

Ecological site R034AA228UT

Semi-desert Gravel (Bluebunch wheatgrass/ Wyoming big sagebrush)

Last updated: 2/21/2025
 Accessed: 06/03/2026

General information

Provisional. A provisional ecological site description has undergone quality control and quality assurance review. It contains a working state and transition model and enough information to identify the ecological site.

MLRA notes

Major Land Resource Area (MLRA): 034A–Cool Central Desertic Basins and Plateaus

Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) 34A, Cool Central Desertic Basins and Plateaus, consists of approximately 21 million acres in Wyoming, Colorado and Utah, it consists of 11 Land Resource Units (LRU). These units are divisions of the MLRA based on geology, landscape, common soils, water resources and plant community potentials. The elevation spans from approximately 5600 feet (1700 m) along the Green River in UT and CO to approximately 9500 feet (2900 m) near Jeffrey City, WY. Annual precipitation ranges from 7 to 16 inches (177 to 406 mm), with the driest areas in the Green River and Great Divide Basins and the wettest areas in northern Carbon County, Southeast Fremont County and Albany County. There is a seasonal weather pattern that trends west to east, with more winter precipitation in the west and more spring/summer in the east, illustrated by diminishing amounts of Big Sagebrush in the eastern part of the MLRA.

LRU notes

The Bear River Valley LRU is located on the far western side of MLRA 34A between the Bear River Divide and the Monte Cristo Range, from Woodruff, Utah at the southern end to Cokeville, Wyoming at the northern end. The total area of the LRU is approximately 340,000 acres. It shares a boundary with MLRA 47, 43B and 46 (proposed). This LRU differs from the others in its geology, which is comprised mostly of alluvium and colluvium from the Stump Formation. Its weather patterns are such that the soil moisture is xeric, there is a slight peak in winter precipitation in this LRU, with typical yearly precipitation between 9 to 15 inches (230 to 380 mm). The soil temperature regime of this LRU is frigid with mean annual soil temperatures ranging from 44 to 48 degrees Fahrenheit (6.7 to 8.8°C). The elevation range is from 5700 to 7000 feet (1730 to 2130 m). The soils in the Bear River Valley are dominated by young aged very deep soils developed from sandstone and shale parent material re-worked with recent alluvium. Soils are dominated by Alfisols with young argillic horizons and by Fluvents in more recent alluvium. The Bear River runs through this LRU, allowing for ample amounts of irrigation water used in the lowland areas to produce hay. Smaller tributaries originating from the neighboring mountains.

Ecological site concept

- This site does not receive any additional water.
- These soils:
 - o are not saline or saline-sodic
 - o are moderately deep to deep
 - o are skeletal within 20" of the soil surface; and have greater than 35 percent rock fragments in the soil subsurface
 - o are not strongly or violently effervescent in the surface mineral layer (within top 10")
 - o have surface textures that usually range from sandy loam to loam in surface mineral layer (4")
- have slopes less than 30 percent
- clay content is not greater than 35% in mineral soil surface layer (1-2")

Associated sites

R034AA235UT	Semi-desert Shallow Loam (Wyoming big sagebrush)
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Similar sites

R034AY212WY	Gravelly Foothills and Basins West (Gr)
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R034AY162WY	Shallow Loamy Green River and Great Divide Basins (SwLy)
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Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	(1) <i>Artemisia tridentata</i> var. <i>wyomingensis</i>
Herbaceous	(1) <i>Pseudoroegneria spicata</i>

Physiographic features

This site is located on toes slopes, alluvial fans, and ridges at elevations between 5,700 and 7,000 feet. It occurs on all aspects at slopes between 3 and 30 percent. Runoff is medium and flooding and ponding do not occur on this site.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Alluvial fan (2) Ridge
Flooding frequency	None
Ponding frequency	None
Elevation	1,740 – 2,130 m
Slope	0 – 30 %
Water table depth	150 cm
Aspect	Aspect is not a significant factor

Climatic features

The climate is characterized by warm, dry summers and cold, snowy winters. This climate is modified by local topographic conditions. The mountains appreciably modify both the precipitation and temperature patterns. April, May, September and October are the wettest months; December, January, February and July are the driest.

