

# GLOSSARY

Many of the terms relating to landforms, geology, and geomorphology are defined in more detail in the "National Soil Survey Handbook" (available in local offices of the Natural Resources Conservation Service or online at: <http://soils.usda.gov/technical/handbook>).

**Alluvial fan.** A low, outspread mass of loose materials and/or rock material, commonly with gentle slopes. It is shaped like an open fan or a segment of a cone. The material was deposited by a stream at the place where it issues from a narrow mountain valley or upland valley or where a tributary stream is near or at its junction with the main stream. The fan is steepest near its apex, which points upstream, and slopes gently and convexly outward (downstream) with a gradual decrease in gradient.

**Alluvium.** Unconsolidated material, such as gravel, sand, silt, clay, and various mixtures of these, deposited on land by running water.

**Aquic conditions.** Current soil wetness characterized by saturation, reduction, and redoximorphic features.

**Argillic horizon.** A subsoil horizon characterized by an accumulation of illuvial clay.

**Aspect.** The direction toward which a slope faces. Also called slope aspect.

**Available water capacity** (available moisture capacity). The capacity of soils to hold water available for use by most plants. It is commonly defined as the difference between the amount of soil water at field moisture capacity and the amount at wilting point.

**Basin.** (a) Drainage basin; (b) A low area in the Earth's crust in which sediments have accumulated. A general term for the nearly level to gently sloping, bottom surface of a depression.

**Bedrock.** The solid rock that underlies the soil and other unconsolidated material or that is exposed at the surface.

**Bench.** A platform-like, nearly level to gently inclined surface developed on resistant materials in areas where valleys are cut. Structural benches are bedrock controlled, and in contrast to stream terraces, have little or no suggestion of former erosion cycles.

**Bottom land.** An informal term loosely applied to various portions of a flood plain.

**Canyon.** A long, deep, narrow valley with high, precipitous walls in an area of high local relief.

**Cirque.** A steep-walled, semicircular or crescent-shaped, half-bowl-like recess or hollow commonly situated at the head of a glaciated mountain valley or high on the side of a mountain. It was produced by the erosive activity of a mountain glacier. It commonly contains a small round lake (tarn).

**Clay.** As a soil separate, the mineral soil particles less than 0.002 millimeter in diameter.

**Clay film.** A thin coating of oriented clay on the surface of a soil aggregate or lining pores or root channels. Synonyms: clay coating, clay skin.

**Claypan.** A dense, compact, slowly permeable subsoil layer that contains much more clay than the overlying materials, from which it is separated by a sharply defined boundary. A claypan is commonly hard when dry and plastic and sticky when wet.

**Colluvium.** Unconsolidated, unsorted earth material being transported or deposited on side slopes and/or at the base of slopes by mass movement (e.g., direct gravitational action) and by local, unconcentrated runoff.

**Dense layer.** A very firm, massive layer that has a bulk density of more than 1.8 grams per cubic centimeter. Such a layer affects the ease of digging and can affect filling and compacting.

**Depth, soil.** Generally, the thickness of the soil over bedrock or other root restrictive horizon. Very deep soils are more than 60 inches deep over bedrock or some restriction; deep soils, 40 to 60 inches; moderately deep, 20 to 40 inches; shallow, 10 to 20 inches; and very shallow, less than 10 inches.

**Drainage class** (natural). Refers to the frequency and duration of wet periods under conditions similar to those under which the soil formed. Alterations of the water regime by human activities, either through drainage or irrigation, are not a consideration unless they have significantly changed the morphology of the soil. Seven classes of natural soil drainage are recognized—*excessively drained, somewhat excessively drained, well drained, moderately well drained, somewhat poorly drained, poorly drained, and very poorly drained*. These classes are defined in the "Soil Survey Manual" (<http://soils.usda.gov/technical/manual/contents/chapter3.html#4c>.)

