

Ecological site R040XD003CA

Rocky Slopes

2-4" p.z.

Last updated: 3/04/2025
Accessed: 09/08/2026

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): 040X–Sonoran Basin and Range

Site Type: Rangeland MLRA Description: Major land resource area (MLRA) 31 is the Lower Colorado Desert. This area is in the extreme southeastern part of California, in areas along the Colorado River, and in Western Arizona. The area is comprised of rough, barren, steep, and strongly dissected mountain ranges, generally northwest to southwest trending that are separated by intermontane basins. Elevation ranges from approximately 275 feet below sea level at the lowest point in the Salton Trough to 2700 feet along low northwest to southeast trending mountain ranges. The average annual precipitation is 2 to 6 inches with high temporal and spatial variability. Winter temperatures are mild, summer temperatures are hot, and seasonal and diurnal temperature fluctuations are large. Monthly minimum temperature averages range from 40 to 80 degrees F (4 to 27 degrees C). Monthly maximum temperature averages range from 65 to 110 degrees F (18 to 43 degrees C). Temperatures are rarely below 28 degrees F, and extremely rarely fall below 24 degrees F. Precipitation is bimodal, with approximately 20 to 40 percent of annual precipitation falling between July and September. This summer rainfall, in combination with very hot temperatures and very few to no days of hard freeze are what characterize this MLRA and distinguish it from the Mojave Desert (MLRA 30).

Classification relationships

NDDB/Holland, R.F. 1986. Preliminary descriptions of the terrestrial natural communities of California - Mojave Creosotebush Scrub. ; Sawyer, J.O. and T. Keeler-Wolf. 1995. Manual of California Vegetation - Brittlebush Series.

Ecological site concept

This ecological site occurs on primarily on south facing hill and slopes, but may also occur on ballenas, and steep side slopes of fan remnants. Slopes range from 15 to 50 percent, and elevations are between 460 and 2030 feet. Soils are typically very shallow to shallow, but may be very deep soils on the alluvial soils of the ballenas and fan remnants. Production reference value (RV) is 250 pounds per acre, and depending on precipitation and annual forb production, ranges from 100 to 400 pounds per acre. Brittlebush (*Encelia farinosa*) and creosote bush (*Larrea tridentata*) dominate the site. Hot soil temperatures on warm landscape positions favor dominance by the drought-tolerant but cold-intolerant brittlebush. Data ranges in the physiographic data, climate data, water features, and soil data sections of this Ecological Site Description are based on major components only (15 percent of map unit or greater).

Associated sites

R040XD010CA	Valley Wash This ephemeral stream has a large drainage basin, and is in broad valleys, which are distal from the mountains. Desert willow and blue paloverde are common.
R040XD001CA	Limy Hill 4-6" p.z. This ecological site is on north facing hills, burrobush and creosote bush are dominant.

R040XD017CA	Steep Granitic Slope 4-6" p.z. This ecological site occurs on hills with burrobrush, teddybear cholla, creosote bush, and a mix of other species.
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Similar sites

R030XD003CA	Hyperthermic Steep South Slopes This ecological site is on hyperthermic soils in the Mojave Desert, it has higher production, but similar species.
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Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	(1) <i>Encelia farinosa</i> (2) <i>Larrea tridentata</i>
Herbaceous	(1) <i>Eriogonum deflexum</i> (2) <i>Plantago ovata</i>

Physiographic features

This site occurs on hills, ballenas and steep side slopes of fan remnants. It is typically associated with south facing slopes, but at lower elevations may occur on all aspects. Slopes range from 15 to 50 percent, and elevations range from 460 to 2030 feet.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Hill (2) Ballena
Flooding frequency	None
Ponding frequency	None
Elevation	140 – 620 m
Slope	20 – 50 %
Aspect	SE, S, SW

Climatic features

The Colorado Desert of California represents the northwestern most portion of the Sonoran Desert. The subtropical Colorado Desert results from the descent of cold air which is heated by compression and arrives hot and dry at the earth's surface. Precipitation is frontal in nature during the winter and convectional in the summer. Reduced summer rainfall and high potential evapo-transpiration make the Colorado Desert one of the most arid regions in North America. Summer temperatures frequently exceed 105 degrees F. The average annual precipitation ranges from 2 to 6 inches with most falling as rain. Snowfall is rare. Approximately 35% of annual precipitation occurs

from July to September as a result of intense convection storms. Spring months are the windiest.

Table 3 Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (average)	370 days
Freeze-free period (average)	370 days
Precipitation total (average)	150 mm

Influencing water features

Soil features

The soils associated with this ecological site range from very shallow over bedrock to very deep. Soils typically have minimal soil development, and are skeletal, with gravel surface textures and very gravelly or extremely gravelly subsurface textures. These soils are well to somewhat excessively drained with moderate to rapid permeability. The soils associated with this ecological site occur on hillslopes and formed from colluvium and residuum derived from granitoid or andesitic rock or basalt; or soils occur on steep sideslopes of fan remnants formed in alluvium from granitoid or gneiss parent material; or on ballenas formed in alluvium derived from granitic sources.