Table 3 Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (average)	80 days
Freeze-free period (average)	110 days

Precipitation total (average)	330 mm
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Influencing water features

This site is not typically influenced by streams or wetlands.

Wetland description

N/A

Soil features

This soils of this site are moderately deep to deep and formed in alluvium and colluvium derived from limestone, sandstone, and conglomerate rocks. Surface and subsurface textures are gravelly loams and sandy loams. Rock fragments are usually found on the soil surface and throughout the soil profile. These soils are somewhat excessively well-drained and permeability is moderate to moderately-rapid. Available water-holding capacity ranges from 3 to 6 inches in the upper 40 inches of soil. The soil moisture regime is xeric and the soil temperature regime is frigid.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Alluvium – metamorphic and sedimentary rock (2) Colluvium – metamorphic and sedimentary rock
Surface texture	(1) Gravelly loam (2) Sandy loam
Family particle size	(1) Loamy
Drainage class	Somewhat excessively drained
Permeability class	Moderate to moderately rapid
Soil depth	50 – 150 cm
Surface fragment cover <=3"	20 – 40 %
Surface fragment cover >3"	20 – 60 %
Available water capacity (0-101.6cm)	7.62 – 15.24 cm
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-101.6cm)	8.4 – 10

Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (Depth not specified)	20 – 90 %
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (Depth not specified)	0 – 40 %

Ecological dynamics

It is impossible to determine in any quantitative detail the Reference Plant Community for this ecological site because of the lack of direct historical documentation preceding all human influence. In some areas, the earliest reports of dominant plants include the cadastral survey conducted by the General Land Office, which began in the late 19th century for this area (Galatowitsch 1990). However, up to the 1870s the Shoshone Indians, prevalent in northern Utah and neighboring states, grazed horses and set fires to alter the vegetation for their needs (Parson 1996). In the 1860s, Europeans brought cattle and horses to the area, grazing large numbers of them on unfenced parcels year-long (Parson 1996). Itinerant and local sheep flocks followed, largely replacing cattle as the browse component increased.

Below is a State and Transition Model diagram to illustrate the “phases” (common plant communities), and “states” (aggregations of those plant communities) that can occur on the site. Differences between phases and states depend primarily upon observations of a range of disturbance histories in areas where this ESD is represented. These situations include grazing gradients to water sources, fence-line contrasts, patches with differing dates of fire, herbicide, treatment, tillage, etc. Reference State 1 illustrates the common plant communities that probably existed just prior to European settlement.

The major successional pathways within states, (“community pathways”) are indicated by arrows between phases. “Transitions” are indicated by arrows between states. The drivers of these changes are indicated in codes decipherable by referring to the legend at the bottom of the page and by reading the detailed narratives that follow the diagram. The transition between Reference State 1 and State 2 is considered irreversible because of the naturalization of exotic species of both flora and fauna, possible extinction of native species, and climate change. There may have also been accelerated soil erosion.

When available, monitoring data (of various types) were employed to validate more subjective inferences made in this diagram. See the complete files in the office of the State Range Conservationist for more details.

The plant communities shown in this State and Transition Model may not represent every possibility, but are probably the most prevalent and recurring plant communities. As more monitoring data are collected, some phases or states may be revised, removed, and/or new ones may be added. None of these plant communities should necessarily be thought of as “Desired Plant Communities.” According to the USDA NRCS National Range & Pasture Handbook (USDA-NRCS 2003), Desired Plant Communities (DPC’s) will be determined by the decision-makers and will meet minimum quality criteria established by the NRCS. The main purpose for including descriptions of a plant community is to capture the current knowledge at the time of this revision.

