Ecological site FX053A99X110
Sandy (Sy)

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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): 053A–Northern Dark Brown Glaciated Plains

The Northern Dark Brown Glaciated Plains, MLRA 53A, is a large, agriculturally and ecologically significant area. It consists of approximately 6.1 million acres and stretches 140 miles from east to west and 120 miles from north to south, encompassing portions of 8 counties in northeastern Montana and northwestern North Dakota. This region represents part of the southern edge of the Laurentide Ice Sheet during maximum glaciation. It is one of the driest and westernmost areas within the vast network of glacially derived prairie pothole landforms of the Northern Great Plains and falls roughly between the Missouri Coteau to the east and the Brown Glaciated Plains to the west. Elevation ranges from 1,800 feet (550 meters) to 3,300 feet (1,005 meters). Soils are primarily Mollisols, but Inceptisols and Entisols 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 (Soller, 2001). Underlying the till is sedimentary bedrock largely consisting of Cretaceous shale, sandstone, and mudstone (Vuke et al., 2007). The bedrock is commonly exposed on hillslopes, particularly along drainageways. Significant alluvial deposits occur in glacial outwash channels and along major drainages, including portions of the Missouri, Poplar, and Big Muddy Rivers. Large eolian deposits of sand occur in the vicinity of the ancestral Missouri River channel east of Medicine Lake (Fullerton et al., 2004). The northwestern portion of the MLRA contains a large unglaciated area containing paleoterraces and large deposits of sand and gravel known as the Flaxville gravel. Much of this MLRA was glaciated towards the end of the Wisconsin age, and the maximum glacial extent occurred approximately 20,000 years ago (Fullerton and Colton, 1986; Fullerton et al., 2004). Subsequent erosion from major stream and river systems has created numerous drainageways throughout much of the MLRA. The result is a geologically young landscape that is predominantly a dissected till plain interspersed with alluvial deposits and dominated by soils in the Mollisol and Inceptisol orders. Much of this area is typic ustic, making these soils very productive and generally well suited to production agriculture. Dryland farming is the predominant land use, and approximately 50 percent of the land area is used for cultivated crops. Winter, spring, and durum varieties of wheat are the major crops, with over 48 million bushels produced annually (USDA-NASS, 2017). Areas of rangeland typically are on steep hillslopes along drainages. The rangeland is mostly native mixed-grass prairie similar the Stipa-Agropyron, Stipa-Bouteloua-Agropyron, and Stipa-Bouteloua faciations (Coupland, 1950; 1961). Cool-season grasses dominate and include rhizomatous wheatgrasses, needle and thread, western porcupine grass, and green needlegrass. Woody species are generally rare, however many of the steeper drainages support stands of trees and shrubs such as green ash and chokecherry. Seasonally ponded, prairie pothole wetlands may occur throughout the MLRA, but the greatest concentrations are in the east and northeast where receding glaciers stagnated and formed disintegration moraines with hummocky topography and numerous areas of poorly drained soils.

Classification relationships

NRCS Soil Geography Hierarchy • Land Resource Region: Northern Great Plains • Major Land Resource Area (MLRA): 053A Northern Dark Brown Glaciated Plains 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: Glaciated Northern Grasslands Section 331L • Subsection: Glaciated Northern Grasslands Subsection 331La • 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 and Shrubland Formation (2.B.2) • Division: Central North American and Shrubland Division (2.B.2.Nb) o 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: Hesperostipa comata Northwestern Great Plains Grassland Alliance o Association: Hesperostipa comata - Carex filifolia Grassland o Macrogroup: Andropogon hallii - Calamovilfa longifolia - Artemisia filifolia Great Plains Sand Grassland & Shrubland Macrogroup (2.B.2.Nb.4) ? Group: Andropogon hallii - Calamovilfa longifolia - Hesperostipa comata Sand Grassland Group (2.B.2.Nb.4.b) • Alliance: Calamovilfa longifolia Sand Prairie Alliance o Association: Calamovilfa longifolia - Hesperostipa comata Grassland EPA Ecoregions • Level 1: Great Plains (9) • Level 2: West-Central Semi-Arid Prairies (9.3) • Level 3: Northwestern Glaciated Plains (42) • Level 4: Glaciated Dark Brown Prairie (42i) Glaciated Northern Grasslands (42j)

Ecological site concept

This provisional ecological site is fairly common in MLRA 53A. 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. Sandy is a moderately extensive ecological site that occurs on a variety of landscapes from nearly level to moderately steep. This site is characterized by coarse textured soils which typically fall within the coarse-loamy textural family in the upper 4 inches (Soil Survey Staff, 2014). Soils typically have a mollic epipedon and are deeper than 20 inches to a restrictive layer. Characteristic vegetation is needle and thread (Hesperostipa comata), threadleaf sedge (Carex filifolia), and prairie sandreed (Calamovilfa longifolia).

Associated sites

FX053A99X032	**Loamy (Lo)** This site occurs adjacent to the Sandy ecological site on similar landforms. It generally occurs in similar landscape positions but occupies areas with fine-loamy textured soils (such as ground moraines) rather than kames or terraces.
FX053A99X040	**Loamy Steep (LoStp)** This site occurs on moderate to steeply sloping hillslopes adjacent to or downslope from the Sandy ecological site. It is generally in backslope positions with linear or concave slope shapes and in areas of fine-loamy textured soils.
FX053A99X030	**Limy (Ly)** This site occurs adjacent to the Sandy ecological site on similar landforms. It is generally in positions with convex slope shapes and occupies areas with fine-loamy textured soils (such as ground moraines) rather than kames or terraces.

Similar sites

FX053A99X032	**Loamy (Lo)** This site differs from the Sandy ecological site in that soils contain more than 18 percent clay in the upper 4 inches. Prairie sandreed does not occur on this site.
FX053A99X030	**Limy (Ly)** This site differs from the Sandy ecological site in that soils contain more than 18 percent clay in the upper 4 inches and have greater than 5 percent calcium carbonate in the upper 5 inches (as evidenced by strong or violet effervescence). Prairie sandreed does not occur on this site.

Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	Not specified
Herbaceous	(1) *Carex filifolia* (2) *Calamovilfa longifolia*

Legacy ID

Physiographic features

Sandy is an extensive ecological site occurring on a variety of landforms across MLRA 53A, largely in areas where glacial meltwater deposited large amounts of sand. It occurs on kames, moraines, and terraces and can occur on any slope shape or slope position. Slopes are typically less than 25 percent but may be as steep as 45 percent in some areas.

Figure 1. General distribution of the Sandy ecological site by map unit extent.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Till plain > Kame (2) Till plain > Moraine (3) Terrace
Flooding frequency	None
Ponding frequency	None
Elevation	550 – 1,010 m
Slope	0 – 20 %
Aspect	Aspect is not a significant factor

Table 3. Representative physiographic features (actual ranges)

Flooding frequency	Not specified
Ponding frequency	Not specified
Elevation	Not specified
Slope	0 – 40 %

Climatic features

The Northern Dark Brown Glaciated Plains is a semi-arid region with a temperate continental climate that is characterized by frigid winters and warm to hot summers (Coupland, 1958; Richardson and Hanson, 1977; Heidel et al., 2000). 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. Approximately 80 percent of the annual precipitation occurs during the growing season. June is the wettest month, followed by July and May (Richardson and Hanson, 1977; Heidel et al., 2000). Average annual precipitation ranges from 11 inches (280 mm) near Richey, Montana, to 15 inches (380 mm) in the Little Muddy drainage near Williston, North Dakota, but precipitation varies greatly from year to year. On average, severe drought and very wet years occur with

the same frequency, which is 1 out of 10 years (Coupland, 1958; Heidel et al., 2000). Extreme climatic variations, especially droughts, have the greatest influence on species cover and production (Coupland, 1958, 1961; Biondini et al., 1998). The frost-free period for this ecological site ranges from 90 to 130 days, and the freeze-free period ranges from 115 to 155 days.

Table 4 Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (characteristic range)	90-130 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	120-160 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	280-380 mm
Frost-free period (average)	110 days
Freeze-free period (average)	140 days
Precipitation total (average)	330 mm

- (1) CULBERTSON [USC00242122], Culbertson, MT
- (2) OPHEIM 10 N [USC00246236], Opheim, MT
- (3) OPHEIM 12 SSE [USC00246238], Opheim, MT
- (4) PLENTYWOOD [USC00246586], Plentywood, MT
- (5) SCOBEY 4 NW [USC00247425], Scobey, MT
- (6) SIDNEY [USC00247560], Sidney, MT
- (7) VIDA 6 NE [USC00248569], Vida, MT
- (8) WILLISTON SLOULIN INTL AP [USW00094014], Williston, ND
- (9) BREDETTE [USC00241088], Poplar, MT

Influencing water features

This is an upland ecological site and is not influenced by a water table or run in from adjacent sites. Due to the semi-arid climate in which it occurs, the water budget is contained within the soil profile for the majority of the year; however, the site does function as a recharge site during the spring. Soil moisture is recharged by spring rains, and recharge of the localized area occurs via deep percolation or surface runoff. For the remainder of the year, soil moisture rarely exceeds field capacity in the upper 40 inches before being depleted by evapotranspiration. Moisture loss through evapotranspiration exceeds precipitation for the majority of the growing season, and soil moisture is the primary limiting factor for plant production on this ecological site.

Soil features

The soil series that best represent the central concept of this ecological site are Dooley and Tally. The Dooley soil is in the Argiustolls great group and is characterized by a relatively dark mollic epipedon and by an underlying argillic horizon where clay has accumulated through weathering. The Tally soil is in the Haplustolls great group and is characterized by a relatively dark mollic epipedon and an underlying cambic horizon where pedogenic development is present but minimal. The parent material for both of these soils is typically alluvium or glaciofluvial deposits, and they both have mixed minerology. The Dooley soil is in the fine-loamy family, meaning that it contains between 18 and 35 percent clay in the particle-size control section; the Tally soil is in the coarse-loamy family, meaning that it contains 15 percent or more fine sand and less than 18 percent clay. The soil moisture regime for all soils in this ecological site concept is typic ustic, 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 are typically sandy loam or fine sandy loam and contain less than 18 percent clay and less than 70 percent sand. Some sites may have a higher sand content and have textures of loamy sand or loamy fine sand. The underlying horizons typically have loamy fine sand, fine sandy loam, or sandy clay loam textures and contain 10 to 30 percent clay and 55 to 70 percent sand. Organic matter content in the surface horizon typically ranges from 0.25 to 1.25 percent, and moist colors vary from olive brown (2.5Y

4/3) to very dark grayish brown (10YR 3/2). The upper 5 inches of these soils sometimes reacts strongly or violently with hydrochloric acid. The calcium carbonate equivalent in the upper 5 inches is typically 5 percent or less but may be as high as 10 percent in some areas. Soil pH classes are neutral to slightly alkaline in the surface horizon and neutral to moderately alkaline in the subsurface horizons. The soil depth class for this site can be moderately deep (between 20 to 40 inches to bedrock) where bedrock is present but is typically very deep. The upper 20 inches of soil generally does not contain coarse fragments.

Table 5. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Alluvium (2) Glaciofluvial deposits
Surface texture	(1) Sandy loam (2) Fine sandy loam
Drainage class	Well drained
Soil depth	50 – 180 cm
Available water capacity (0-101.6cm)	12.45 – 16.76 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)	6.6 – 8.4
Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (0-50.8cm)	0 – 30 %
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (0-50.8cm)	0 – 30 %

Ecological dynamics

The information in this ecological site description, including the state-and-transition model (STM), 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 Sandy provisional ecological site in MLRA 53A consists of six states: the Historic Reference state (1), the Current Potential state (2), the Shortgrass state (3), the Invaded state (4), the Cropland state (5), and the Post Cropland state (6). Plant communities associated with this 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).

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). The precise effects of the historic fire return interval are not definitive, but in general the mixed-grass ecosystem was resilient to fire. Potential effects are generally temporary and may include reduction of litter, fluctuations in production, and changes in species composition (Vermeire et al., 2011, 2014).

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. Additionally, small mammals such as prairie dogs (Cynomys spp.) and ground squirrels (Urocitellus spp.) 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 mixed-grass ecosystem was resilient to grazing, although localized areas could experience shifts in species composition due to heavy grazing.

Following European settlement, fire was largely eliminated, domestic livestock replaced native ungulates as the primary grazers, and non-native species were introduced to the ecosystem. Aside from drought, livestock grazing is now the principle disturbance on the landscape.

Improper grazing of this site can result in a reduction in the cover of the mid-statured grasses and an increase in shortgrasses such as blue grama (Bouteloua gracilis) (Smoliak et al., 1972; Smoliak, 1974). Eventually, improper grazing may also begin to reduce sedges. 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 (approximately 3 years or more) may have similar effects (Coupland, 1958, 1961). Further degradation of the site due to improper grazing can result in a community dominated by shortgrasses such as blue grama and prairie Junegrass (Koeleria cristata).

Most, if not all, extant examples of this site have some degree of invasion by non-native species. Non-native grasses, particularly crested wheatgrass (Agropyron cristatum), are the most common invasive species. Seeding of crested wheatgrass was a common practice on eroded and abandoned agricultural areas after the droughts of the 1930s (Rogler and Lorenz, 1983). It is a highly drought-tolerant and competitive cool-season, perennial bunchgrass that can invade relatively undisturbed grasslands (Lesica and DeLuca, 1996; Heidinga and Wilson, 2002; Henderson and Naeth, 2005). In most cases native ecological function is relatively intact, but in some cases non-native grasses will displace native species and dominate the ecological functions of the site.

The effects of an altered fire regime are not completely understood at the time of this writing, but evidence suggests that long-term fire suppression can result in accumulations of litter and may contribute to increased abundance of non-native grasses (Vermeire et al., 2011; Whisenant, 1990). Conversely, fire return intervals of less than 6 years, such as annual burning, can reduce productivity and shift species composition toward warm-season, short-statured grasses (Shay et al., 2001; Smith and McDermid, 2014).

Due to the coarse soil textures and the reduced 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 taken out of production, this site is either allowed to revert back to perennial grassland or is seeded back to perennial grass. Such seedings may be comprised of introduced grasses and legumes or a mix of native species. Sites left to undergo natural plant succession after cultivation can, over several decades, support native vegetation similar to the Reference State (1) (Christian and Wilson, 1999) although it may take over 75 years for soil organic matter to return to its pre-disturbed state (Dormaar et al., 1990). Without vegetative cover, this ecological site is very susceptible to wind erosion and severe loss of topsoil is possible. Under such circumstances, a return to the reference conditions in a reasonable amount of time is unlikely. Sites seeded with non-native species may persist with this cover type indefinitely (Christian and Wilson, 1999). A mix of native species may also be seeded; however, a return to the Reference State (1) in a reasonable amount of time is unlikely.

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 and transition model

Additional community tables

Table 6. Community 1.1 plant community composition

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

Table 7. Community 2.1 plant community composition

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

Table 8. Community 2.2 plant community composition

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

Table 9. Community 3.1 plant community composition

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

Table 10. Community 4.1 plant community composition

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

Table 11. Community 5.1 plant community composition

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

Table 12. Community 6.1 plant community composition

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

Table 13. Community 6.2 plant community composition

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

Inventory data references

Data for this provisional ecological site was obtained from two low-intensity plots and four medium-intensity plots representing the Contemporary Reference State (2). These plots were used in conjunction with a review of the scientific literature and professional experience to approximate the plant communities for this state. Information for remaining states was obtained from professional experience and a review of the scientific literature. 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, 4/25/2025

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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	04/24/2025
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:**

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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):**

---

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:**

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17. **Perennial plant reproductive capability:**
