# Alaska Geoportal

## Data Steward Best Practices Guide

A Governance Framework for Publishing Authoritative Geospatial Data to the Alaska Geoportal

**Alaska Geospatial Office**

State of Alaska

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# About the Alaska Geospatial Office

The Alaska Geospatial Office (AGO) provides a centralized access point for authoritative geospatial data and map resources for Alaska. AGO is housed within the Division of Geological & Geophysical Surveys (DGGS) under the Department of Natural Resources.

The Alaska Geoportal *(gis.data.alaska.gov)* is built on Esri's ArcGIS Online Open Data framework using ArcGIS Hub. AGO operates as a federated portal – connecting users with datasets that remain owned, hosted, and maintained by the organizations responsible for them. This approach preserves data ownership and responsibility, reduces duplication, and allows data to be updated at the source while remaining publicly discoverable.

Datasets published to the Geoportal may be available as downloadable data files, web services for live consumption, or referenced services hosted outside an organization's infrastructure. The best practices in this guide improve data governance and quality while enhancing discoverability in the Geoportal.

# Purpose of This Guide

This guide provides data stewards with standards and practices needed to improve the quality of their geospatial data and ensure contributing data is consistent and discoverable within the Geoportal. The goal is to ensure that data are:

- **Authoritative** — trusted and maintained by the correct source
- **Findable** — easy to discover through search and browsing
- **Usable** — well-documented, stable, and interoperable
- **Sustainable** — maintained over time without breaking links or workflows

This guide provides best practices to support an integrated ecosystem of organizations data across Alaska. It aligns with FAIR data principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) and supports long-term stewardship of Alaska's geospatial investments.

# 1. Why Governance and Standards Matter

Data published to the Geoportal reaches users and applications well beyond their original intent. Without consistent standards, it becomes difficult to identify the correct data source, broken links disrupt downstream workflows, incomplete metadata limits discoverability, and organizations end up duplicating effort and spending to recreate data that already exists.

# 2. Who Should Share Data

The Geoportal is intended to host or reference authoritative geospatial data produced or maintained by state, federal, and local governments; Tribal organizations; universities and research institutions; and non-governmental agencies.

## What Does "Authoritative" Mean?

A dataset is considered authoritative when one organization is clearly responsible for its accuracy, updates, and long-term maintenance. A dataset may be authoritative if your

organization is the original producer and official source of the data, or your organization publishes and maintains the data on behalf of the official source with permission.

**Key Principle**

For any given dataset and geographic extent, there should be one authoritative layer. Multiple competing versions create confusion, reduce trust, and undermine data duplicity.

**DGGS Example**

The Division of Geological & Geophysical Surveys (DGGS) is the authoritative source for volcano location and eruptive history data in Alaska. DGGS publishes the Alaska Volcanoes dataset (https://soa-dnr.maps.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=4f9ad53b45f1463b863a44fc0e31466e) with compliant metadata and maintains it as the official state record.

## 3. Roles and Responsibilities of the Data Steward

Designating a data steward ensures your organization maintains control over the quality and accuracy of its published data, while giving the Geoportal a reliable point of contact for coordination and issue resolution. The data steward works within their organization to:

- Ensure datasets are accurate, current, and fit for use
- Complete and maintain item information and metadata
- Manage updates without breaking existing links or applications
- Coordinate with the AGO on Alaska Geoportal, tags, and sharing
- Serve as the primary point of contact for questions or issues

This role does not require advanced GIS expertise, but it does require attention to detail and an understanding of how data are discovered and reused by others.

# 4. Data Lifecycle

Effective data stewardship spans the entire lifecycle of a dataset from initial planning through eventual retirement. The following diagram illustrates the key stages of the data lifecycle from a data steward's perspective.