State and transition model

Figure 3. State and Transition Model

Additional community tables

Table 5. Community 1.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 6. Community 1.2 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 7. Community 1.3 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 8. Community 2.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 9. Community 2.2 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 10. Community 2.3 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 11. Community 3.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 12. Community 4.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 13. Community 5.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Animal community

The suitability for livestock grazing is fair to good. This site provides grazing for cattle and sheep year-round, however prolonged heavy grazing during spring will lead to loss of the perennial grasses and expansion of unpalatable shrubs and exotics.

Inventory data references

Data gathered by qualified range professionals within NRCS and cooperating partners.

Other references

Galatowitsch, S.M. 1990. Using the original land survey notes to reconstruct pre-settlement landscapes in the American West. Great Basin Naturalist: 50(2): 181-191. Keywords: [Western U.S., conservation, history, human impact]

Noy-Meir I. 1973. Desert ecosystem: environment and producers. Annual review of ecology and systematics: 4: 25–51.

Parson, R. E. 1996. A History of Rich County. Utah State Historical Society, County Commission, Rich County, Utah. Keywords: [Rich County, Utah, Historic land use, European settlements]

USDA-NRCS. 2003. National Range and Pasture Handbook. in USDA, editor, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service-Grazing Lands Technology Institute. Keywords: [Western US, Federal guidelines, Range pasture management]

Woodland, R.D. 2007. Influence of fall grazing by sheep on plant productivity, shrub age class structure, and herbaceous species diversity in sagebrush steppe. Master’s Thesis, Utah State University, Utah, USA.

Contributors

USU

Approval

Kirt Walstad, 2/21/2025

Rangeland health reference sheet

Interpreting Indicators of Rangeland Health is a qualitative assessment protocol used to determine ecosystem condition based on benchmark characteristics described in the Reference Sheet. A suite of 17 (or more) indicators are typically considered in an assessment. The ecological site(s) representative of an assessment location must be known prior to applying the protocol and must be verified based on soils and climate. Current plant community cannot be used to identify the ecological site.

Author(s)/participant(s)	
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Contact for lead author	
Date	02/21/2025
Approved by	
Approval date	
Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on	Annual Production

Indicators

1. Number and extent of rills:

2. Presence of water flow patterns:

3. Number and height of erosional pedestals or terracettes:

4. Bare ground from Ecological Site Description or other studies (rock, litter, lichen, moss, plant canopy are not bare ground):

5. Number of gullies and erosion associated with gullies:

6. Extent of wind scoured, blowouts and/or depositional areas:

7. Amount of litter movement (describe size and distance expected to travel):

8. Soil surface (top few mm) resistance to erosion (stability values are averages - most sites will show a range of values):

9. Soil surface structure and SOM content (include type of structure and A-horizon color and thickness):

10. Effect of community phase composition (relative proportion of different functional groups) and spatial distribution on infiltration and runoff:

11. Presence and thickness of compaction layer (usually none; describe soil profile features which may be mistaken for compaction on this site):

12. Functional/Structural Groups (list in order of descending dominance by above-ground annual-production or live foliar cover using symbols: >>, >, = to indicate much greater than, greater than, and equal to):

Dominant:

Sub-dominant:

Other:

Additional:

13. Amount of plant mortality and decadence (include which functional groups are expected to show mortality or decadence):

14. Average percent litter cover (%) and depth (in):

15. Expected annual annual-production (this is TOTAL above-ground annual-production, not just forage annual-production):

16. Potential invasive (including noxious) species (native and non-native). List species which BOTH characterize degraded states and have the potential to become a dominant or co-dominant species on the ecological site if their future establishment and growth is not actively controlled by management interventions. Species that become dominant for only one to several years (e.g., short-term response to drought or wildfire) are not invasive plants. Note that unlike other indicators, we are describing what is NOT expected in the reference state for the ecological site:

17. Perennial plant reproductive capability:
