

Ecological site FX052X01X022

Loamy Gravel (Logr)

Dry Grassland

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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): 052X–Brown Glaciated Plains

The Brown Glaciated Plains, MLRA 52, is an expansive and agriculturally and ecologically significant area. It consists of approximately 14.5 million acres that stretches across 350 miles from east to west, encompassing portions of 15 counties in north-central Montana. This region represents the southwestern limit of the Laurentide Ice Sheet and is considered to be the driest and westernmost area within the vast network of glacially derived prairie pothole landforms of the northern Great Plains. Elevation ranges from 2,000 feet (610 meters) to 4,600 feet (1,400 meters). Soils are primarily Mollisols, but Entisols, Inceptisols, Alfisols, and Vertisols are also common. Till from continental glaciation is the predominant parent material, but alluvium and bedrock are also common. Till deposits are typically less than 50 feet thick, and in some areas glacially deformed bedrock occurs at or near the soil surface (Soller, 2001). Underlying sedimentary bedrock largely consisting of Cretaceous shale, sandstone, and mudstone (Vuke et al., 2007) is commonly exposed on hillslopes, particularly along drainageways. Significant alluvial deposits occur along glacial outwash channels and major drainages which include portions of the Missouri, Teton, Marias, Milk, and Frenchman Rivers. Large glacial lakes, particularly in the western half of the MLRA, deposited clayey and silty lacustrine sediments (Fullerton et al., 2013). Much of the western portion of this MLRA was glaciated towards the end of the Wisconsin age, with the maximum glacial extent occurring approximately 20,000 years ago (Fullerton et al., 2004). The result is a geologically young landscape that is predominantly a level till plain interspersed with lake plains and dominated by soils in the Mollisol and Vertisol orders. These soils are very productive and generally are well suited to dryland farming. Much of this area is aridic-ustic. Crop-fallow dryland wheat farming is the predominant land use. Areas of rangeland typically are on steep hillslopes along drainages. Rangeland, much of which is native mixedgrass prairie, increases in abundance in the eastern half of the MLRA. The Wisconsin-age till in the north-central part of this area typically formed large disintegration moraines with steep slopes and numerous poorly drained potholes. A large portion of Wisconsin-age till found on level terrain that would typically be optimal for farming has large amounts of less-suitable sodium-affected Natrustalfs. Significant portions of Blaine, Phillips, and Valley Counties were glaciated approximately 150,000 years ago during the Illinoian age. Due to erosion and dissection of the landscape, many of these areas have steeper slopes and more exposed bedrock than areas glaciated during the Wisconsin age (Fullerton et al. 1986). While much of the rangeland in the aridic-ustic portion of MLRA 52 is classified as belonging to the “dry grassland” climatic zone, sites in portions of southern MLRA 52 may belong to the “dry shrubland” climatic zone. The dry shrubland zone represents the northernmost extent of the big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) steppe on the Great Plains. Because similar soils occur in both southern and northern portions of the MLRA, it is currently hypothesized that climate is the primary driving factor affecting big sagebrush distribution in this area. However, the precise factors are not yet fully understood. Sizeable tracts of largely unbroken rangeland in the eastern half of the MLRA and adjacent southern Saskatchewan are home to the Northern Montana population of greater sage grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*), and large portions of this area are considered to be a Priority Area for Conservation (PAC) by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2013). This population is unique among sage grouse populations because many individuals overwinter in the big sagebrush steppe (dry shrubland) in the southern portion of the MLRA and then migrate to the northern portion of the MLRA, which lacks big sagebrush (dry grassland), to live the rest of the year (Smith, 2013). Areas of the till plain near the Bearpaw and Highwood Mountains as well as the Sweetgrass Hills and Rocky Mountain foothills are at higher elevations, receive higher amounts of precipitation, and have a typic-ustic moisture regime. These areas have significantly more rangeland production than the drier aridic-ustic portions of the MLRA and have enough moisture to produce a crop annually rather than just bi-annually, as in the drier areas. Ecological sites in this higher precipitation area are classified as the Moist Grassland climatic zone.

Classification relationships

NRCS Soil Geography Hierarchy • Land Resource Region: Northern Great Plains • Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) 052 Brown Glaciated Plains • Climate Zone: Dry Grassland National Hierarchical Framework of Ecological Units (Cleland et al., 1997; McNab et al., 2007) • Domain: Dry • Division: Temperate Steppe • Province: Great Plains-Palouse Dry Steppe Province 331 • Section: Northwestern Glaciated Plains 331D • Subsection: Montana Glaciated Plains 331Dh • Landtype association/Landtype phase: N/A National Vegetation Classification Standard (Federal Geographic Data Committee, 2008) • Class: Mesomorphic Shrub and Herb Vegetation Class (2) •

Subclass: Temperate and Boreal Grassland and Shrubland Subclass (2.B) • Formation: Temperate Grassland, Meadow, and Shrubland Formation (2.B.2) • Division: Great Plains Grassland and Shrubland Division (2.b.2.Nb) • Macrogroup: *Hesperostipa comata* – *Pascopyrum smithii* – *Festuca hallii* Grassland Macrogroup (2.B.2.Nb.2) • Group: *Hesperostipa comata* – *Bouteloua gracilis* Dry Mixedgrass Prairie Group (2.B.2.Nb.2.b) • Alliance: *Pseudoroegneria spicata* – *Pascopyrum smithii* – *Hesperostipa comata* Grassland Alliance • Association: No existing correlation EPA Ecoregions • Level 1: Great Plains (9) • Level 2: West-Central Semi-Arid Prairies (9.3) • Level 3: Northwestern Glaciated Plains (42) • Level 4: North Central Brown Glaciated Plains (42o) and Glaciated Northern Grasslands (42j)

Ecological site concept

This provisional ecological site occurs in the Dry Grassland climatic zone of MLRA 52. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of this ecological site based on current data. This map is approximate, is not intended to be definitive, and may be subject to change. Loamy Gravel Dry Grassland is an ecological site of limited extent, approximately 16,000 acres, occurring on most landscapes throughout MLRA 52. It occurs on outwash fans, terraces, and kames that have been overtopped with glacial till. Sand and gravel have been mixed with till material, resulting in a loamy skeletal soil profile. This site can be found on any slope or slope shape. The distinguishing characteristic of this site is that the upper 20 inches of soil is predominantly loamy skeletal, meaning that it contains 35 percent or more coarse fragments, has a texture class finer than loamy fine sand, and contains less than 35 percent clay (Soil Survey Staff, 2014). Soils for this ecological site are typically deep to very deep (more than 40 inches) and derived from alluvium or glacial outwash. Soil textures in the upper 4 inches are typically very gravelly loam or very gravelly clay loam, but soils may also have a loamy surface over loamy-skeletal material in some cases. Slopes are highly variable and may range from 0 to 60 percent. Characteristic vegetation is cool-season rhizomatous grasses and mid-statured, cool-season bunchgrasses. Shrubs are rare on this site, but silver sagebrush (*Artemisia cana*), may occur at 5 percent canopy cover or less.

Associated sites

FX052X01X062	Swale (Se) Dry Grassland The Swale Dry Grassland ecological site is downslope from the Loamy Gravel Dry Grassland ecological site. It is on similar landscapes but in swales that receive additional moisture.
FX052X01X032	Loamy (Lo) Dry Grassland The Loamy Dry Grassland ecological site is on similar landscapes and slope positions as the Loamy Gravel Dry Grassland ecological site. It is adjacent to Loamy Gravel Dry Grassland ecological site where slopes are less than 15 percent and coarse fragment content is less than 35 percent.
FX052X01X021	Sandy Gravel (Sygr) Dry Grassland The Sandy Gravel Dry Grassland ecological site is on similar landscapes and slope positions as the Loamy Gravel Dry Grassland ecological site. It is adjacent to Loamy Gravel Dry Grassland ecological site where fine-earth textures are loamy fine sand or coarser.

Similar sites

FX052X01X021	Sandy Gravel (Sygr) Dry Grassland This site differs from Loamy Gravel Dry Grassland ecological site in that its soils are sandy skeletal rather than loamy skeletal, meaning that fine-earth textures are loamy fine sand or coarser. Percent clay in the fine-earth fraction is typically less than 18 percent.
FX052X03X022	Loamy Gravel (Logr) Dry Shrubland This site differs from Loamy Gravel Dry Grassland ecological site in that it has slightly warmer annual temperatures and can support big sagebrush.

FX052X01X032	Loamy (Lo) Dry Grassland This site differs from Loamy Gravel Dry Grassland ecological site in that it contains less than 35 percent coarse fragments in the upper 20 inches of soil.
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Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	Not specified
Herbaceous	Not specified

Legacy ID

R052XY022MT

Physiographic features

Loamy Gravel Dry Grassland ecological site occurs on outwash fans, terraces, and kames where sand and gravel deposits have been mixed with till. This site is of limited extent in MLRA 52. This site is not affected by aspect.

Figure 1. Figure 1. General distribution of the Loamy Gravel Dry Grassland ecological site by map unit extent.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Outwash fan (2) Terrace (3) Kame
Elevation	610 – 1,180 m
Slope	0 – 60 %
Aspect	Aspect is not a significant factor

Climatic features

The Brown Glaciated Plains is a semi-arid region with a temperate continental climate that is characterized by frigid winters and warm to hot summers (Cooper et al., 2001). The average frost-free period for this ecological site is 120 days. The majority of precipitation occurs as steady, soaking, frontal system rains in late spring to early summer. Summer rainfall comes mainly from convection thunderstorms that typically deliver scattered amounts of rain in intense bursts. These storms may be accompanied by damaging winds and large-diameter hail and result in flash flooding along low-order streams. Severe drought occurs on average in 2 out of 10 ten years. Annual precipitation ranges from 10 to 14 inches, and 70 to 80 percent of this occurs during the growing season (Cooper et al., 2001). Extreme climatic variations, especially droughts, have the greatest influence on species cover and production (Coupland, 1958, 1961; Biondini et al., 1998).

During the winter months, the western half of MLRA 52 commonly experiences chinook winds, which are strong west to southwest

surface winds accompanied by abrupt increases in temperature. The chinook winds are strongest on the western boundary of the MLRA near the Rocky Mountain foothills and decrease eastward. In addition to producing damaging winds, prolonged chinook episodes can result in drought or vegetation kills due to the reaction of plants to a “false spring” (Oard, 1993).

Table 3 Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (average)	120 days
Freeze-free period (average)	140 days
Precipitation total (average)	310 mm

- (1) CARTER 14 W [USC00241525], Floweree, MT
- (2) CHESTER [USC00241692], Chester, MT
- (3) TIBER DAM [USC00248233], Chester, MT
- (4) HARLEM [USC00243929], Harlem, MT
- (5) MALTA 7 E [USC00245338], Malta, MT
- (6) TURNER 11N [USC00248415], Turner, MT
- (7) CONRAD [USC00241974], Conrad, MT
- (8) SHELBY [USC00247500], Shelby, MT
- (9) GLASGOW [USW00094008], Glasgow, MT
- (10) HAVRE CITY CO AP [USW00094012], Havre, MT

Influencing water features

This is a recharge upland ecological site. The high content of coarse fragments results in a very high infiltration rate. During peak precipitation periods, typically May and June, this site delivers moisture to downslope sites via subsurface flow. During intense precipitation events, the site may also deliver moisture to downslope sites via surface runoff. For the remainder of the year moisture loss exceeds precipitation and this ecological site is in a moisture deficit for the majority of the growing season. Soil moisture is the primary limiting factor for plant production on this ecological site.

Soil features

The central concept for this ecological site is not precisely represented by an existing soil series. The soil that is most similar to the central concept is the Beaverell soil. The Beaverell soil is in the Argiustolls great group. It is characterized by a mollic epipedon, gravelly loam surface textures, and very gravelly textures in the underlying horizons. The particle-size family is loamy skeletal over sandy skeletal, and the minerology is mixed. The typical parent materials for this soil is gravelly glaciofluvial deposits. The soil moisture regime for these and all other soils in this ecological site concept is ustic bordering on aridic, which means that the soils are moist in some or all parts for either 180 cumulative days or 90 consecutive days during the growing season but are dry in some or all parts for over 90 cumulative days. These soils have a frigid soil temperature regime (Soil Survey Staff, 2014).

Surface horizon textures in this site most commonly range from gravelly loam to gravelly clay loam. Some sites may have 2 to 7 inches of loam or silt loam surface horizons over very gravelly subsurface horizons. The underlying horizons contain 35 percent or more coarse fragments and typically have loam, clay loam, or silty clay loam textures. Sometimes, but not always, sandy skeletal layers are present at depths greater than 10 inches. Organic matter content in the surface horizon typically ranges from 1.5 to 3 percent, and moist colors vary from dark brown (10YR 3/3) to very dark brown (10YR 2/2). Calcium carbonate equivalent varies from 0 to 15 percent. In the upper 20 inches, electrical conductivity is less than 4 and the sodium absorption ratio is less than 13. Soil pH classes are moderately acid to slightly alkaline in the surface horizon and neutral to strongly alkaline in the subsurface horizons. The soil depth class for this site is typically deep to very deep (greater than 40 inches to bedrock). Content of coarse fragments is 35 percent or more in the upper 20 inches of soil.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Glaciofluvial deposits
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Surface texture	(1) Gravelly loam (2) Gravelly clay loam
Drainage class	Excessively drained
Soil depth	100 – 180 cm
Available water capacity (0-101.6cm)	4.83 – 5.33 cm
Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-12.7cm)	0 – 10 %
Electrical conductivity (0-50.8cm)	Not specified
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-50.8cm)	0 – 10
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-101.6cm)	5.6 – 10
Subsurface fragment volume ≤3" (0-50.8cm)	40 – 90 %
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (0-50.8cm)	40 – 90 %

Ecological dynamics

The information in this ecological site description, including the state-and-transition model (STM) (Figure 2), was developed based on historical data, current field data, professional experience, and a review of the scientific literature. As a result, all possible scenarios or plant species may not be included. Key indicator plant species, disturbances, and ecological processes are described to inform land management decisions.

The Loamy Gravel Dry Grassland provisional ecological site in MLRA 52 consists of five states: The Reference State (1.0), the Shortgrass State (2.0), the Invaded State (3.0), the Cropland State (4.0), and the Post-Cropland State (5.0). Plant communities associated with the Loamy Gravel Dry Grassland ecological site evolved under the combined influences of climate, grazing, and fire. Extreme climatic variability results in frequent droughts, which have the greatest influence on the relative contribution of species cover and production (Coupland, 1958, 1961; Biondini et al., 1998). Due to the dominance of cool-season graminoids, annual production is highly dependent upon mid- to late-spring precipitation (Heitschmidt and Vermeire, 2005; Anderson, 2006).

Native grazers also shaped these plant communities. American bison (*Bison bison*) were the dominant historic grazer, but pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*), elk (*Cervus canadensis*), and deer (*Odocoileus* spp.) were also common. Small mammals such as prairie dogs (*Cynomys* spp.) and ground squirrels (*Urocyon* spp.) also influenced this plant community (Salo et al., 2004). Grasshoppers and periodic outbreaks of Rocky Mountain locusts (*Melanoplus spretus*) also played an important role in the ecology of these communities (Lockwood, 2004).

