

Ecological site R046XC597MT

Saline Lowland (SL)

RRU 46-C 15-19 PZ

Last updated: 2/11/2025
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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): 046X–Northern and Central Rocky Mountain Foothills

Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) 46, Rocky Mountain Foothills, is approximately 11.6 million acres. MLRA 46's extent has changed over recent years and is now primarily located in Montana and Wyoming with limited acres in Utah and Colorado. It spans from the Canadian border south to the Uinta Mountains of Northwest Colorado. MLRA 46 is a transitional MLRA between the plains and mountains of primarily non-forested rangeland. In Montana, three Land Resource Units (LRUs) exist based on differences in geology, landscape, soils, water resources, and plant communities. Elevations for this MLRA in Montana vary from a low of 3200 to 6500 feet (975 to 1981m) however the elevations on the fringes of this MLRA may fall outside of that range in extremely small isolated areas where the boundaries between neighboring MLRAs are not easily defined. Annual precipitation ranges from 8 inches (254 mm) to, in very isolated areas, 42 inches (1083 mm). In general precipitation rarely exceeds 24 inches (610 mm). Frost-free days are variable from 50 days near the Crazy and Beartooth Mountains to 130 days in the foothills south of the Bear's Paw Mountains of Central Montana. The geology of MLRA 46 is generally Cretaceous and Jurassic marine sediments. MLRA 46's plant communities are dominated by cool season bunchgrasses with mixed shrubs. This MLRA is rarely forested; however, ponderosa and limber pine do occupy areas. Portions of this MLRA may have a subdominance of warm-season mid-statured bunchgrasses like little bluestem; however, the general concept of the MLRA does not have a large component of warm-season species. Wyoming big sagebrush, mountain big sagebrush, silver sagebrush, common snowberry, and shrubby cinquefoil tend to be the dominant shrub component. The kind and presences of shrubs tends to be driven by a combination of soils and climate. Due to the variable nature of the Land Resources Units, Climatic subsets will be necessary to describe the ecological sites and the variation of plant communities for this MLRA.

LRU notes

LRU C is generally located in Central Montana. It borders the Little Belt Mountains, Highwood Mountains, Snowy Mountains (Big and Little), Crazy Mountains, and Castle Mountains. Included in this LRU are the foothills of the island mountain groups of the Bear's Paw and Little Rocky Mountains. This LRU borders MLRAs 43B, 52 and 58. LRU C is the second largest of the LRUs located in Montana occupying approximately 2.6 million acres. Cities and towns located in this LRU includes Stanford, Lewistown, Grass Range, and Harlowton. Elevation ranges from 2880 feet (878 m) to 6783 feet (2068 m). The geology is sedimentary in nature with the majority including the Colorado Shale Formation, Kootenai Formation (mixed sedimentary), Mississippian Formation (carbonatic sedimentary), terrace deposits (alluvium), Tertiary mixed sedimentary. Areas of the Claggett Formation (mudstone), Devonian (carbonatic sedimentary) as well as intrusive and extrusive volcanics (mixed) exist in the foothills of the island mountains. Landforms include hillslopes, drainage ways, fan remnants, valleys, and escarpments. This LRU is dominated by deep, well drained soils. Soil depth is mixed with 45 percent moderately-deep, 45 percent very deep, and 10 percent other soil depth. Slopes are most frequently 0 to 15 percent and 15 to 30 percent, while higher sloping areas (30 to 45 percent) exist along the Little Belt and Highwood interfaces. Slightly acid to moderately alkaline soils throughout. Small areas of moderately acid soils exist in places, in particular around Highwoods. Vast differences in soil texture within LRU exist likely due to the variation in parent material. The climate of this LRU is classic to the MLRA concept. The precipitation falls primarily as rain in the spring however areas may receive high amounts of snowfall (i.e. Lewistown). Precipitation ranges are from 13.7 inches (348 mm) to a rare 37.4 inches (942 mm) with 16 inches as an average. This LRU has an average air temperature of 44 degrees Fahrenheit (6.75 degrees C) with a range of 38 degrees Fahrenheit (3.38 degrees C) to 47.3 degrees Fahrenheit (8.52 degrees C). Frost-free days tends to be one of the longest of the Montana LRUs with a range of 70-130 days. Soil moisture regime is ustic with a frigid soil temperature regime. Due to the variability in climate of this LRU, climatic subsets will be necessary to accurately describe the ecological processes. Major watersheds within this LRU include Big Spring Creek, Judith River, Swimming Woman Creek, and Musselshell River. These watersheds provide irrigation water for production of small grains and hay. As these watersheds leave the neighboring MLRA 43B, these river systems offer fishing and other recreational opportunities. Cropland conversion is the largest land conversion within this LRU. Small grains such as wheat and barley are the most common particularly in Judith Basin County. Conversion to recreational property is becoming a more frequent occurrence, particularly near Lewistown.

Ecological site concept

• Site receives additional effective moisture because of run-in or stream overflow • Seasonal water table greater than or equal to 40 inches from ground surface • Soil saline (EC greater than 4 within surface 4 inches) • Salt tolerant plants dominate site

Associated sites

R046XC603MT	Saline Upland (SU) RRU 46-C 15-19 PZ Site has similar plant community and is typically located slightly higher on the landscape.
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Similar sites

R046XC603MT	Saline Upland (SU) RRU 46-C 15-19 PZ Site has similar plant community but produces much less vegetation.
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Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	(1) <i>Sarcobatus vermiculatus</i> (2) <i>Krascheninnikovia lanata</i>
Herbaceous	(1) <i>Sporobolus airoides</i> (2) <i>Leymus cinereus</i>

Physiographic features

This ecological site occurs on overflow lands where salt and/or alkali accumulations are apparent and salt-tolerant species dominate the plant community. It is associated mainly with ephemeral streams (those that flow only in response to a precipitation event or snow melt, and the water table is lower than the channel bottom).

The site is nearly level to gently sloping; rarely exceeding 5 percent slope.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Foothills > Slough (2) Foothills > Stream terrace (3) Foothills > Fan (4) Foothills > Swale (5) Foothills > Pothole
Flooding duration	Extremely brief (0.1 to 4 hours) to brief (2 to 7 days)
Flooding frequency	None to rare

Elevation	1,100 – 1,770 m
Slope	0 – 10 %
Water table depth	100 cm
Aspect	Aspect is not a significant factor

Climatic features

The climate of the Saline Lowland site falls into Climatic Subset B. The central concept of Climatic Subset B is 15 to 19 inches Relative Effective Annual Precipitation (REAP) and 70 to 130 days frost-free. Calculated averages based on climate stations suggest that this ecological site receives just over 16 inches of precipitation with 76 to 111 frost-free days.

The soil temperature regime for this Saline Lowland Ecological Site is Frigid and the soil moisture regime is Ustic

Table 3 Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (characteristic range)	50-90 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	100-120 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	380-430 mm
Frost-free period (actual range)	40-130 days
Freeze-free period (actual range)	70-130 days
Precipitation total (actual range)	380-480 mm
Frost-free period (average)	80 days
Freeze-free period (average)	110 days
Precipitation total (average)	410 mm

- (1) JUDITH GAP 13 E [USC00244545], Judith Gap, MT
- (2) HOBSON [USC00244193], Hobson, MT
- (3) MOCCASIN EXP STN [USC00245761], Moccasin, MT
- (4) DENTON [USC00242347], Denton, MT
- (5) STANFORD [USC00247864], Stanford, MT
- (6) LEWISTOWN MUNI AP [USW00024036], Lewistown, MT
- (7) GRASS RANGE [USC00243727], Grass Range, MT

Influencing water features

Site is located at the bottom third of the slope where run-in or stream overflow brings saline or alkali water to or near the surface where salt accumulate. This site may have a seasonal water table as close as 40 inches from the surface. Seasonal water flows as a result of high precipitation events or spring snowmelt. These areas may also be associated near springs or seeps that travel through salt laden material.

Wetland description

Site is not considered a wetland

Soil features

The soils on this site are moderately to strongly saline, medium- to fine-textured, moderately deep to deep, but poorly developed. This site has a seasonal high water table that is deeper than 40 inches. Soils tend to be saline or sodic. Soluble salt accumulations are often apparent at or near the surface. Most herbaceous roots extend less than 20 inches below the soil surface. Surface textures are mainly silty clay, silty clay loam, clay loam and loam. Permeability varies with surface texture and the amount of salt and/or sodium present. Soil ph varies from 7.4 – 9.0.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Alluvium – sedimentary rock
Surface texture	(1) Clay loam (2) Loam (3) Silty clay loam (4) Silty clay
Family particle size	(1) Fine (2) Fine-loamy
Drainage class	Moderately well drained to somewhat poorly drained
Permeability class	Moderately slow to very slow
Electrical conductivity (0-101.6cm)	0 – 20 mmhos/cm
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-101.6cm)	10 – 30
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-101.6cm)	7.4 – 10

Table 5. Representative soil features (actual values)

Drainage class	Not specified
Permeability class	Not specified
Electrical conductivity (0-101.6cm)	Not specified
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-101.6cm)	0 – 40
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-101.6cm)	Not specified

Ecological dynamics

The Saline Lowland (SL) Ecological Site is characterized by the production and composition of the Reference Plant Community, which is defined by soils, precipitation, and the temperature regime influencing the site. The Saline Lowland ecological site receives additional effective moisture from offsite runoff from precipitation events or stream overflow. The site has saline or saline-sodic conditions within 4 inches of the soil surface which is expressed as an Electrical Conductivity of 4-30 mmhos/cm. This site may also have a seasonal water table within 40 inches of the soil surface.

In the Rocky Mountain Foothills of Central Montana, MLRA 46X LRU B is found where an Ustic soil moisture regime occurs. This area is typified by a frigid soil temperature phase which receives a yearly representative value of 15 to 19 inches of relative effective annual precipitation and between 70 and 110 consecutive frost-free days annually.

Much of the precipitation comes in May and June. Primary plant growth typically occurs between May and early July however due to the increased soil moisture the growing season is extended longer into the summer than other sites in this MLRA. Dominant plants are those that have adapted to these conditions. A period of fall "green-up" can occur amongst this cool season dominated plant community if adequate precipitation is present.

The reference plant community is dominated by alkali sacaton (*Sporobolus airoides*), basin wildrye (*Leymus cinereus*), western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*), alkali cordgrass (*Spartina gracilis*), and Sandberg bluegrass (*Poa secunda*). Subdominant species may include black greasewood (*Sarcobatus vermiculatus*), big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), winterfat (*Krascheninnikovia lanata*) and Gardner's saltbush (*Atriplex gardnerii*).

As the community changes away from reference, cool season shortgrasses tend to increase. If allowed to continue non-native grasses (cheatgrass, field brome, and ventenata) tend to take over the site. Throughout this time bare ground increases exponentially. The short rooted nature of the sodforming grasses erosion can occur rapidly.

Historical records indicate, prior to the introduction of livestock (cattle and sheep) during the late 1800's, elk and bison grazed this ecological site. Due to the nomadic nature and herd structure of bison, areas that were grazed received periodic high intensity short duration grazing pressure.

Livestock grazing has occurred on most of this ecological site for more than 150 years. The gold boom in the 1860s brought the first herds of livestock overland from Texas, and homesteaders began settling the area. During this time cattle were the primary domestic grazers in the area.

Natural fire was a frequent ecological driver of this Ecological Site however due to the relatively low plant density and fire resistant plants (saltbush and greasewood) stand replacement was rare. The reference community with a high amount of herbaceous growth as a result of favorable growing conditions has the highest susceptibility to extreme fire. A herbaceous invaded community that contains high amounts of exotic annual grasses can greatly increase risk of fire frequency and intensity resulting in potential removal of native species.

Some of the major invasive species that can occur on this site include (but not limited to) spotted knapweed (*Centaurea stoebe*), leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula*), cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), dandelion (*Taraxicum* spp), and Kentucky

bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*). Invasive weeds have a high impact on this Ecological Site.