**Drainageway.** A general term for a channel which drains water from an area.

**Drift.** A general term applied to all mineral material (clay, silt, sand, gravel, and boulders) transported by a glacier and deposited directly by or from the ice or transported by running water emanating from a glacier. Drift includes unstratified material (till) that forms moraines and stratified deposits that form outwash plains, eskers, kames, varves, and glaciofluvial sediments. The term is generally applied to Pleistocene glacial deposits in areas that no longer contain glaciers.

**Dune.** A low mound, ridge, bank, or hill of loose, windblown granular material (generally sand), either barren and capable of movement from place to place or covered and stabilized with vegetation but retaining its characteristic shape.

**Eluviation.** The movement of material in true solution or colloidal suspension from one place to another within the soil. Soil horizons that have lost material through eluviation are eluvial; those that have received material are illuvial.

**Eolian deposit.** Sand, silt, or clay-sized clastic material transported and deposited primarily by wind, commonly in the form of a dune or a sheet of sand or loess.

**Erosion.** The wearing away of the land surface by water, wind, ice, or other geologic agents and by such processes as gravitational creep.

*Erosion (geologic).* Erosion caused by geologic processes acting over long geologic periods and resulting in the wearing away of mountains and the building up of such landscape features as flood plains and coastal plains. Synonym: natural erosion.

*Erosion (accelerated).* Erosion much more rapid than geologic erosion, mainly as a result of human or animal activities or of a catastrophe in nature, such as a fire, that exposes the surface.

**Escarpment.** A relatively continuous and steep slope or cliff breaking the general continuity of more gently sloping land surfaces and resulting from erosion or faulting. Most commonly applied to cliffs produced by differential erosion. Synonym: scarp.

**Extent.** See soil extent

**Fan terrace.** A general term for landforms that are the remaining parts of older fan-landforms, such as alluvial fans, fan aprons, inset fans, and fan skirts, that either have been exposed by erosion or partially buried. An erosional fan remnant must have a relatively flat summit that is a relict fan-surface.

**Fibric soil material (peat).** The least decomposed of all organic soil material. Peat contains a large amount of well preserved fiber that is readily identifiable according to botanical origin. Peat has the lowest bulk density and the highest water content at saturation of all organic soil material.

**Flood plain.** The nearly level plain that borders a stream and is subject to flooding unless protected artificially.

**Foothills.** A region of steeply sloping hills that fringes a mountain range or high-plateau escarpment. The hills have relief of as much as 1,000 feet (300 meters).

**Genesis, soil.** The mode of origin of the soil. Refers especially to the processes or soil-forming factors responsible for the formation of the solum, or true soil, from the unconsolidated parent material.

**Glacial.** a) Of or relating to the presence and activities of ice and glaciers, as in glacial erosion. (b) Pertaining to distinctive features and materials produced by or derived from glaciers and ice sheets, as in glacial lakes such as glacial outwash terrace, glacial outwash plains, or glacial drift plains.

**Glaciofluvial deposits.** Material moved by glaciers and subsequently sorted and deposited by streams flowing from the melting ice. The deposits are stratified and occur in the form of outwash plains, valley trains, deltas, kames, eskers, and kame terraces.

**Glaciolacustrine deposits.** Material ranging from fine clay to sand derived from glaciers and deposited in glacial lakes mainly by glacial meltwater. Many deposits are bedded or laminated.

**Gravel.** Rounded or angular fragments of rock as much as 3 inches (2 millimeters to 7.6 centimeters) in diameter. An individual piece is a pebble.

**Ground water.** Water filling all the unblocked pores of the material below the water table.

**Hard bedrock.** Bedrock that cannot be excavated except by blasting or by the use of special equipment that is not commonly used in construction.

**Hardpan.** A hardened or cemented soil horizon, or layer. The soil material is sandy, loamy, or clayey and is cemented by iron oxide, silica, calcium carbonate, or other substance.

**Hill.** A generic term for an elevated area of the land surface, rising as much as 1,000 feet above surrounding lowlands, commonly of limited summit area and having a well defined outline. Slopes are generally more than 15 percent. The distinction between a hill and a mountain is arbitrary and may depend on local usage.