The associated soil series that are 15 percent or greater of any one map unit are: Emptygun (sandy-skeletal, mixed, hyperthermic Typic Haplocalcids); Goldroad (loamy-skeletal, mixed, superactive, calcareous, hyperthermic Lithic Torriorthents); Sunrock (loamy-skeletal, mixed, superactive, calcareous, hyperthermic Lithic Torriorthents), and Whipple (loamy-skeletal, mixed, superactive, hyperthermic Lithic Haplargids). The Emptygun soils are very deep and formed in alluvium on fan remnants or ballenas. They have a sandy skeletal particle control section. The Goldrose and Sunrock soils are very shallow to shallow with loamy skeletal particle control sections. The Goldrose and Sunrock soils differ in that the Sunrock soils are dominated by fine and medium sand in the particle control section and formed from volcanic parent material rather than granitoid. The Whipple soils have an argillic horizon, from 2 to 14 inches over bedrock, with an extremely gravelly sandy loam or extremely gravelly loam texture.

NOTE: The Goldrose and Sunrock soils correlated below in CA803 need to be updated. They are MLRA 30 (Mojave Desert) soils, and need to be developed as MLRA31 (Colorado Desert) soils.

This ecological site has been correlated to the following mapunits in the Colorado Desert Area Soil Survey (CA803):

1200; Goldroad very gravelly sandy loam, 15 to 50 percent slopes; Goldroad;; 80
 1211;Stormjade-Whipple complex, 8 to 50 percent slopes;Whipple;warm;151400; Sunrock complex, 8 to 50 percent slopes;Sunrock;warm;25
 1402;Sunrock-Cheme family-Rock outcrop association, 8 to 50 percent slopes;Sunrock;warm;3
 1403;Sunrock-Emptygun-Rock outcrop association, 8 to 50 percent slopes;Sunrock;warm;45
 2002; Emptygun association, 8 to 60 percent slopes; Emptygun; warm; 5

This ecological site has been correlated to the following mapunits in the Joshua Tree National Park Soil Survey (CA794):

2003; Emptygun fine sandy loam, 15 to 50 percent slopes; Emptygun;; 100

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Colluvium – granite
Surface texture	(1) Very gravelly sandy loam (2) Extremely gravelly loamy sand (3) Very gravelly fine sandy loam
Family particle size	(1) Loamy

Drainage class	Well drained to somewhat excessively drained
Permeability class	Moderate to moderately rapid
Soil depth	10 cm
Surface fragment cover <=3"	60 – 90 %
Surface fragment cover >3"	0 – 30 %
Available water capacity (0-101.6cm)	0.25 – 6.86 cm
Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-101.6cm)	0 – 20 %
Electrical conductivity (0-101.6cm)	Not specified
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-101.6cm)	0 – 10
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-101.6cm)	7.4 – 8.4
Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (Depth not specified)	20 – 80 %
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (Depth not specified)	0 – 10 %

Ecological dynamics

Abiotic Factors

The most important abiotic factors driving this site are a hot climate with hyperthermic soil temperatures, steep slopes and skeletal soils. This ecological site is associated with hot landscape positions, so at higher elevations and more westerly positions, this site is associated with south-facing aspects, but at lower elevations this site may occur on all aspects. These factors favor dominance by the extremely drought-tolerant, but cold-intolerant brittlebush, with creosote bush as an important secondary shrub.

Throughout its range, brittlebush is most abundant on steeper south-facing slopes (McAuliffe and Devender 1998, Martre et al. 2002). When dominant on lower landscape positions, such as alluvial fans, it is generally a disturbance community (Sawyer et al. 2009). Steeper slopes experience greater degrees of water stress (Monson et al. 1992, Martre et al. 2002), and brittlebush is more competitive in these positions (Ehleringer 1988). Brittlebush is an extremely drought-tolerant, drought-deciduous shrub. Adaptations in degree of leaf pubescence and leaf size allow brittlebush to occupy sites ranging from relatively mesic coastal environments to extremely arid deserts (Ehleringer and Cook 1990, Sandquist and Ehleringer 1997, Housman et al. 2002, Sandquist and Ehleringer 2003).. Desert plants have smaller, more pubescent leaves, and a more compact growth form. Smaller more pubescent leaves reduce leaf temperatures and increases water use efficiency. The tradeoff is that plant productivity declines because smaller leaves have less surface area available for photosynthesis, and because pubescence reduces the absorption of solar radiation (Housman et al. 2002, Sandquist and Ehleringer 2003).