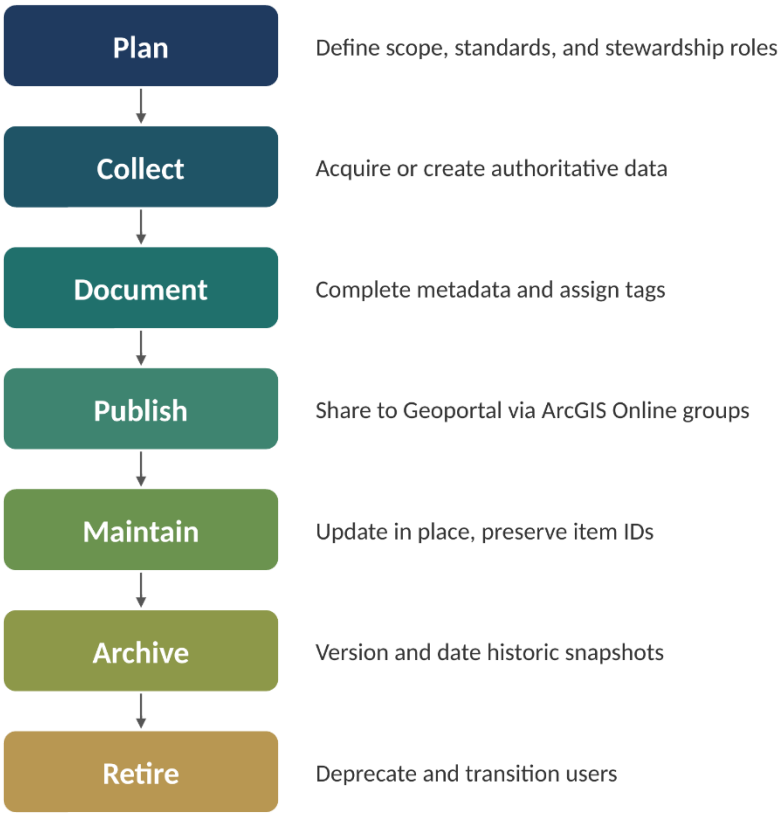


***Figure 1.*** *Data Lifecycle — a data steward perspective.*

Each stage carries specific stewardship responsibilities:

- **Plan.** Define the dataset's scope, coordinate reference system, update schedule, and responsible steward before data collection begins.
- **Collect.** Acquire or create data using established standards. Where possible, align attribute schemas with statewide or national conventions and standards.
- **Document.** Complete metadata fields, assign tags, write a thorough item description, and set terms of use.

- **Publish.** Share the dataset to the your organizations public data access site and to the Geoportal via ArcGIS Online groups. Verify that settings (authoritative badge, delete protection, exports) are correct.
- **Maintain.** Update data in place, preserving Item IDs and service URLs. Monitor quality issues and respond to user feedback.
- **Archive.** Create versioned snapshots at appropriate intervals. Append dates to archived titles (e.g., "Alaska Volcanoes 2023").
- **Retire.** Deprecate outdated data gracefully. Notify dependent users, mark items as deprecated, and provide transition guidance.

# 5. ArcGIS Online Accounts and Ownership

## Use Organizational Accounts

We recommend data stewards publish authoritative data from organizational accounts rather than personal user accounts. This helps ensure that staff turnover does not affect access to data, that ownership persists beyond individual employees, and that administrative continuity supports long-term stewardship.

> **DGGS Example**
> DGGS publishes authoritative geospatial data using a shared organizational account (e.g., DGGS_GIS) rather than individual staff accounts. This ensures continuity when personnel change and allows multiple team members to manage content.

**Examples of appropriate accounts:** DCRAAdmin, MSB_admin, AKDOT_GIS, DGGS_GIS

# 6. Publishing Stable and Reusable Data

## Item IDs and Service URLs

Each item in ArcGIS Online has a unique Item ID and associated service URL. These identifiers are used by web maps and applications, scripts and APIs, automated workflows, embedded maps, and external partner systems.