**Horizon, soil.** A layer of soil, approximately parallel to the surface, having distinct characteristics produced by soil-forming processes. In the identification of soil horizons, an uppercase letter represents the major horizons. Numbers or lowercase letters that follow represent subdivisions of the major horizons. An explanation of the subdivisions is given in the Appendix. The major horizons of mineral soil are as follows:

*O horizon.*—An organic layer of fresh and decaying plant residue.

*A horizon.*—The mineral horizon at or near the surface in which an accumulation of humified organic matter is mixed with the mineral material. Also, a plowed surface horizon, most of which was originally part of a B horizon.

*E horizon.*—The mineral horizon in which the main feature is loss of silicate clay, iron, aluminum, or some combination of these.

*B horizon.*—The mineral horizon below an A horizon. The B horizon is in part a layer of transition from the overlying A to the underlying C horizon. The B horizon also has distinctive characteristics, such as (1) accumulation of clay, sesquioxides, humus, or a combination of these; (2) prismatic or blocky structure; (3) redder or browner colors than those in the A horizon; or (4) a combination of these.

*C horizon.*—The mineral horizon or layer, excluding indurated bedrock, that is little affected by soil-forming processes and does not have the properties typical of the overlying soil material. The material of a C horizon may be either like or unlike that in which the solum formed. If the material is known to differ from that in the solum, an Arabic numeral, commonly a 2, precedes the letter C.

*Cr horizon.*—Soft, consolidated bedrock beneath the soil.

*R layer.*—Consolidated bedrock beneath the soil. The bedrock commonly underlies a C horizon, but it can be directly below an A or a B horizon.

**Infiltration.** The downward entry of water into the immediate surface of soil or other material, as contrasted with percolation, which is movement of water through soil layers or material.

**Infiltration rate.** The rate at which water penetrates the surface of the soil at any given instant, usually expressed in inches per hour. The rate can be limited by the infiltration capacity of the soil or the rate at which water is applied at the surface.

**Lacustrine deposit.** Material deposited in lake water and exposed when the water level is lowered or the elevation of the land is raised.

**Lake terrace.** A narrow shelf, partly cut and partly built, produced along a lake shore and later exposed when the water level falls.

**Landslide.** A general, encompassing term for most types of mass movement landforms and processes involving the downslope transport and outward deposition of soil and rock materials caused by gravitational forces; the movement may or may not involve saturated materials. The speed and distance of movement, as well as the amount of soil and rock material, vary greatly.

**Large stones** (in tables). Rock fragments 3 inches (7.6 centimeters) or more across. Large stones adversely affect the specified use of the soil.

**Lateral moraine.** A moraine that looks like a ridge at the sides of a valley glacier. It is composed chiefly of rock fragments removed from valley walls by glacial movement through the valley, or by materials tumbling off adjacent slopes.

**Leaching.** The removal of soluble material from soil or other material by percolating water.

**Loess.** Material transported and deposited by wind and consisting dominantly of silt-sized particles.

**Mass movement.** A generic term for the dislodgment and downslope transport of soil and rock material as a unit under direct gravitational stress.

**Mineral soil.** Soil that is mainly mineral material and low in organic material. Its bulk density is more than that of organic soil.

**Mollic epipedon.** A thick, dark, humus-rich surface horizon (or horizons) that have high base saturation and pedogenic soil structure. It may include the upper part of the subsoil.

**Moraine.** In terms of glacial geology, a mound, ridge, or other topographically distinct accumulation of unsorted, unstratified drift, predominantly till, deposited primarily by the direct action of glacial ice in a variety of landforms. Also, a general term for a landform composed mainly of till (except for kame moraines, which are composed mainly of stratified outwash) that has been deposited by a glacier. Some types of moraines are disintegration, end, ground, kame, lateral, recessional, and terminal.

**Morphology, soil.** The physical makeup of the soil, including the texture, structure, porosity, consistence, color, and other physical, mineral, and biological properties of the various horizons, and the thickness and arrangement of those horizons in the soil profile.

**Mountain.** A generic term for an elevated area of the land surface, rising more than 1,000 feet (300 meters) above surrounding lowlands, commonly of restricted summit area (relative to a plateau) and generally having steep sides. A mountain can occur as a single, isolated mass or in a group forming a chain or range. Mountains are formed primarily by tectonic activity and/or volcanic action but can also be formed by differential erosion.

**Muck.** Dark, finely divided, well decomposed organic soil material. (See Sapric soil material.)

**Organic matter.** Plant and animal residue in the soil in various stages of decomposition.

**Outwash.** Stratified and sorted sediments (chiefly sand and gravel) removed or "washed out" from a glacier by meltwater streams and deposited in front of or beyond the end moraine or the margin of a glacier. The coarser material is deposited nearer to the ice.

**Pan.** A compact, dense layer in a soil that impedes the movement of water and the growth of roots. For example, *hardpan*, *fragipan*, *claypan*, *plowpan*, and *traffic pan*.

**Parent material.** The unconsolidated organic and mineral material in which soil forms.

**Ped.** An individual natural soil aggregate, such as a granule, a prism, or a block.

**Pedon.** The smallest volume that can be called "a soil." A pedon is three dimensional and large enough to permit study of all horizons. Its area ranges from about 10 to 100 square feet (1 square meter to 10 square meters), depending on the variability of the soil.

**Percolation.** The movement of water through the soil.

**Plain.** A general term referring to any flat mostly smooth and level lowland area, large or small, at a low elevation. A plain has few or no prominent hills or valleys but sometimes has considerable slope, and usually occurs at low elevation relative to surrounding areas.

**Plateau (geomorphology).** A comparatively flat area of great extent and elevation; specifically, an extensive land region that is considerably elevated (more than 100 meters) above the adjacent lower lying terrain, is commonly limited on at least one side by an abrupt descent, and has a flat or nearly level surface. A comparatively large part of a plateau surface is near summit level.

**Ponding.** Standing water on soils in closed depressions. Unless the soils are artificially drained, the water can be removed only by percolation or evapotranspiration.

**Potential rooting depth (effective rooting depth).** Depth to which roots could penetrate if the content of moisture in the soil were adequate. The soil has no properties restricting the penetration of roots to this depth.

**Pothole.** A type of small pit or closed depression (1 to several feet deep), generally round or oblong that occurs in a part of a glacial landscape.

**Profile, soil.** A vertical section of the soil extending through all its horizons and into the parent material.

**Rangeland.** Land on which the potential natural vegetation is predominantly grasses, grasslike plants, forbs, or shrubs suitable for grazing or browsing. It includes natural grasslands, savannas, many wetlands, some deserts, tundras, and areas that support certain forb and shrub communities.

**Redoximorphic features.** Redoximorphic features are associated with wetness and result from alternating periods of reduction and oxidation of iron and manganese compounds in the soil. Reduction occurs during saturation with water, and oxidation occurs when the soil is not saturated. Characteristic color patterns are created by these processes. The reduced iron and manganese ions may be removed from a soil if vertical or lateral fluxes of water occur, in which case there is no iron or manganese precipitation in that soil. Wherever the iron and manganese are oxidized and precipitated, they form either soft masses or hard concretions or nodules. Movement of iron and manganese as a result of redoximorphic processes in a soil may result in redoximorphic features that are defined as follows:

1. Redoximorphic concentrations.—These are zones of apparent accumulation of iron-manganese oxides, including:

A. Nodules and concretions, which are cemented bodies that can be removed from the soil intact. Concretions are distinguished from nodules on the basis of internal organization. A concretion typically has concentric layers that are visible to the naked eye. Nodules do not have visible organized internal structure; *and*

B. Masses, which are noncemented concentrations of substances within the soil matrix; *and*

C. Pore linings, i.e., zones of accumulation along pores that may be either coatings on pore surfaces or impregnations from the matrix adjacent to the pores.