Plant Communities and Transitions

A State and Transition Model for this ecological site is depicted below. Thorough descriptions of each state, transition, plant community, and pathway follow the model. This model is based on available experimental research, field data, field observations, and interpretations by experts. It is likely to change as knowledge increases.

The plant communities within the same ecological site will differ across the MLRA due to the naturally occurring variability in weather, soils, and aspect. The biological processes on this site are complex; therefore, representative values are presented in a land management context. The species lists are representative and are not botanical descriptions of all species occurring, or potentially occurring, on this site. They are intended to cover the core species and known range of conditions and responses. Both percent species composition by weight and percent canopy cover are referenced in this document. Canopy cover drives the transitions between communities and states because of the influence of shade, interception of rainfall and competition for available water. Species composition by dry weight remains an important descriptor of the herbaceous community and of the community as a whole. Woody species are included in species composition for the site. Calculating similarity index requires use of species composition by dry weight.

Although there is considerable qualitative experience supporting the pathways and transitions within the State and Transition Model (STM), no quantitative information exists that specifically identifies threshold parameters between grassland types and invaded types in this ecological site. For information on STMs, see the following citations: Bestelmeyer et al. 2003, Bestelmeyer et al. 2004, Bestelmeyer and Brown 2005, Stringham et al. 2003.

State and transition model

Additional community tables

Table 6. Community 1.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 7. Community 1.2 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 3.1 plant community composition

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

The Saline Lowland Ecological site provides for a variety of wildlife habitat for an array of species. Prior to the settlement of this area, large herds of antelope, elk and bison roamed. Though the bison that once utilized this landscape have been replaced with domestic livestock, wildlife still utilize this largely intact landscape for habitat. The relatively high grass component of the Reference Community provides excellent nesting cover for multiple neotropical migratory birds as well as provide hiding habitat for larger animals. Greater Sage Grouse likely utilize most states of this ecological site as there are high amounts of forbs and insects as a result of the favorable soil moisture. Even in the Shortgrass State, sage grouse will utilize the increased forb and shrub cover for both foraging and hiding cover. This site would be considered critical habitat for most lifestages of Greater Sage Grouse. Managed livestock grazing is suitable on this site due to the potential to produce an abundance of high quality forage. This is often a preferred site for grazing by livestock, and animals tend to congregate in these areas. In order to maintain the productivity of this site, grazing on adjoining sites with less production must be managed carefully to be sure utilization on this site is not excessive. Management objectives should include maintenance or improvement of the native plant community. Careful management of timing and duration of grazing is important. Shorter grazing periods and adequate deferment during the growing season are recommended for plant maintenance, health, and recovery. Continual non-prescribed grazing of this site will be injurious, will alter the plant composition and production over time, and will result in transition to the Shortgrass State. Transition to other states will depend on duration of poorly managed grazing as well as other circumstances such as weather conditions and fire frequency. Further degradation will result in transition to the Invaded State. Management should focus on grazing management strategies that will prevent further degradation, such as seasonal grazing deferment or winter grazing where feasible. Communities within this state are still stable and healthy under proper management. Forage quantity and/or quality may be substantially decreased from the Reference State. Grazing is possible in the Invaded State. Invasive species are generally less palatable than native grasses. Forage production is typically greatly reduced in this state. Due to the aggressive nature of invasive species, sites in the Invaded State face increased risk for further degradation. Grazing has to be carefully managed to avoid further soil loss and degradation and possible livestock health issues. Prescriptive grazing can be used to manage invasive species. In some instances, carefully targeted grazing (sometimes in combination with other treatments) can reduce or maintain species composition of invasive species.

Inventory data references

Information presented was derived from NRCS inventory data, National Resources Inventory (NRI) data, literature, field observations, and personal contacts with range-trained personnel (i.e., used professional opinion of agency specialists, observations of land managers, and outside scientists).