> **Best Practice**
> Once a dataset is published and shared, avoid changing the Item ID or service URL. Changing these identifiers can break any dependencies on your data. Instead of replacing a layer, update it in place or archive older versions separately.

For detailed guidance on building and maintaining feature layers, see Esri's documentation on swapping layers[3].

### Publish Individual Layers When Possible

While web services can contain multiple sublayers, publishing individual layers usually provides better performance, clearer metadata, easier reuse, and more flexible sharing. Multi-layer services should only be used when layers are tightly coupled and intended to be consumed together.

## 7. Naming Conventions for Discoverability

Item titles are one of the most important discovery elements in any open data portal. Titles appear in search results, browser tabs, application legends, and map pop-ups.

### Recommended Title Pattern

#### Layer Topic – Jurisdiction – Date (if applicable – see below)

Use title case for all item titles (see Appendix A for detailed capitalization conventions).

- **Good:** "Alaska Volcanoes 2020"
- **Good:** "Alaska Volcanoes"
- **Avoid:** "ak_volcanoes_2020_v2_FINAL"

#### Title Best Practices

- Be concise but descriptive
- Avoid underscores, abbreviations, and special characters
- Use dates only when the dataset represents a snapshot or historic record
- Living datasets should not include a date; explain the update frequency in the item description instead

- Dates should follow ISO 8601 formats (YYYY or YYYY-MM-DD)
- Item titles can be changed without affecting Item IDs or service URLs, so clarity should always be prioritized

> **DGGS Example**
> Title: "Alaska Volcanoes" — This is a living dataset maintained by DGGS, so no date is included in the title. The item description notes that the web map documents the location and most recent eruptive events of historically active volcanoes and is actively updated.

# 8. Metadata: Making Data Findable and Usable

**Metadata is one of the most important investments a data steward can make.** Without it, data may technically exist but be functionally undiscoverable. Complete, well-written metadata is the single most impactful thing a data steward can do to ensure their data are found and used correctly.

## Recommended Item Information

To maximize discoverability and usability, we recommend that every dataset shared to the Geoportal include:

- **Summary** — one to two sentences describing what the dataset is
- **Description** — a structured, thorough explanation (see Section 9 below)
- **Thumbnail** — a visual preview (600 × 400 pixels recommended)
- **Tags** — at least four keywords for searching (see Section 10 for specifics)
- **Terms of Use / License** — defines how data may be reused (see Section 12)
- **Credits** — the originating organization (if applicable)
- **Geographic Extent** — the bounding box for the dataset

> **Metadata Completeness Example**
> DGGS Example: The Alaska Volcanoes Web Map (https://soa-dnr.maps.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=4f9ad53b45f1463b863a44fc0e31466e)

demonstrates complete metadata, including a thorough description, proper tags, terms of use, coordinate reference information, and a custom thumbnail. This item serves as a reference for all Alaska Geoportal contributors.

## Coordinate Reference System Information

All datasets published to the Geoportal should clearly document the coordinate reference system (CRS) used, including both horizontal and vertical components where applicable. This information should be included in the item description (see Section 9) and in formal metadata records[6].

- **Horizontal CRS:** Specify the geographic or projected coordinate system, including the datum. Common Alaska systems include:
    - NAD 1983 (2011) Alaska Albers (EPSG:6393)
    - NAD 1983 (2011) UTM Zones 1N–10N
    - WGS 1984 Web Mercator Auxiliary Sphere (EPSG:3857).

**National Spatial Reference System Modernization Guidance**

As the NSRS is modernized, datasets should transition to:

- North American Terrestrial Reference Frame of 2022 (NATRF 2022)
- State Plane Coordinate System of 2022 (SPCS 2022)

- **Vertical CRS:** If the dataset includes elevation or depth values, specify the vertical datum (e.g., NAVD 1988, GEOID12B, NAPGD 2022). Note any vertical transformations applied.

**National Spatial Reference System Modernization Guidance**

As the NSRS is modernized, datasets should transition to:

- North American-Pacific Geopotential Datum of 2022 (NAPGD 2022)

- **Web Services:** ArcGIS Online web services are typically served in WGS 1984 Web Mercator (EPSG:3857). If the source data uses a different projection, note the native CRS in the description and metadata.

**DGGS Example**

The DGGS Alaska Volcanoes dataset uses NAD 1983 Alaska Albers (horizontal) for its source data. The item description clearly notes: "Horizontal: NAD 1983 (2011) Alaska Albers (EPSG:6393). Web services are reprojected to WGS 1984 Web Mercator (EPSG:3857) for display."

# 9. Item Description Best Practices

The item description is the most important piece of free-text metadata. It is what users read to decide whether a dataset meets their needs.

**Be thorough.** A strong description addresses the following fields. Use the table below as a template. The DGGS example column illustrates how each field might be completed for an Alaska dataset.

## Description Template

| Field | Guidance | DGGS Example |
|---|---|---|
| **What is this dataset?** | A concise statement of what the data represents and its geographic scope. | *This web map documents the location and most recent eruptive events of the historically active volcanoes throughout Alaska, maintained by the Division of Geological & Geophysical Surveys (DGGS).* |
| **Purpose** | Why was the data created? What decisions or applications does it support? | *This dataset was developed to support volcanic hazard awareness, emergency preparedness, and scientific research related to Alaska's active volcanoes.* |
| **Source and Lineage** | Who created or compiled the data? What source materials were used? | *Data was compiled by the Alaska Division of Geological & Geophysical Surveys (DGGS) in cooperation with the Alaska Volcano Observatory (AVO), drawing on USGS and university research records.* |

| Field | Guidance | DGGS Example |
|---|---|---|
| **Coordinate Reference System** | Horizontal and vertical datum and projection used. | *Horizontal: NAD 1983 (2011) Alaska Albers (EPSG:6393). Data is served in WGS 1984 Web Mercator Auxiliary Sphere (EPSG:3857) for web display.* |
| **Update Frequency** | How often is the data updated? Is it a living dataset or a point-in-time snapshot? | *This is a living dataset. It is reviewed and updated by DGGS as new eruptive events occur or as additional volcano information becomes available.* |
| **Known Limitations** | Any caveats about accuracy, completeness, or appropriate use. | *Volcano locations represent approximate summit or vent positions. Eruptive history records vary in completeness, particularly for remote volcanoes with limited observation records. Not suitable for site-specific hazard delineation without additional analysis.* |
| **Contact** | Name, organization, and email for the responsible data steward. | *State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources, Division of Geological & Geophysical Surveys (DGGS). Contact: dggspubs@alaska.gov* |

**Formatting Tip**

Use line breaks or simple HTML formatting in the ArcGIS Online description editor to separate each section visually. Bold the field labels (e.g., "Purpose:", "Source:", "Coordinate Reference System:") for easy scanning.

## 10. Tags: How Users Find Data

Tags power keyword searching in the Geoportal and provide a mechanism for structured browsing and thematic filtering both within the Geoportal and within the Geoportal's Digital Atlas and Catalog Layer applications. Tags are essential to enable user search and discovery of an organization's data in the Geoportal.

## Recommended Tag Hierarchy

Apply tags in the following priority order:

- **Alaska Geoportal tags (recommended):** At least one tag from the Alaska Geoportal list below (title case, exact match). Example: "Water & Hydrography"
- **Jurisdiction tags (recommended):** "Alaska" is strongly recommended. Add the borough, municipality, or community name if the data is not statewide. Add regional context where helpful (e.g., "Chugach State Park").
- **Organization tag (recommended):** The name or official abbreviation of the stewarding organization (e.g., "SOA" or "State of Alaska").
- **Program or division (if applicable):** E.g., "DGGS," "Division of Geological & Geophysical Surveys."
- **Descriptive keywords:** Additional terms that describe the content (e.g., "landslides," "minerals," "wildfire," "roads"). Use lowercase except for proper nouns.
- **Lifecycle tag (recommended):** One of: "living," "real-time," "deprecated," or "archive."