The historic ecosystem experienced periodic lightning-caused fires with estimated fire-return intervals of 6 to 25 years (Bragg, 1995). Historically, Native Americans also set periodic fires. The majority of lightning-caused fires occurred in July and August, whereas Native Americans typically set fires during spring and fall to correspond with the movement of bison (Higgins, 1986). Generally, the mixedgrass ecosystem is resilient to fire and the primary effects of fire under the historic fire regime are reduction of litter and short-term fluctuations in production (Vermeire et al., 2011, 2014). However, studies have shown that shorter fire-return intervals can have a negative effect, shifting species composition toward warm-season, short-statured grasses (Shay et al., 2001; Smith and McDermid, 2014). Conversely, long-term fire suppression in the 20th century removed periodic fire from the ecosystem altogether. Lack of periodic fires can result in an increase in litter accumulation, which in some cases provides ideal conditions for seed germination and seedling establishment of non-native annual brome species, such as field brome or Japanese brome (*Bromus arvensis*; Whisenant, 1990). These species have become naturalized in relatively undisturbed grasslands (Ogle et al., 2003; Harmon, 2007) and can be present in any state within the scope of this ecological site. They typically do not have a significant ecological impact; however, their presence can reduce the production of cool-season perennial grasses in some cases (Haferkamp et al., 1997). Their abundance varies depending on precipitation and germination conditions.

Improper grazing of this site can result in a reduction in the cover of the mid-statured bunchgrasses, a decrease in cool-season wheatgrasses, and an increase in shortgrasses (Smoliak et al., 1972; Smoliak, 1974). Improper grazing practices include any practices that do not allow sufficient opportunity for plants to physiologically recover from a grazing event or multiple grazing events within a given year and/or that do not provide adequate cover to prevent soil erosion over time. These practices may include, but are not limited to, overstocking, continuous grazing, and/or inadequate seasonal rotation moves over multiple years. Periods of extended drought can reduce mid-statured bunchgrasses and cool-season rhizomatous wheatgrasses, triggering an increase in shortgrasses such as blue grama and prairie Junegrass (Coupland, 1961).

Further degradation of the site due to improper grazing can result in a community dominated by shortgrasses such as blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*) and prairie Junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*). The cover of mid-statured rhizomatous grasses and bunchgrasses is severely reduced or absent. The cover of prairie sagewort (*Artemisia frigida*) can also increase.

Due to the very low water holding capacity, this ecological site is not generally regarded as productive cropland. Regardless, many acres have been cultivated and planted to cereal grain crops, such as winter wheat, spring wheat, and barley. When this site is taken out of production, the site is either allowed to revert back to perennial grassland or is seeded with perennial species. Seeding of introduced grasses, particularly crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron cristatum*), was a common practice on eroded and abandoned agricultural areas after the droughts of the 1930s (Rogler and Lorenz, 1983). Crested wheatgrass is a highly drought tolerant and competitive cool season, perennial bunchgrass (DeLuca and Lesica, 1986). Crested wheatgrass can invade relatively undisturbed grasslands, reducing cover and production of native cool-season midgrasses (Heidinga and Wilson, 2002; Henderson and Naeth, 2005). Sites seeded with non-native species, particularly crested wheatgrass may persist as this cover type indefinitely (Christian and Wilson, 1999). The site may also be seeded to native species which provides species composition and structural complexity similar to that of the Reference State (1). However, it may take over 75 years for soil organic matter to return to its pre-disturbed state (Dormaar and Willms, 1990). Sites left to undergo natural plant succession after cultivation can, over several decades, support native vegetation similar to the Reference State (1), however, soil quality is consistently lower than under conditions prior to cultivation (Dormaar and Smoliak, 1985).

The state-and-transition model (STM) (Figure 2) suggests possible pathways that plant communities on this site may follow as a result of a given set of ecological processes and management. The site may also support states not displayed in the STM diagram. Landowners and land managers should seek guidance from local professionals before prescribing a particular management or treatment scenario. Plant community responses vary across this MLRA due to variability in weather, soils, and aspect. The reference community phase may not necessarily be the management goal. The lists of plant species and species composition values are provisional and are not intended to cover the full range of conditions, species, and responses for the site. Species composition by dry weight is provided when available and is considered provisional based on the sources identified in the narratives associated with each community phase.