While leaf and shoot-adaptations allow brittlebush to withstand hot temperatures and extreme aridity, freezing temperatures restrict brittlebush. Frosts cause branch die-back and mortality in adult brittlebush (Sandquist and Ehleringer 1996), and reduce seedling establishment (Bowers 1994). Brittlebush seedlings emerge over multiple pulses in response to cool season rains, with emergence triggered by a minimum of 19 mm of precipitation, and seedlings are killed if freezing temperatures occur within nine days of the trigger event (Bowers 1994). Warm, south-facing slopes experience fewer and less severe frosts, allowing brittlebush populations to persist without damage. Further, optimal soil temperatures for root growth of established brittlebush occur over winter, and conditions are more favorable on warm, south-facing slopes (Martre et al. 2002).

This site is associated with skeletal soils and gravelly textures. Throughout its range, brittlebush dominance is associated with rocky soils and is not dominant on clayey or sandy soils (Tesky 1993). This is probably because brittlebush has less of a competitive advantage on these soils, and other species are better able to dominate.

Disturbance Dynamics

The disturbances impacting this ecological site include drought, invasion by non-native species and fire.

Desert regions are characterized by low mean annual precipitation and extreme variability in the amount of precipitation received in any year or decade (Hereford et al. 2006). Thus, episodic mortality in response to periods of drought is important in shaping desert community dynamics (Hereford et al. 2006, Miriti et al. 2007). This ecological site is buffered from severe drought-induced impacts by the physiological adaptations of brittlebush. Brittlebush can vary the degree of leaf pubescence in response to periods of drought, where each successive leaf cohort produces more pubescence over the course of a drought (Sandquist and Ehleringer 2003). Individuals are able to continue photosynthesizing during drought, although at reduced rates of production.

The hot temperatures and skeletal soils of this ecological site reduce available soil moisture, which limits the susceptibility of this site to invasion by non-native annuals. However, microsites that are sheltered by large rock fragments and/or that receive additional run-on are susceptible to invasion by non-native annuals including red-stemmed stork's bill (*Erodium cicutarum*) and Mediterranean grass (*Schismus barbatus*). These non-native annuals may usurp space from native annuals that also depend on these microsites for establishment.

The low potential for high biomass of annual species limits the continuity of fine fuels in this site, and reduces the susceptibility of this site to fire. However brittlebush can reach high densities, and since this site occurs on steep slopes over which fire may rapidly move, this site may burn during conditions of extreme fire behavior. If this ecological site does burn, a brittlebush dominated community recovers rapidly (Brown and Minnich 1986, Steers and Allen 2011), so this ecological site is not considered at risk of transitioning to a fire-altered State.

State and transition model

Figure 3. R031XY003CA Model

Additional community tables

Table 5. Community 2.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
Shrub/Vine					
1	Shrubs			96-359	
	brittlebush	ENFA	Encelia farinosa	46-168	–
	creosote bush	LATR2	Larrea tridentata	16-101	–
	burrobush	AMDU2	Ambrosia dumosa	15-56	–
	Schott's pygmycedar	PESC4	Peucephyllum schottii	4-17	–
	white ratany	KRGR	Krameria grayi	1-17	–
2	Cacti			3-16	

	California barrel cactus	FECY	<i>Ferocactus cylindraceus</i>	0-6	–
	strawberry cactus	MADI3	<i>Mammillaria dioica</i>	0-4	–
	beavertail pricklypear	OPBA2	<i>Opuntia basilaris</i>	1-3	–
	spinystar	ESVI2	<i>Escobaria vivipara</i>	0-2	–
8	Ocotillo			0-2	
	ocotillo	FOSP2	<i>Fouquieria splendens</i>	0-2	–
Grass/Grasslike					
4	Perennial grasses			3-17	
	purple threeawn	ARPU9	<i>Aristida purpurea</i>	1-11	–
	low woollygrass	DAPU7	<i>Dasyochloa pulchella</i>	1-6	–
5	Annual Grasses			2-7	
	sixweeks threeawn	ARAD	<i>Aristida adscensionis</i>	1-3	–
	sixweeks grama	BOBA2	<i>Bouteloua barbata</i>	1-3	–
9	Non-native grass			0-3	
	Mediterranean grass	SCHIS	<i>Schismus</i>	0-3	0-2
Forb					
6	Perennial Forbs			4-22	
	Parry's false prairie-clover	MAPA7	<i>Marina parryi</i>	0-22	0-20
	California fagonbush	FALA	<i>Fagonia laevis</i>	0-22	–
7	Annual Forbs			2-22	
	sowthistle desertdandelion	MASO	<i>Malacothrix sonchoides</i>	0-17	–
	cryptantha	CRYPT	<i>Cryptantha</i>	0-11	–
	desert Indianwheat	PLOV	<i>Plantago ovata</i>	1-6	–
	flatcrown buckwheat	ERDE6	<i>Eriogonum deflexum</i>	1-3	–
	Emory's rockdaisy	PEEM	<i>Perityle emoryi</i>	0-3	–
	trailing windmills	ALIN	<i>Allionia incarnata</i>	0-3	–
	bristly fiddleneck	AMTE3	<i>Amsinckia tessellata</i>	0-3	–
	largebract spiderling	BOWR	<i>Boerhavia wrightii</i>	0-3	–

Table 6. Community 2.2 plant community composition

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

This site provides habitat for small mammals such as canyon mice, long-tailed pocket mice, white-tailed antelope squirrels and desert woodrats. This site also provides habitat for reptiles such as the western whiptail, desert collared lizard, side-blotched lizard and the chuckwalla. The depth to bedrock is a restrictive feature to burrowing reptiles such as the desert tortoise. Birds that may frequent this site include common ravens, rock wrens, Says phoebes, species of sparrows and raptors.

Recreational uses

This site is highly valued for open space and those interested in desert ecology. Uses include mountain biking, hiking, bird watching and botanizing. Desert tortoise and wildflowers may also attract visitors during the spring.

Inventory data references

The following plot is from Joshua Tree National Park. 1247710310 The type location for the ecological site is listed below in the Chemehuevi OHV Area.

Type locality

Location 1: San Bernardino County, CA	
UTM zone	N
UTM northing	3802439
UTM easting	720120
Latitude	34° 20'23"
Longitude	114° 36'25"
General legal description	This site is located several miles east of West Well in Chemehuevi Wash OHV area.

Other references

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with contrasting desert environments. *New Phytologist* 135:635-644.

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Western Regional Climate Center, Desert Research Institute, Reno, Nevada (<http://www.wrcc.dri.edu/index.html>)

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Approval

Kendra Moseley, 3/04/2025

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)	P Novak-Echenique; Dustin Detweiler
Contact for lead author	State Rangeland Management Specialist
Date	07/19/2010
Approved by	
Approval date	
Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on	Annual Production

Indicators

1. **Number and extent of rills:** Rills are none to rare. A few rills can be expected on steeper slopes in areas recently subjected to summer convection storms. Rock fragments armor the surface.

2. **Presence of water flow patterns:** Water flow patterns are none to rare but can be expected in areas recently subjected to summer convection storms, usually on steeper slopes.

3. **Number and height of erosional pedestals or terracettes:** Pedestals are none to rare. Occurrence is usually limited to areas of water flow patterns.

4. **Bare ground from Ecological Site Description or other studies (rock, litter, lichen, moss, plant canopy are not bare ground):** Bare Ground 2-5%; there is very little bare ground due to high gravel, cobble, stone and boulder cover.

5. **Number of gullies and erosion associated with gullies:** None

6. **Extent of wind scoured, blowouts and/or depositional areas:** None

7. **Amount of litter movement (describe size and distance expected to travel):** Fine litter (foliage from grasses and annual & perennial forbs) expected to move until trapped under surface fragments or other plants. Persistent litter (large woody material) will remain in place except during catastrophic events.

8. **Soil surface (top few mm) resistance to erosion (stability values are averages - most sites will show a range of values):** Soil stability values should be 1 to 4 on most soil textures found on this site. (To be field tested.)

9. **Soil surface structure and SOM content (include type of structure and A-horizon color and thickness):** Surface structure is typically moderate thick platy to weak fine subangular blocky structure. Soil surface colors are light brown and soils are typified by an ochric epipedon. Organic matter of the surface horizon is typically <1 percent dropping off quickly below. Organic matter content can be more or less depending on micro-topography.

10. **Effect of community phase composition (relative proportion of different functional groups) and spatial distribution on infiltration and runoff:** Shrub canopy and associated litter break raindrop impact.

11. **Presence and thickness of compaction layer (usually none; describe soil profile features which may be mistaken for compaction on this site):** Compacted layers are not typical.

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: Mojave Desert shrubs

Sub-dominant: perennial forbs > annual forbs > perennial grasses > annual grasses

Other:

Additional:

13. **Amount of plant mortality and decadence** (include which functional groups are expected to show mortality or decadence):
Dead branches within individual shrubs common and standing dead shrub canopy material may be as much as 25% of total woody canopy.
-

14. **Average percent litter cover (%) and depth (in):** Between plant interspaces up to 5%.
-

15. **Expected annual annual-production** (this is TOTAL above-ground annual-production, not just forage annual-production):
For normal or average growing season $\pm$ 250 lbs/ac.
-

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: Invaders on this site include red-stem filaree, red brome, and Mediterranean grass.
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17. **Perennial plant reproductive capability:** All functional groups should reproduce in average (or normal) and above average growing season years.
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