2. Redoximorphic depletions.—These are zones of low chroma (chromas less than those in the matrix) where either iron-manganese oxides alone or both iron-manganese oxides and clay have been stripped out, including:

A. Iron depletions, i.e., zones that contain low amounts of iron and manganese oxides but have a clay content similar to that of the adjacent matrix; *and*

B. Clay depletions, i.e., zones that contain low amounts of iron, manganese, and clay (often referred to as silt coatings or skeletons).

3. Reduced matrix.—This is a soil matrix that has low chroma *in situ* but undergoes a change in hue or chroma within 30 minutes after the soil material has been exposed to air.

**Residuum (residual soil material).** Unconsolidated, weathered or partly weathered mineral material that accumulated as bedrock disintegrated in place.

**Ridge.** A long, narrow landscape feature that is usually sharp crested with steep sides and forms an extended upland between valleys. The term is used in areas of both hill and mountain relief.

**Riser.** The vertical or steep side slope (e.g., escarpment) of terraces, flood-plain steps, or other stepped landforms; commonly a recurring part of a series of natural, steplike landforms, such as successive stream terraces.

**Rock fragments.** Rock or mineral fragments having a diameter of 2 millimeters or more; for example, pebbles, cobbles, stones, and boulders.

**Root zone.** The part of the soil that can be penetrated by plant roots.

**Runoff.** The precipitation discharged into stream channels from an area. The water that flows off the surface of the land without sinking into the soil is called surface runoff. Water that enters the soil before reaching surface streams is called ground-water runoff or seepage flow from ground water.

**Sag pond.** A small body of water occupying an enclosed depression formed where active or recent soil movement downslope has collected water.

**Saline soil.** A soil containing soluble salts in an amount that impairs growth of plants. A saline soil does not contain excess exchangeable sodium.

**Sand.** As a soil separate, individual rock or mineral fragments from 0.05 millimeter to 2.0 millimeters in diameter. Most sand grains consist of quartz.

**Scabland.** An elevated, flat-lying, basalt-floored area, with little if any soil on it, sparse vegetation, and usually deep, dry channels scoured into the floor, especially by glacial meltwaters such as the Channeled Scablands of eastern Washington.

**Series, soil.** A group of soils that have profiles that are almost alike. All the soils of a given series have horizons that are similar in composition, thickness, and arrangement.

**Side slope (geomorphology).** A geomorphic component of hills consisting of a laterally planar area of a hillside. The overland waterflow is predominantly parallel. Side slopes are dominantly colluvium and slope-wash sediments.

**Silt.** As a soil separate, individual mineral particles that range in diameter from the upper limit of clay (0.002 millimeter) to the lower limit of very fine sand (0.05 millimeter).

**Slickensides (pedogenic).** Grooved, striated, and/or glossy (shiny) slip faces on structural peds, such as wedges; produced by shrink-swell processes, most commonly in soils that have a high content of expansive clays.

**Slope.** The inclination of the land surface from the horizontal. Percentage of slope is the vertical distance divided by horizontal distance, then multiplied by 100. Thus, a slope of 20 percent is a drop of 20 feet in 100 feet of horizontal distance.

**Slope alluvium.** Sediment gradually transported down the slopes of mountains or hills primarily by nonchannel alluvial processes (i.e., slope-wash processes) and characterized by particle sorting.

Lateral particle sorting is evident on long slopes. In a profile sequence, sediments may be distinguished by differences in size and/or specific gravity of rock fragments and may be separated by stone lines. Burnished peds and sorting of rounded or subrounded pebbles or cobbles distinguish these materials from unsorted colluvial deposits.

**Soil.** A natural, three-dimensional body at the earth's surface. It is capable of supporting plants and has properties resulting from the integrated effect of climate and living matter acting on earthy parent material, as conditioned by relief and by the passage of time.

**Soil extent.** Groupings of soils based upon the number of acres that are presently recognized within the National Cooperative Soil Survey.

Small extent - less than 10,000 acres  
Moderately extensive - 10,000 to 100,000 acres  
Extensive - more than 100,000 acres

**Soil separates.** Mineral particles less than 2 millimeters in equivalent diameter and ranging between specified size limits. The names and sizes, in millimeters, of separates recognized in the United States are as follows:

Very coarse sand 2.0 to 1.0  
Coarse sand 1.0 to 0.5  
Medium sand 0.5 to 0.25  
Fine sand 0.25 to 0.10  
Very fine sand 0.10 to 0.05  
Silt 0.05 to 0.002  
Clay less than 0.002

**Stones.** Rock fragments 10 to 24 inches (25 to 60 centimeters) in diameter if rounded or 15 to 24 inches (38 to 60 centimeters) in length if flat.

**Stream terrace.** One of a series of platforms in a stream valley, flanking and more or less parallel to the stream channel, originally formed near the level of the stream; represents the remnants of an abandoned flood plain, stream bed, or valley floor produced during a former state of fluvial erosion or deposition.

**Structure, soil.** The arrangement of primary soil particles into compound particles or aggregates. The principal forms of soil structure are—*platy* (laminated), *prismatic* (vertical axis of aggregates longer than horizontal), *columnar* (prisms with rounded tops), *blocky* (angular or subangular), and *granular*. *Structureless* soils are either *single grained* (each grain by itself, as in dune sand) or *massive* (the particles adhering without any regular cleavage, as in many hardpans).

**Subsoil.** Technically, the B horizon; roughly, the part of the solum below plow depth.

**Substratum.** The part of the soil below the solum.

**Subsurface layer.** Any surface soil horizon (A, E, AB, or EB) below the surface layer.

**Summit.** A general term for the top or highest area of a landform such as a hill, mountain, or tableland.

**Surface layer.** The soil ordinarily moved in tillage, or its equivalent in uncultivated soil, ranging in depth from 4 to 10 inches (10 to 25 centimeters). Frequently designated as the "plow layer," or the "Ap horizon."

**Surface soil.** The A, E, AB, and EB horizons, considered collectively. It includes all subdivisions of these horizons.

**Terrace (geomorphology).** A step like surface, bordering a valley floor or shoreline, that represents the former position of a flood plain, lake, or seashore. The term is usually applied both to the relatively flat summit surface (tread) that was cut or built by stream or wave action and to the steeper descending slope (scarp or riser) that has graded to a lower base level of erosion.

**Texture, soil.** The relative proportions of sand, silt, and clay particles in a mass of soil. The basic textural classes, in order of increasing proportion of fine particles, are *sand*, *loamy sand*, *sandy loam*, *loam*, *silt loam*, *silt*, *sandy clay loam*, *clay loam*, *silty clay loam*, *sandy clay*, *silty clay*, and *clay*. The sand, loamy sand, and sandy loam classes may be further divided by specifying "coarse," "fine," or "very fine."

**Till.** Dominantly unsorted and nonstratified drift, generally unconsolidated and deposited directly by a glacier without subsequent reworking by meltwater, and consisting of a heterogeneous mixture of clay, silt, sand, gravel, stones, and boulders; rock fragments of various lithologies are embedded within a finer matrix that can range from clay to sandy loam.

**Till plain.** An extensive area of level to gently undulating soils underlain predominantly by till and bounded at the distal end by subordinate recessional or end moraines.

**Tread.** The flat to gently sloping, topmost, laterally extensive slope of terraces, flood-plain steps, or other stepped landforms; commonly a recurring part of a series of natural steplike landforms, such as successive stream terraces.

**Upland.** An informal, general term used to describe the higher ground of a region, in contrast with a low-lying adjacent area, such as a valley or plain, or for land at a higher elevation than the flood plain or low stream terrace.

**Valley.** A relatively large, long depression of the Earth's surface that is primarily developed by stream erosion or glacial activity and is drained outside of itself.

**Weathering.** All physical disintegration, chemical decomposition, and biologically induced changes in rocks or other deposits at or near the earth's surface by atmospheric or biologic agents or by circulating surface waters but involving essentially no transport of the altered material.