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Contributors

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Approval

Kirt Walstad, 2/11/2025

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)	Grant Petersen
Contact for lead author	grant.petersen@usda.gov
Date	08/05/2020
Approved by	
Approval date	
Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on	Annual Production

Indicators

1. **Number and extent of rills:** Rills are not present in the reference state

2. **Presence of water flow patterns:** Water flow patterns will not be present in the Reference State

3. **Number and height of erosional pedestals or terracettes:** Pedestals and terracettes will not be present in the Reference State

4. **Bare ground from Ecological Site Description or other studies (rock, litter, lichen, moss, plant canopy are not bare ground):**
Bare ground is extremely limited due to high amounts of herbaceous growth and litter. Bare ground may be expressed in very small

patches of up to 5 percent.

5. Number of gullies and erosion associated with gullies: Gullies will not be present in the Reference State
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6. Extent of wind scoured, blowouts and/or depositional areas: Wind scoured, blowouts, and/or depositional areas will not be present in the Reference State.
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7. Amount of litter movement (describe size and distance expected to travel): No litter movement is expected in the Reference State.
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8. Soil surface (top few mm) resistance to erosion (stability values are averages - most sites will show a range of values): This site is stable due to deep rooted nature of the bunchgrass dominated community. Stability ratings of 5 to 6 under both canopy and ratings of 3-5 in plant interspaces are expected. .
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9. Soil surface structure and SOM content (include type of structure and A-horizon color and thickness): Soil Structure at the surface is weak subangular blocky to weak fine granular. A Horizon should be 4-8 inches thick with color, when wet, typically ranging in Value of 5 or less and Chroma of 4 or less. Local geology may affect color, it is important to reference the Official Series Description (OSD) for characteristic range. <https://soilseries.sc.egov.usda.gov/osdname.aspx>
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10. Effect of community phase composition (relative proportion of different functional groups) and spatial distribution on infiltration and runoff: 90-95% plant canopy and 80-85% basal cover with small gaps between plants should reduce raindrop impact and slow overland flow, providing increased time for infiltration to occur. Healthy, deep rooted native grasses enhance infiltration and reduce runoff. Infiltration rate is moderate to very slow. If in plant community A, 90-95% plant canopy and 70-80% basal cover with small gaps between plants will still reduce raindrop impact and decrease overland flow.
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11. Presence and thickness of compaction layer (usually none; describe soil profile features which may be mistaken for compaction on this site): A compaction layer is not present in the reference condition. Soil profile may contain an abrupt transition to an Argillic horizon which can be misinterpreted as compaction, however, the soil structure will be fine to medium subangular blocky, where a compaction layer will be platy or structureless (massive).
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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: Tall, warm season bunch grasses = mid-stature, cool season bunch grasses >> mid-stature cool season rhizomatous grasses >> sedges and rushes >> short, warm season rhizomatous grasses

Sub-dominant: forbs = shrubs.

Other:

Additional:

13. Amount of plant mortality and decadence (include which functional groups are expected to show mortality or decadence):
Mortality in herbaceous species is not evident. Species with bunch growth forms may have some natural mortality in centers is 3% or less.
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14. Average percent litter cover (%) and depth (in): Litter cover is high and ranges from 50-65 percent. Litter depth is highly variable from nearly immeasurable in plant interspaces to very thick (1 inch) under plants. Averages are 0.25 to 0.5 inches deep.
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15. Expected annual annual-production (this is TOTAL above-ground annual-production, not just forage annual-production):
Total vegetative production averages 3000 lbs/ac, 4500 lbs/ac as a high, and 1750 lbs/ac as a low Production varies based on effective precipitation and natural variability of soil properties for this ecological site.
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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: Potential invasive (including noxious) species (native and non-native). Invasive species on this ecological site include (but not limited to): annual brome spp., spotted knapweed, leafy spurge, crested wheatgrass, salsify, and halogeton Native species such as rocky mtn Juniper, ponderosa pine, pricklypear cactus, broom snakeweed, Sandberg's bluegrass, etc. when their populations are significant enough to affect ecological function, indicate site condition departure.
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17. Perennial plant reproductive capability: In the reference condition, all plants are vigorous enough for reproduction either by seed or rhizomes in order to balance natural mortality with species recruitment.
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