## Alaska Geoportal Tags – for thematic filtering and grouping capabilities

The following table lists a set of key tags that the Geoportal uses to improve data discovery from the end user perspective. Data stewards should assign at least one of the tags below to every item.

| Alaska Geoportal Tags |
|---|
| Address |
| Boundaries |
| Community |
| Energy |
| Hazards |
| Land Records & Ownership |
| Land Use & Cover |

| Alaska Geoportal Tags |
| --- |
| Natural Resources |
| Transportation |
| Water & Hydrography |
| Wildlife & Fisheries |
| Coastal & Marine |
| Demographics |
| Economy |
| Elevation & Terrain |
| Emergency Management |
| Environment & Contamination |
| Geology & Mining |
| Imagery |
| Recreation |
| Utilities & Telecom |
| Cultural & Historical |
| Education |
| Geodetic Control |
| Health |
| Infrastructure & Facilities |
| Public Safety |
| Weather & Climate |

**DGGS Example — Tags for Alaska Volcanoes**

Hazards, Alaska, DGGS, volcanoes, eruptions, volcanic activity, Alaska Volcano Observatory, living

**Standardized Organization Names**

Before publishing, agree on the standard form of your organization's name and use it consistently across all items. Avoid creating duplicate entries like "DGGS," "Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys," and "AK DGGS." Pick one and stick with it.

# 11. Item Settings That Matter

Several ArcGIS Online item settings directly affect data quality and trust. Review these settings for every dataset published to the Geoportal:

- **Mark as Authoritative** when appropriate — this adds a visible badge that helps users identify trusted sources
- **Enable delete protection** — prevents accidental removal of published datasets
- **Disable editing** for public layers — use view layers if internal edits are needed
- **Set the geographic extent** — improves map display and spatial search results
- **Allow data exports** — enables users to download data in multiple formats
- **Enable sync** — if offline use is required

Taking time to review these settings can help prevent data loss, misuse, or confusion.

# 12. Sharing Data to the Geoportal

AGO uses ArcGIS Online Open Data groups to index content. Once shared correctly, datasets automatically appear in the Geoportal without additional steps. For data to appear in the Geoportal, items need to be shared publicly (everyone).

## Sharing Models

There are three workflows for sharing data with the Alaska Geoportal:

| Model | Best For | How It Works | Key Benefit |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Traditional Group Sharing (Recommended)** | Most organizations; simple open data sharing | AGO invites partner to a shared ArcGIS Online group; partner shares items to that group **OR** Partner adds data to an ArcGIS Online group and shares group to the Geoportal | Easy setup; scalable; minimal admin overhead |
| **Partnered Collaboration** | Organizations needing closer coordination | Two ArcGIS Online organizations establish a formal partnership enabling shared content access | Shared editing and deeper collaboration across agencies |
| **Distributed Collaboration** | Complex enterprise-level workflows | Uses collaboration workspaces to sync or replicate content between ArcGIS Online and ArcGIS Enterprise | Supports syncing, scheduled updates, and cross-platform sharing |

## How Traditional Group Sharing Works (Recommended)

### Option 1

**Step 1: Group Invitation.** The AGO administrator invites the partnering organization to the "Alaska Geoportal Partner Shared Content" group in ArcGIS Online. The partner accepts the invitation, and the group appears in the partner's group listing.

**Step 2: Share Data.** The partner shares their authoritative content to the shared content group via the item's Share settings. Items should also be shared with "Everyone" (public) to be discoverable in the Geoportal.

### Option 2

**Step 1: Share Data.** The partnering organization creates a 'DGGS Geoportal Content' group. Partner shares authoritative content to the group via the item's Share settings. Items should also be shared with "Everyone" (public) to be discoverable in the Geoportal.

**Step 2: Group Invitation.** The partner invites the AGO administrator to the group and the 'DGGS Geoportal Content' group in ArcGIS Online. The AGO administrator accepts the invitation, the group is shared to the Geoportal Content group and data appears in the Geoportal.

# 13. Terms of Use

Establishing clear terms of use is a valuable step for any organization publishing data to the Geoportal. Terms of use communicate to the public what they can and cannot do with your data, protect your organization legally, and set expectations for attribution and modification.

## Why Terms of Use Matter

Without stated terms of use, users may be uncertain whether they can legally use, redistribute, or modify your data. This uncertainty discourages reuse and undermines the goal of an open data portal. Clear terms of use build trust, encourage appropriate reuse, and give your organization control over how its data is cited and credited.

## Choosing a License or Terms Statement

Organizations should work with their legal or policy teams to determine the appropriate license or terms for their data. Common options include:

### Creative Commons Licenses

Creative Commons (CC) licenses[7] are widely used for open government data. The most common options are:

- **CC0 (Public Domain Dedication):** No rights reserved. Data may be used for any purpose without attribution. Used by many federal agencies.
- **CC BY 4.0 (Attribution):** Users must credit the source but may otherwise use, share, and adapt the data freely. Recommended for most state and local government data.
- **CC BY-SA 4.0 (Attribution-ShareAlike):** Same as CC BY, but derivative works must use the same license.

- **CC BY-NC 4.0 (Attribution-NonCommercial):** Users must credit the source and may not use the data for commercial purposes.

### Custom Terms of Use

Some organizations prefer custom terms that address specific concerns. At minimum, custom terms should address permitted uses, attribution requirements, restrictions on misrepresentation, and a disclaimer of warranties.

> **DGGS Example — Terms of Use**
> Any hard copies or published datasets utilizing these datasets shall clearly indicate their source. If the user has modified the data in any way, the user is obligated to describe the types of modifications the user has made. User specifically agrees not to misrepresent these datasets, nor to imply that changes made by the user were approved by the State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources, Division of Geological & Geophysical Surveys.

### Federal Data (USGS, NOAA, and Others)

Most federal data is in the public domain and not subject to copyright. However, agencies may still have terms regarding attribution, disclaimer, and appropriate use. When republishing or referencing federal data, check the source agency's data policy and note it in your terms of use.

## Best Practices for Terms of Use

- Every item published to the Geoportal should have terms of use filled in — leaving this field blank can create uncertainty for users
- Use plain language that non-specialists can understand
- If your organization uses a Creative Commons license, state the license type and version explicitly (e.g., "CC BY 4.0")
- Include your organization's standard attribution statement
- If custom terms are required, have them reviewed by your organization's legal or policy team
- Be consistent — use the same terms across all items published by your organization, unless specific datasets have different requirements

# 14. Credits

The Credits field in ArcGIS Online identifies the individual or organization that produced or provided the data. This information appears at the bottom of the map when the layer is added to a web map. Credits are important for establishing provenance and building user trust.

## Best Practices for Credits

- Consider crediting the originating organization rather than individual staff members
- Use the official organization name consistently
- If data was compiled from multiple sources, list all contributing agencies
- Include the division or program name for large organizations

> **DGGS Example — Credits**
> State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources, Division of Geological & Geophysical Surveys (DGGS)

# 15. Archiving and Retiring Data

Thoughtful lifecycle management preserves trust and prevents broken dependencies.

## Archiving Data

Make a copy to archive content periodically while maintaining Item IDs and service URLs for the current (living) version. The frequency of archiving will vary based on the nature of the dataset and your organization's data governance. Append the date to the title of archived copies.

Layers without dates in their titles are assumed to be current. Dates represent the time period of the data or the archive date. Express dates as year (YYYY), year-month (YYYY-MM), or year-month-day (YYYY-MM-DD) per ISO 8601.

### Retiring (Deprecating) Data

Where possible, avoid deleting datasets abruptly and provide transitions to newer versions[4]:

- Mark the item as deprecated in ArcGIS Online to display a warning badge
- Update the item description to note the deprecation and link to the replacement dataset
- Add the "deprecated" lifecycle tag
- Notify known dependent users or applications before removal
- Allow a reasonable transition period (30–90 days recommended) before deletion

> **DGGS Example — Archiving**
> DGGS archives snapshots of its Alaska Volcanoes dataset periodically. The current, actively maintained version uses the title "Alaska Volcanoes" with the "living" lifecycle tag. Archived snapshots are titled "Alaska Volcanoes 2024" and tagged with "archive."

## 16. Summary

Consistent application of these practices ensures that Alaska's geospatial data:

- Remain authoritative and trusted
- Are easy to find and reuse
- Support emergency response, planning, research, and decision-making
- Maximize the return on public investment

Data stewards are foundational to Alaska's geospatial infrastructure. Your commitment to data quality, thorough documentation, and responsible stewardship ensures that authoritative data can be used with confidence - supporting health and human services, safeguarding life and communities, and advancing economic and infrastructure development across the state.

# References


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3. *Nauman, R., & Meriam, E. (2023, November 1). Swapping layers: A great way to build and maintain your feature layer.* ArcGIS Blog. Esri.
4. *Scopel, C. (2021, September 14). A process for deprecating maps and layers.* ArcGIS Blog. Esri.
5. *Configure item details and settings.* ArcGIS Online Help. Esri. https://doc.arcgis.com/en/arcgis-online/manage-data/configure-item-details.htm
6. *Best practices for editing metadata.* ArcGIS Pro Documentation. Esri.
7. *Creative Commons Licenses.* Creative Commons. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/


# Appendix A: Capitalization Quick Reference

## Capitalization Conventions

Consistent capitalization improves readability and professionalism across the Geoportal. Throughout this guide and in all data published to the Geoportal, we recommend following these conventions:

- **Item Titles:** Use title case. Capitalize all major words; lowercase articles, prepositions, and conjunctions of three or fewer letters unless they begin the title. Example: “Alaska Volcanoes 2020”
- **Tags:** Use lowercase for all tags except proper nouns (e.g., “volcanoes,” “Alaska,” “Matanuska-Susitna Borough”).

- **Alaska Geoportal Tags:** Use title case exactly as they appear in the official Alaska Geoportal tag list (see Section 10). Example: “Water & Hydrography,” not “water & hydrography.”
- **Descriptions and Summaries:** Use standard sentence case. Capitalize the first word of each sentence and proper nouns.
- **Organization Names:** Always use the full official name on first reference, followed by the abbreviation in parentheses. Use the abbreviation consistently thereafter. Example: “Division of Geological & Geophysical Surveys (DGGS)”
- **Field Names and Attributes:** Follow the conventions established in your data schema. When displayed to end users, use title case.

> **Capitalization Quick Reference**
> Titles = Title Case | Tags = lowercase (except proper nouns) | Alaska Geoportal Tags = Title Case (match official list) | Descriptions = Sentence case | Organization Names = Official spelling with abbreviation

## Appendix B: Item Description Template (Copy-Paste)

Copy the following structure into the ArcGIS Online description editor for each new item. Replace the bracketed placeholders with your dataset-specific information. Bold the field labels for visual clarity.

```
What is this dataset?
[Describe the dataset in one to two sentences.]

Purpose:
[Why was this data created? What decisions does it support?]

Source and Lineage:
[Who created this data? What source materials were used?]

Coordinate Reference System:
Horizontal: [Datum and projection, e.g., NAD 1983 (2011) Alaska Albers (EPSG:6393)]
Vertical: [If applicable, e.g., NAVD 1988]

Update Frequency:
```

[Living/annual/one-time snapshot? When was it last updated?]

**Known Limitations:**
[Any caveats about accuracy, completeness, or appropriate use.]

**Contact:**
[Name, organization, and email for the data steward.]