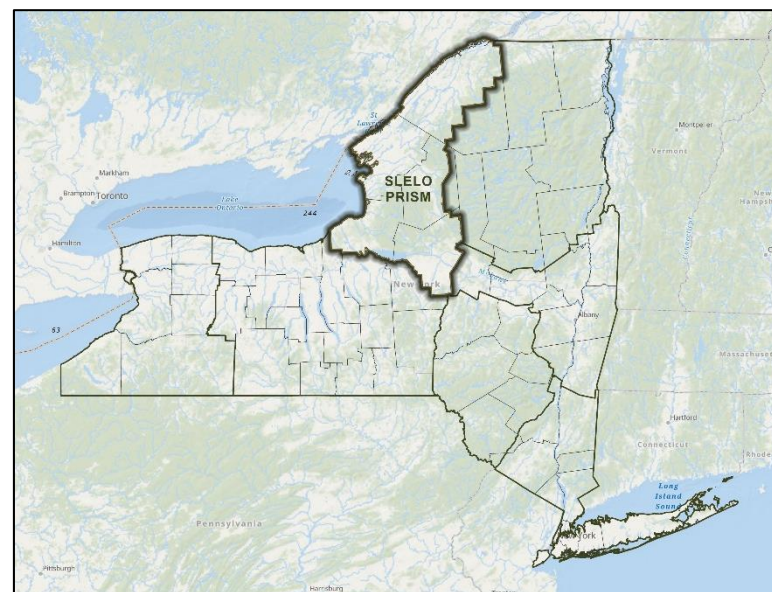
Introduction

The St. Lawrence Eastern Lake Ontario Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management (SLELO PRISM) serves as one of New York State's eight PRISMs and is hosted by The Nature Conservancy. The SLELO PRISM region encompasses 7,600 square miles and includes all or part of five counties (Map 1).

The mission of the SLELO PRISM is to protect native habitats, biodiversity, natural areas, parks and refuges, habitats, waterbodies, farmland, and open space by using a collaborative and integrated approach to invasive species management. The emphasis of these activities is on prevention, early detection, rapid response, ecological restoration, and education.

Due to the expansive nature of the PRISM and the high number of invasive species present in the region, SLELO PRISM partners focus invasive species management efforts on sites that are ecologically significant or have a high conservation value. In addition, sites that are seed banks, vectors, or that pose a proximity threat to high-value sites are all factors involved in determining site-based management on both public and private lands. The SLELO partnership has named these sites [Priority Conservation Areas \(PCAs\)](#). Specifically, PCA's are viewed as "sites that have ecological importance such as unique habitat, grassland, Alvar, wetland, dune, freshwater spawning area, fen, bog, etc. and are often host to a rare, threatened or endangered species."

Invasive species survey and management work at PCAs is further refined to areas where human activities or site conditions increase the probability of an invasive species being introduced and/or becoming established – known as **Highly Probable Areas (HPAs)**. Examples for HPAs in aquatic areas include boat launches, fishing access sites, and coves with shallow slow-



Map 1. Location of SLELO PRISM in New York State.

moving waters, while HPAs in terrestrial areas include trailheads, parking areas, and campgrounds.

The purpose of this priority conservation area evaluation is to summarize select measures of conservation significance within the PCA and to objectively assess SLELO's progress toward invasive species prevention, survey, and management goals. The evaluation includes an overview of a respective PCA's conservation significance; a summary of invasive species distribution and abundance, including a quantitative analysis of management progress; and recommendations for future work. Summaries of invasive species distribution and management progress are compiled with data collected by SLELO PRISM staff and contractors, supplemented by public data from the iMapInvasives database. Survey and management activities conducted by partners and not reported to the iMapInvasives database are not included in this assessment.

About this PCA – French Creek Wildlife Management Area

French Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is a NYSDEC managed property in the Town of Clayton, Jefferson County. The 2,300-acre parcel is primarily used for wildlife-dependent recreation such as hunting, fishing and bird watching. French Creek is navigable by small rowboats, canoes, and kayaks and the remainder of the property can be accessed by foot (NYSDEC).