State 1: Reference State

The Reference State (1) contains two community phases. This state evolved under the combined influences of climate, grazing, and fire with climatic variation having the greatest influence on cover and production. In general, this state was resilient to grazing and fire, although these factors could influence species composition in localized areas. Vegetation is characterized by mid-statured rhizomatous grasses, mid-statured, cool-season bunchgrasses, and short statured grasses. Dense clubmoss may or may not be present in this state. The dynamics of this species are not well understood and its abundance may vary greatly from site to site without discernable reason.

Phase 1.1: Mixedgrass Community Phase

The Mixedgrass Community Phase (1.1) is typically dominated by mid-statured rhizomatous grasses. Western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*) is the predominant rhizomatous wheatgrass although thickspike wheatgrass (*Elymus lanceolatus*) may also be present, particularly in the northern extent of this ecological site. Plains reedgrass (*Calamagrostis montanensis*) may also be common. Mid-statured, cool-season bunchgrasses commonly occur at 5 to 15 percent cover. Needle and thread (*Hesperostipa comata*) is the most

common bunchgrass, but other species that may occur on this site are plains muhly (*Muhlenbergia cuspidata*) and bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*). Short-statured grasses such as prairie Junegrass and blue grama are not abundant in this phase but are generally present at low cover. Sedges (*Carex* spp.) may also be present at low cover. Common forbs are spiny phlox or Hood's phlox (*Phlox hoodii*), and scarlet globemallow (*Sphaeralcea coccinea*). Shrubs and subshrubs comprise up to 5 percent of canopy cover. Silver sagebrush (*Artemisia cana*) and fringed sagewort are the most common species. The approximate species composition of the reference plant community is as follows:

Percent composition by weight*

Rhizomatous Wheatgrass 30-35%

Plains Reedgrass 5%

Needle and Thread 5-20%

Bluebunch Wheatgrass 0-20%

Blue Grama 5%

Prairie Junegrass 5%

Other Native Grasses 15%

Perennial Forbs 10%

Shrubs/Subshrubs 5%

Estimated Total Annual Production (lbs/ac)*

Low - 400

Representative Value - 600

High - 800

* Estimated based on current observation – subject to revision

Phase 1.2: At Risk Community Phase

In the At Risk Community Phase (1.2), mid-statured rhizomatous wheatgrasses are in nearly equal proportion to shortgrasses. Mid-statured bunchgrasses such as bluebunch wheatgrass have been nearly eliminated. Rhizomatous wheatgrasses are in decline in this phase while shortgrasses such as blue grama and prairie Junegrass are increasing. Prairie sagewort (*Artemisia frigida*), also known as fringed sagewort, may also increase in this phase.

Community Phase Pathway 1.1a

Drought, improper grazing management, multiple fires in close succession, or a combination of these factors can shift the Mixedgrass Community Phase (1.1) to the At Risk Community Phase (1.2). These factors favor a decrease in cool-season midgrasses and an increase in shortgrasses (Coupland, 1961).

Community Phase Pathway 1.2a

Normal or above-normal spring precipitation and proper grazing management can return The At Risk Community Phase (1.2) to the Mixedgrass Community Phase (1.1).

Transition T1A

Prolonged drought (approximately 3 years or more), improper grazing practices, or a combination of these factors weaken the resilience of the Reference State (1) and drive its transition to the Shortgrass State (2). The Reference State (1) transitions to the Shortgrass State (2) when cool-season midgrasses become rare and contribute little to production. Shortgrasses, particularly prairie Junegrass, and the warm-season, mat-forming blue grama dominate the plant community.