French Creek WMA is comprised of diverse landcover types including open meadows, hardwood uplands, wetlands, and open water. Approximately 98% of the PCA is natural landcover (NLCD, 2019). The mean elevation of French Creek WMA PCA is 261 feet and the majority of the PCA is classified as a low elevation loam, silt/clay, and calcareous soil types.

French Creek WMA was nominated as a SLELO PCA in 2013 and includes approximately six terrestrial and five aquatic HPAs (Map 2). The PCA was surveyed by SLELO staff/contractors in 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018, and 2021.



BY THE NUMBERS

PCA STATS	SURVEY STATS	MANAGEMENT STATS
2,300+ ACRES IN THE PCA 98% NATURAL LANDCOVER 70% OF PCA IN RCN* 148,692 mt OF STORED CARBON 9 KNOWN RARE SPECIES OR COMMUNITIES	11 HPAs 6 TERRESTRIAL 5 AQUATIC 7.1 AVERAGE ACRES SURVEYED PER VISIT 14 KNOWN INVASIVE SPECIES (4 AQUATIC + 10 TERRESTRIAL) 9 SLELO TIERED SPECIES (3 AQUATIC + 6 TERRESTRIAL)	0 TIER SPECIES UNDER MANAGEMENT N/A TOTAL SLELO MANAGEMENT ACTIONS SINCE 2012 N/A AVERAGE ACRES MANAGED PER VISIT N/A REDUCTION IN EXTENT AT MANAGED SITES

PCA SCORE	Score is based on the PCA's ecological attributes and current progress towards invasive species management goals. Primary drivers influencing the score at this PCA include:
C	(+) Average terrestrial resilience (+) Limited distribution of target invasive species * <small>* No invasive species management underway. Score incorporates RCD scores only</small>

Conservation Significance and Natural Features

The following section provides an overview of select characteristics – such as terrestrial resilience, carbon storage, and rare species and communities – that lend to this PCA's conservation value.

Terrestrial Resilience

The Nature Conservancy has identified a network of lands with unique topographies, geologies, and other characteristics that can withstand the impacts of climate change. The **resilient and connected network (RCN)** identifies where plant and animal species have the best chance to adapt in a changing climate (Anderson et al., 2016). Multiple factors contribute to a location's overall resilience, including:

- **Landscape Diversity** – microhabitats and climate gradients available within a given area. The persistence of species increases in areas with high landscape diversity.
- **Local Connectedness** – the number of barriers and degree of fragmentation within a given area. A permeable (or connected) landscape promotes resilience by facilitating species movements.

The attributes of climate resilient lands can be degraded by invasive plants and/or forest pests and pathogens. Approximately 70% of the terrestrial environment within French Creek WMA is included in the resilient and connected land network (Figure 1). French Creek WMA PCA has **average terrestrial resilience, local connectedness, and landscape diversity**, indicating capacity to maintain species diversity, movement, and ecological function as the climate changes (Figure 2). For background information on this data, see Appendix A.

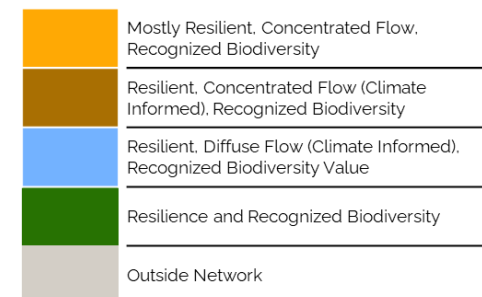
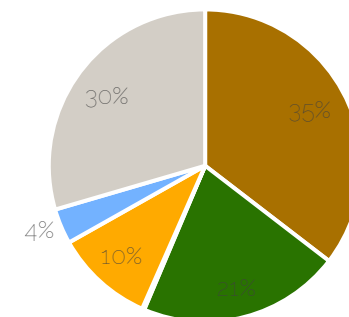


Figure 1. Percent of French Creek WMA located in The Nature Conservancy's resilient and connected land network.

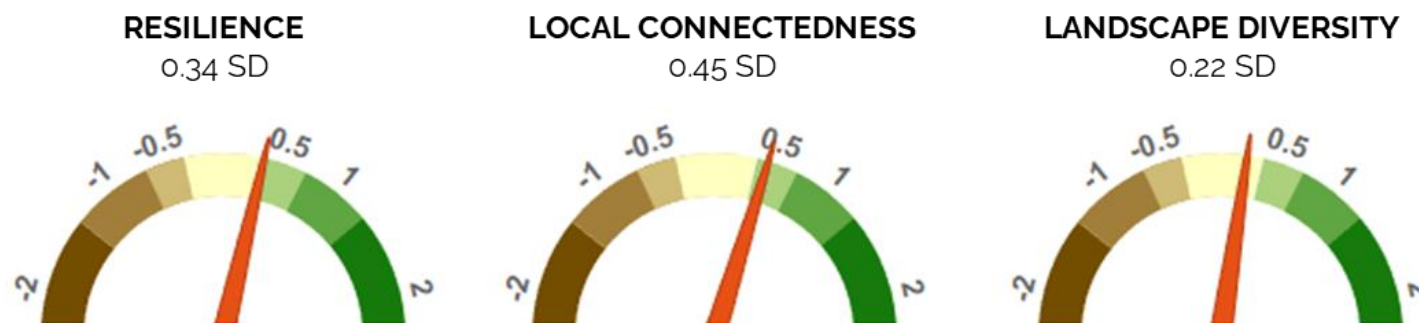
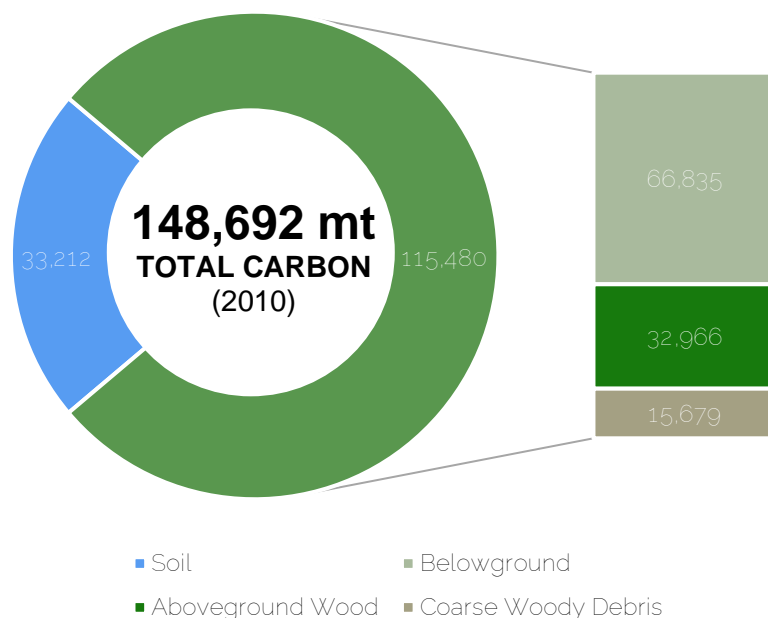


Figure 2. Site resilience, local connectedness, and landscape diversity scores for French Creek WMA PCA. Scores are expressed as the standard deviation above or below the average score.

Carbon Benefits

Climate change is driven, in part, by increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere from human sources. Forests are an effective means to sequester (i.e. store) carbon. Through the process of photosynthesis, trees pull CO₂ from the air and bind it in their tissues as branches, roots, etc. Forests also sequester and store carbon through their soil. Conservation or improved management actions that aim to increase carbon storage and/or avoid carbon release are an important component of a natural climate solutions strategy. It's estimated that in the United States, conservation, restoration, and management could support sequestration of 21% of net annual emissions (Fargione et al., 2018). Unfortunately, tree damage or death caused by invasive forest pests or diseases can reduce sequestration and storage capacity. Based on an analysis of National Forest Inventory Plots, forests impacted by insect disturbances sequestered 69% less carbon than trees with no disturbance (Quirion et al., 2021). In addition, the presence of terrestrial invasive plants has been documented to reduce forest regeneration success, which can lead to long-term reductions in forest carbon storage (Magdalena & Katharina, 2020).

Models of forest and soil carbon data indicate French Creek WMA PCA stores an estimated 148,692 metric tonnes (mt) of carbon, including 115,480 mt forest carbon (Williams et al., 2021) and 33,212 mt of soil carbon (Guevara et al., 2020) (Figure 3).



THE STORED CARBON AT
FRENCH CREEK WMA PCA
IS EQUIVALENT TO CO₂ EMISSIONS FROM:



16.7 MILLION
GALLONS OF
GASOLINE COMSUMED

OR



167 MILLION
POUNDS OF
COAL BURNED

Source: EPA Greenhouse Gas Equivalencies Calculator

Figure 3. Sources and quantities of stored carbon at French Creek WMA PCA.

Rare Native Species and Communities

Approximately 42% of threatened or endangered species are at risk due to invasive species. Invasive species are generally considered one of the greatest causes of endangerment, second only to habitat loss (Pimental et al., 2005). Invasives may impact endangered species through direct predation, disease or competition for space and resources, and more (Duenas, et al., 2021).

Species and communities in New York are assigned a state rank by the NY Natural Heritage Program (NYNHP) to reflect their rarity. Conservation status ranks include:

S1 – Typically 5 or fewer occurrences, very few remaining individuals, acres, or miles of stream, or some factor of its biology making it especially vulnerable in New York State.

S2 – Typically 6 to 20 occurrences, few remaining individuals, acres, or miles of stream, or factors demonstrably making it very vulnerable in New York State.

S3 – Typically 21 to 100 occurrences, limited acreage, or miles of stream in New York State.

S4 – Apparently secure in New York State

S5 – Demonstrably secure in New York State

Surveys by NYNHP and other conservation partners have identified **two rare communities** and **seven rare species** at French Creek WMA PCA (Table 1). Note that some species documented historically may no longer be extant.

French Creek WMA CONTAINS:

2 RARE
COMMUNITIES

7 RARE
SPECIES

Table 1. Rare species and communities documented at French Creek WMA PCA.

State Rank	Functional Group	Count
Critically Imperiled (S1)	Fish	1
Imperiled (S2)	Fish	1
	Reptiles	1
	Upland/Terrestrial Communities	1
	Wetland/Aquatic Communities	1
Vulnerable (S3)	Birds	3
	Vascular Plants	1

Invasive Species Abundance and Management

Invasive Species Surveys

French Creek WMA PCA was surveyed by SLELO staff in 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018, and 2021. Staff focus early detection surveys on approximately five aquatic and six terrestrial highly probable areas (HPAs). Staff surveys focus on tier-ranked species. For more information on the ranking system, see Appendix B. Additional incidental invasive species observations throughout the PCA are submitted by community scientists and other practitioners. According to the iMapInvasives database, the first invasive species observation at French Creek WMA was reported in 2002. Since that time, the total number of known species has gradually increased, with larger increases observed in 2013 and 2020 (Figure 5a). **These large increases in species observations are not necessarily reflective of new species being introduced to the landscape, but more likely are an indication of increased levels of survey effort and reporting.** As of November 2022, a total of 14 invasive species are known in French Creek WMA including four aquatic and ten terrestrial species (Figures 4a). Five species are low to moderate impact species and not tier ranked in the SLELO PRISM. Two known species are ranked as tier 3 and seven are ranked as tier 4 (Figure 4b). The total number of known species at each HPA ranges from one to five with an average of 3.1 species per HPA. The total number of SLELO tier species at each HPA ranges from one to four with an average of 2.7 species per HPA. For a full list of species known at the PCA, see Appendix C.

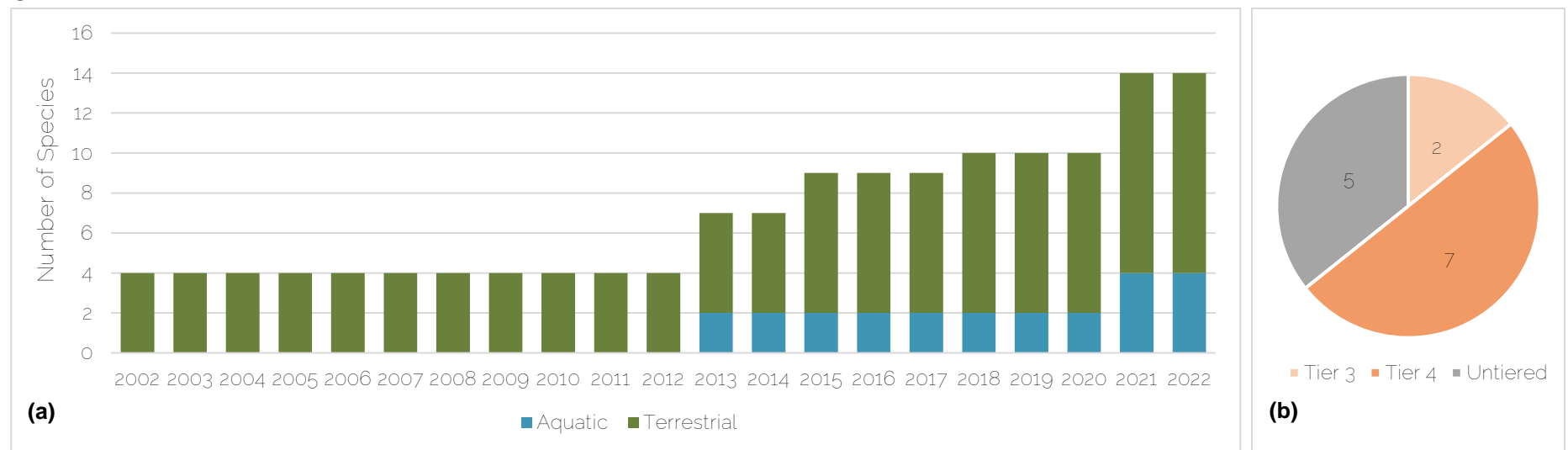


Figure 4. (a) cumulative number of aquatic and terrestrial invasive species documented at French Creek WMA PCA 2002-2022 (source: SLELO and iMapInvasives). (b) Distribution of known invasive species by SLELO tier classification.

Approaching Species

The following species are not found within the PCA geography but are within five-miles of the PCA boundary and approaching the area. They should be considered for early detection efforts by staff and partners.

Table 2. Species approaching French Creek WMA PCA (iMapInvasives, 2022).

Scientific Name	Common Name	SLELO Tier	Observations in Buffer
<i>Reynoutria japonica</i>	Japanese Knotweed	3	1
<i>Vincetoxicum rossicum</i>	Pale Swallowwort	3	7
<i>Trapa natans</i>	Water Chestnut	3	3
<i>Agrilus planipennis</i>	Emerald Ash Borer	4	1
<i>Neogobius melanostomus</i>	Round Goby	4	224
<i>Lonicera tatarica</i>	Tartarian Honeysuckle	4	1
<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>	Yellow Iris	4	1
<i>Alosa pseudoharengus</i>	Alewife	NT	59
<i>Poa compressa</i>	Canada Bluegrass	NT	1
<i>Cyprinus carpio</i>	Common Carp	NT	141
<i>Lycopus europaeus</i>	European Bugleweed	NT	1
<i>Butomus umbellatus</i>	Flowering rush	NT	2
<i>Myosotis scorpioides</i>	Forget-me-not	NT	1
<i>Proterorhinus semilunaris</i>	Freshwater Tubenose Goby	NT	2
<i>Alliaria petiolata</i>	Garlic Mustard	NT	1
<i>Berberis thunbergii</i>	Japanese Barberry	NT	1
<i>Phalaris arundinacea</i>	Reed Canarygrass	NT	12
<i>Scardinius erythrophthalmus</i>	Rudd	NT	11
<i>Lymantria dispar</i>	Spongy Moth	NT	1
<i>Hypericum perforatum</i>	St. Johnswort	NT	3

Invasive Species Management

Invasive species within the PCA are prioritized for management based on their current or future impacts and the availability of effective control measures and management resources. Because resources are limited, all known invasive species cannot be targeted for management. Some HPAs are not surveyed and/or managed annually. In addition, if a species is present in high abundance within the PCA, only a sub-set of HPAs may be prioritized for management.

As of November 2022, no management projects are underway at French Creek WMA PCA. SLELO staff will continue to monitor for tiered species and evaluate distribution data to determine if control efforts are warranted.

Recommendations & Future Work

- **Conduct strategic monitoring outside of HPAs to validate current invasive species distribution data.** SLELO staff and/or contractors will explore opportunities to survey interior portions of the PCA to better understand the extent of tiered species outside of HPAs. Current data suggests the distribution of tiered species commonly managed by SLELO – such as common reed grass – is isolated in extent. If these species are not more widely distributed throughout the PCA, control efforts might be warranted.

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Appendix A: Resilience Definitions

Resilience Score: A site's Resilience Score estimates its capacity to maintain species diversity and ecological function as the climate changes. It was determined by evaluating and quantifying physical characteristics that foster resilience, particularly the site's landscape diversity and local connectedness. The score is calculated within ecoregions based on all cells of the same geophysical setting and is described on a relative basis as above or below the average. For example, cells of granite bedrock were compared with all other cells of granite bedrock, and coastal plain sands were compared with other coastal plain sands. Our goal was to identify the places most resilient to climate change for each geophysical setting within each ecoregion.

Local Connectedness: Refers to the degree of fragmentation and strength of barriers that create resistance to movement within a landscape. A highly connected landscape promotes resilience by allowing species to move through the landscape and find suitable microclimates where they can persist. In this study, we calculate local connectedness by measuring the amount and configuration of human-created barriers like major roads, development, energy infrastructure, and industrial farming and forestry land. Read the methods for your region:

Landscape Diversity: Refers to the microhabitats and climatic gradients available in the immediate neighborhood surrounding any 30-m cell of land. The persistence of species in an area increases in landscapes with a wide variety of microclimates created by the topography (topo-climates), elevation and hydrology. In this study, we measure microclimates by counting the variety of small-scale landforms, measuring elevation range, and evaluating the density and configuration of wetlands in a 100-acre neighborhood around every point on the landscape.

Forest Carbon: Estimates of 2010 forest carbon stock and components (aboveground, coarse woody debris, and soil/other) are from Williams et al. (2021b) following methods described for the Southeast US in Gu et al. (2019). To estimate carbon stock, attributes were determined for all forested 30-m pixels in the continental United States. A forest carbon cycle model trained to match Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) data was used to predict carbon stocks for 2010 based on site-level attributes of forest type group, years since disturbance, and site productivity class. Results were iterated backward in time to provide continuous, annual reporting of forest carbon dynamics for each pixel. Most prior studies lacked spatial detail on the age of forest stands that persisted in a forested condition during the satellite data era, but this study used remotely sensed biomass to estimate the stand age condition of these persisting, intact forests, distinguishing relatively young stands (e.g., 30 to 50 years old) from older stands.

Soil Carbon: Estimates of soil organic carbon (SOC) for 0-30 cm topsoil layer at 250-m resolution for the conterminous USA (CONUS) are from Oak Ridge Lab ([Guevara et al. 2020](#)). The estimates are for the period 1991-2010 and were derived using the USDA Rapid Carbon Assessment (RaCA), which used over 6000 field soil samples and multiple environmental variables representative of the soil-forming environment coupled with a machine learning approach (i.e., simulated annealing) and regression tree ensemble modeling for optimized SOC prediction. Across the continental US, nearly 31% of SOC was found in forests, 28% in croplands, and 35% in grasslands and shrublands respectively.

Total Carbon: Estimates for total carbon in the carbon calculator use Forest Carbon 2010 for all cells with forest cover and Soil Carbon 2010 for all cells with non-forest cover. To combine the two datasets, we resampled the SOC data to a 30-m resolution to align with our other data products, and then removed developed lands using the 2016 National Land Cover Dataset (NLCD). Please note that resampling to a higher 30-m resolution introduces false accuracy as the original SOC data was at a lower 250-m resolution.

For more information, visit:

<https://www.conservationgateway.org/ConservationByGeography/NorthAmerica/UnitedStates/edc/reportsdata/terrestrial/resilience/Pages/default.aspx>

Appendix B: Invasive Species Tier Ranking

In 2017 the PRISM network, state agencies and the New York Natural Heritage Program formalized official definitions for invasive species tiers based on an invasive species impacts and abundance. The ranking system included four primary tiers (Figure 10):

- **Tier 1 – Early Detection/Prevention:** Highly invasive species located in a buffer around region but not in region itself, targeted for early detection and prevention activities
- **Tier 2 – Eradication:** Highly invasive species with low abundance in the region, management goal of eradication
- **Tier 3 – Containment:** Highly invasive species with medium abundance in the region, management goal of containment
- **Tier 4 – Local Control:** Highly invasive species with great abundance in the region, management goal of local control

SLELO PRISM further prioritizes certain invasive species on the tiers list for management. These species are selected through nomination and agreement with PRISM partners. The SLELO tiered species list is a sub-selection of species ranked at the NYS scale.

		Difficulty of Eradication / Cost of Control Abundance (In PRISM plus Buffer)			
		None in PRISM	Low (Eradication/ Full containment may be feasible)	Medium (Strategic management to contain infestations and slow spread in PRISM)	High (Established/widespread in PRISM; only strategic localized management)
Impact (current and future)	Very High or High	TIER 1 <i>Early Detection/Prevention</i> Highest level of early detection survey efforts. Should conduct delineation surveys and assign to appropriate Tier if detected. a) Inside buffer, but not in PRISM b) Outside PRISM and Buffer, but close (eastern North America) c) Far outside PRISM and buffer (not in east NA), but introduction pathway exists	TIER 2 <i>Eradication</i> Highest level of early detection response efforts. High impact species with low enough abundance and suitable treatment method available to make eradication feasible within the PRISM. Need delineation surveys to determine extent.	TIER 3 <i>Containment</i> Target strategic management to slow the spread, as likely too widespread for eradication, but many surrounding regions could be at risk if left unattended. For plants, use the IPMDAT. Possible eradication candidate only if adequate resources and effective control methods available.	TIER 4 <i>Local Control</i> Eradication from PRISM not feasible; focus on localized management over time to contain, exclude, or suppress to protect high-priority resources like rare species or recreation assets. Be strategic when deciding if / where to control.
	Medium	<i>Evaluate (Medium Impact)</i> Further evaluate impacts and PRISM resources to see if the species should be assigned to one of the other lists. If this species could feasibly become high impact with climatic or other environmental changes, consider moving to the appropriate High Impact row based on abundance. If too little is known, consider moving to "Monitor".			
	Unknown	X	TIER 5 <i>Monitor</i> Species that need more research, mapping, and monitoring to understand their invasiveness. This includes naturalized species and cultivated-only species that are known to be invasive in other regions but are not yet invasive here. Invasiveness may change with environmental or genetic changes. Should monitor populations on a regular basis to see if they are starting to become invasive and assign to appropriate Tier if invasive infestations detected.		

Figure 5. Invasive species tier table developed by the PRISMs, state agencies, and New York Natural Heritage Program.

Tier definitions were formalized in 2017 by the NYS invasive species network of PRISMs, state agencies, and NYNHP.

Buffer: An area chosen by the PRISM that surrounds the PRISM and takes in certain counties, states and provinces. Most PRISMs are using about 100 miles as the buffer.

Impact: Use the PRISM-specific invasiveness rankings if available, or use NYS ranks (see nys.info for existing ranks). For species that are not ranked yet, or PRISM-specific adjustments of state ranks are deemed necessary, use expert opinion and document justification. Low-impact species not included since cannot justify spending resources to control these.

Abundance: This is left as a qualitative metric, since assigning standardized values to categories is not feasible due to the diversity of species dispersal strategies and data gaps.

This ranking system takes into account populations that have escaped into natural areas, but not intentionally (and legally) distributed individuals. For example, a landscape planting would not be counted.

Appendix C: French Creek WMA Full Invasive Species Lists

<i>Aquatic Species</i>	SLELO Tier	Source	First Documented
<i>Curly Pondweed</i>	4	iMapInvasives	2021
<i>Eurasian Water-milfoil</i>	4	iMapInvasives	2013
<i>European Frogbit</i>	4	iMapInvasives	2013
<i>Starry Stonewort</i>	NT	iMapInvasives	2021

<i>Terrestrial Species</i>	SLELO Tier	Source	First Detected
<i>Common reed grass</i>	3	iMapInvasives	2013
<i>Wild Chervil</i>	3	iMapInvasives	2018
<i>Common Buckthorn</i>	4	iMapInvasives	2002
<i>Honeysuckle species</i>	4	iMapInvasives	2002
<i>Purple Loosestrife</i>	4	iMapInvasives	2015
<i>Wild Parsnip</i>	4	iMapInvasives	2015
<i>Coltsfoot</i>	NT	iMMA	2021
<i>Common Speedwell</i>	NT	iMapInvasives	2002
<i>Ground Ivy</i>	NT	iMMA	2021
<i>Meadow Timothy</i>	NT	iMapInvasives	2002

Appendix D: PCA Total Score Formula

The total score for PCA's is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Total Score} = \text{Average}(\text{RCD} + \text{IS}) + \text{DRA}$$

- ***RCD = Average(Resilience + Local Connectedness + Landscape Diversity Scores)***
 - Terrestrial resilience data from Anderson et al. (2016) – accessible [here](#).
- ***IS = Average(Invasive Species Management Progress Scores)***
 - Invasive species management scores are calculated based on progress achieved toward established PCA and species-specific objectives. Objectives are set using extent or density-based metrics
 - Extent Based Metrics
 - *Example: Reduce net invaded area of all pale swallow-wort infestations at HPAs by 80% by 2025.*
 - “Score” is measured as progress achieved toward the set objective
 - If the objective is 80% and invaded area has currently been reduced to:
 - 55% → 55/80 = 0.69 (69% or D+)
 - 65% → 65/80 = 0.81 (81% or B-)
 - 75% → 75/80 = 0.94 (94% or A)
 - Density Based Metrics
 - *Ex: Reduce swallow-wort density at current HPAs to 5% or less by 2028.*
 - “Score” is measured as the amount change needed between current average invasive species density and goal
 - If the objective is 5% density or less, and current density is:
 - 76-100 – needs to move 4 cover classes = F
 - 51-75 – needs to move 3 cover classes = D
 - 26-50 – needs to move 2 cover classes = C
 - 5-25 – needs to move 1 cover class = B
 - <5% - at goal = A
- ***DRA = Discretionary Restoration Adjustment***
 - A discretionary adjustment applied to the total score that reflects restoration progress and/or native species recovery at the PCA
 - Add (+) to Total Score
 - Based on visual field observation, the majority of management sites exhibit an increase in native/desirable vegetation richness or cover
 - No Adjustment
 - Based on visual field observation, the majority of management sites exhibit an increase in native/desirable vegetation richness or cover
 - Add (-) to Total Score
 - Based on visual field observation, the majority of management sites exhibit an increase in non-native or invasive vegetation richness and/or cover