Transition T1B

The Reference State (1) transitions to the Invaded State (3) when aggressive perennial grasses or noxious weeds invade the Reference State (1). Crested wheatgrass is a common concern, particularly when native plant communities are adjacent to seeded pastures. Exotic plant species dominate the site in terms of cover and production. Site resilience has been substantially reduced. In addition, other rangeland health attributes, such as reproductive capacity of native grasses (Henderson and Naeth, 2005) and soil quality (Smoliak and Dormaar, 1985; Dormaar et al., 1995), have been substantially altered from the Reference State (1).

Transition T1C

Tillage or application of herbicide followed by seeding of cultivated crops, such as winter wheat, spring wheat, and barley, transitions the Reference State (1) to the Cropland State (4).

State 2: Shortgrass State

The Shortgrass State (2) consists of one community phase. The dynamics of this state are driven by long-term drought, improper grazing management, or a combination of these factors. The site is dominated by shortgrasses such as blue grama and prairie Junegrass. Mid-statured grasses such as western wheatgrass, needle and thread, and bluebunch wheatgrass have been eliminated or nearly so. Dense clubmoss may or may not be present in this state. The dynamics of this species are not well understood and its abundance may vary greatly from site to site without discernable reason.

Phase 2.1: Shortgrass Community Phase

In the Shortgrass Community Phase (2.1), mid-statured grasses have been largely eliminated and replaced by short-statured species,

such as blue grama, and prairie Junegrass. Blue grama resists grazing due to its low stature and extensive root system. Once established, blue grama-dominated communities can alter soil properties, creating conditions that resist establishment of other grass species (Dormaer and Willms, 1990; Dormaer et al., 1994). Prairie sagewort is also common in this phase.

Transition T2A

The Shortgrass State (2) transitions to the Invaded State (3) when aggressive perennial grasses or noxious weeds invade the Shortgrass State (2). Crested wheatgrass is a common concern, particularly when native plant communities are adjacent to seeded pastures. Exotic plant species dominate the site in terms of cover and production. Site resilience has been substantially reduced. In addition, other rangeland health attributes, such as reproductive capacity of native grasses (Henderson and Naeth, 2005) and soil quality (Smoliak and Dormaer, 1985; Dormaer et al., 1995), have been substantially altered from the Reference State (1).

Transition T2B

Tillage or application of herbicide followed by seeding of cultivated crops, such as winter wheat, spring wheat, and barley, transitions the Invaded State (3) to the Cropland State (4).

Restoration Pathway R2A

Blue grama can resist displacement by other species (Dormaer and Willms, 1990; Laycock, 1991; Dormaer et al., 1994; Lacey et al., 1995). Reduction in livestock grazing pressure alone may not be sufficient to restore the Shortgrass State (2) to the Reference State (1) (Dormaer and Willms, 1990). Practices such as mechanical treatment of grazing land and range seeding may be necessary (Hart et al., 1985), but these are management intensive and costly. Therefore, returning the Shortgrass State (2) to the Reference State (1) can require considerable energy and cost and may not be feasible within a reasonable amount of time.

State 3: Invaded State

The Invaded State (3) occurs when invasive plant species invade adjacent native grassland communities. Crested wheatgrass is a common concern, especially when native plant communities are adjacent to seeded pastures. An estimated 20 million acres of crested wheatgrass have been planted in the western U.S. (Holechek, 1981). Crested wheatgrass produces abundant seeds that can dominate the seedbank of invaded grasslands (Henderson and Naeth, 2005), although crested wheatgrass cover decreases with increasing distance from seeded areas (Heidinga and Wilson, 2002). The early growth of crested wheatgrass allows this species to take advantage of early season soil moisture, which may result in competitive exclusion of native cool-season rhizomatous wheatgrasses and bunchgrasses, such as needle and thread and prairie Junegrass (Christian and Wilson, 1999; Heidinga and Wilson, 2002; Henderson and Naeth, 2005). Reduced soil quality (Dormaer et al., 1995), reduced plant species diversity, and simplified structural complexity (Henderson and Naeth, 2005) result in a state that is substantially departed from the Reference State (1).

Noxious weeds such as leafy spurge are uncommon on this site but are capable of invading if a seed source is present. These species are very aggressive. They typically displace native species and dominate ecological function when they invade a site. Sometimes, these species can be suppressed through intensive management (herbicide application, biological control, or intensive grazing management). Control efforts are unlikely to eliminate noxious weeds, but their density can be sufficiently suppressed so that species composition and structural complexity are similar to that of the Reference State (1). However, cessation of control methods will most likely result in recolonization of the site by the noxious species.

Transition T3A

Tillage or application of herbicide followed by seeding of cultivated crops, such as winter wheat, spring wheat, and barley, transitions the Invaded State (3) to the Cropland State (4).

State 4: Cropland State

The Cropland State (4) occurs when land is put into cultivation. Major crops in MLRA 52 include winter wheat, spring wheat, and barley. On the Loamy Gravel Dry Grassland ecological site, this state typically occurs on slopes less than 8 percent.

Transition T4A

The transition from the Cropland State (4) to the Post-Cropland State (5) occurs with the cessation of cultivation. The site may also be seeded to perennial forage species. Such seedings may be comprised of introduced grasses and legumes, or a mix of native species.

State 5: Post-Cropland State

The Post-Cropland State (5) occurs when cultivated cropland is abandoned and allowed to either re-vegetate naturally or is seeded back to perennial species for grazing or wildlife use. This state can transition back to the Cropland State (4) if the site is put back into cultivation.

Phase 5.1: Abandoned Cropland Phase

The Abandoned Cropland Phase (5.1) occurs when cropland is abandoned. In the absence of active management, the site can re-vegetate naturally and, over time, potentially return to a perennial grassland community with needle and thread and blue grama. Shortly after cropland is abandoned, annual and biennial forbs and annual brome grasses invade the site (Samuel and Hart, 1994). The site is highly susceptible to erosion due to the absence of perennial species. Eventually, these pioneering annual species are replaced by perennial forbs and perennial shortgrasses. Depending on the historical management of the site, perennial bunchgrasses may also return; however, species composition will depend upon the seed bank. Invasion of the site by exotic species such as crested wheatgrass and annual bromes will depend upon the site's proximity to a seed source.

Fifty or more years after cultivation, these sites may have species composition similar to phases in the Reference State (1). However, soil quality is consistently lower than under conditions prior to cultivation (Dormaar and Smoliak, 1985; Christian and Wilson, 1999), and a shift to the Reference State (1) is unlikely within a reasonable timeframe.

Phase 5.2: Perennial Grass Phase

The Perennial Grass Phase (5.2) occurs when the site is seeded to perennial forage species. When seeded to introduced species, particularly introduced perennial grasses, this community phase can persist for several decades. Crested wheatgrass, in particular, is very aggressive and may form monocultures that persist for at least 60 years (Krzic et al., 2000; Henderson and Naeth, 2005). A mixture of native species may also be seeded to provide species composition and structural complexity similar to those of the Reference State (1). However, soil quality conditions have been substantially altered and are unlikely to return to pre-cultivation conditions within a reasonable timeframe (Dormaar et al., 1994).

Transition 5A

Tillage or application of herbicide followed by seeding of cultivated crops, such as winter wheat, spring wheat, and barley transitions the Post-Cropland State (5) back to the Cropland State (4).

State and transition model

Additional community tables

Inventory data references

One medium-intensity plot was available for this provisional ecological site. This plot, in combination with professional experience and a review of the scientific literature, was used to approximate the reference plant community. Information for other states and community phases was obtained from a review of the scientific literature and professional experience. All community phases are considered provisional based on these plots and the sources identified in this ecological site description.

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Contributors

Scott Brady
Stuart Veith

Approval

Kirt Walstad, 12/28/2022

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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)	
Contact for lead author	
Date	09/30/2026
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:
