

Ecological site FX053A99X713

Saline Lowland (SLL)

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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 to the *Stipa-Agropyron*, *Stipa-Bouteloua-Agropyron*, and *Stipa-Bouteloua* faciatiions (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) • Macrogroup: Great Plains Saline Wet Meadow and Marsh Macrogroup (2.C.5.Na.1) • Group: Great Plains Saline Wet Meadow and Marsh Group (2.C.5.Na.1.a) 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

Saline Lowland is a somewhat extensive ecological site occurring on alluvial fans, floodplains, drainageways, and stream terraces. The distinguishing characteristics of this site are that it receives additional moisture from surface water and/or groundwater; and that saline, sodic, or saline-sodic conditions are evident in the upper 20 inches of soil. Sometimes, but not always, a seasonal water table is present at a depth of 24 inches or more below the soil surface. Soils for this ecological site are typically very deep (more than 60 inches), somewhat poorly to well drained, and derived from alluvium. Characteristic vegetation is western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*), alkali cordgrass (*Spartina gracilis*), and sodium-tolerant bunchgrasses such as alkali sacaton (*Sporobolus airoides*) and Nuttall's alkaligrass (*Puccinellia nuttalliana*).

Associated sites

FX053A99X060	<p>Overflow (Ov)</p> <p>This site is adjacent to the Saline Lowland ecological site on similar landscapes and terrace positions, but in areas that have not accumulated salts in the soil profile.</p>
FX053A99X061	<p>Riparian Woodland (RW)</p> <p>This site is adjacent to the Saline Lowland ecological site, usually on lower terraces where flooding is more frequent, salts have not accumulated, and riparian woody plants are dominant.</p>
FX053A99X084	<p>Slough (SI)</p> <p>This site is adjacent to the Saline Lowland ecological site, usually in oxbows or channels where flooding is very frequent and a water table is shallow and persistent.</p>

Similar sites

FX053A99X705	<p>Discharge Closed Depression (CdD)</p> <p>This site differs from the Saline Lowland ecological site in that it occurs in depressions rather than floodplains and has different hydrology.</p>
FX053A99X060	<p>Overflow (Ov)</p> <p>This site differs from the Saline Lowland ecological site in that soils do not contain accumulated salts in the upper 20 inches. This site supports a diverse herbaceous plant community and is typically more productive.</p>
FX053A99X093	<p>Saline Upland (SU)</p> <p>This site differs from the Saline Lowland ecological site in that it occurs in uplands or ephemeral drainageways and does not receive enough additional moisture to significantly increase production; whereas the Saline Lowland ecological site is found on higher order stream reaches and receives enough additional moisture to significantly increase production.</p>

Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	Not specified
Herbaceous	(1) <i>Pascopyrum smithii</i> (2) <i>Spartina gracilis</i>

Legacy ID

R053AY713MT

Physiographic features

This ecological site occurs on level to nearly level drainageways, depressions, or floodplain steps. The slopes are generally less than 4 percent. This site occurs on all aspects. Aspect is not a significant factor.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Till plain > Drainageway (2) River valley > Depression (3) River valley > Flood-plain step
Flooding frequency	None to rare
Ponding frequency	None
Elevation	550 – 1,010 m
Slope	0 %
Water table depth	60 – 180 cm
Aspect	Aspect is not a significant factor

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

Influencing water features

This is a drainageway or floodplain site that receives additional moisture from groundwater, stream overflow, or both. When on floodplains, the site may be flooded for brief durations during major flood events. On some sites, a seasonal groundwater table is present between 24 and 40 inches below the soil surface, particularly during spring.

Wetland description

Palustrine Emergent

Soil features

Soils for this ecological site are typically very deep (more than 60 inches), somewhat poorly to well drained, and derived from alluvium. All soils in this concept are characterized by an accumulation of salts in the upper 20 inches and receive additional moisture from surface water, groundwater, or both. On some sites a seasonal groundwater table is present 24 inches or more below the soil surface. The moisture regime varies from typic ustic to aquic, depending on the depth to a water table, and the soil temperature regime is frigid (Soil Survey Staff, 2014).

Surface horizon textures in this site are commonly loam, clay loam, silty clay or clay. The underlying horizon textures are typically loam, clay loam or clay, but may be stratified with textures of fine sandy loam, silt loam, or silty clay loam. Calcium carbonate equivalent is typically less than 15 percent throughout the soil profile. The upper 20 inches of soil contain accumulated salts, as evidenced by an electrical conductivity of 4 or more, a sodium absorption ratio of 13 or more, or both. Soil pH classes are neutral to strongly alkaline in the surface horizon and slightly alkaline to very strongly alkaline in the subsurface horizons. Content of coarse fragments is less than 35 percent in the upper 20 inches of soil.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Alluvium – igneous, metamorphic and sedimentary rock
Surface texture	(1) Loam (2) Clay loam (3) Silty clay (4) Clay

Drainage class	Well drained to somewhat poorly drained
Soil depth	150 – 180 cm
Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-182.9cm)	0 – 20 %
Electrical conductivity (0-50.8cm)	0 – 10 mmhos/cm
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-50.8cm)	10 – 20

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 Saline Lowland provisional ecological site in MLRA 53A consists of six states: the Historic Reference state (1), the Current Potential state (2), the Altered 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, hydrology, 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).

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 cool-season, rhizomatous wheatgrasses and sodium-tolerant bunchgrasses along with an increase in inland saltgrass (*Distichlis spicata*) and foxtail barley (*Hordeum jubatum*). 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. Further degradation of the site due to improper grazing can result in a community dominated by foxtail barley and unpalatable forbs such as povertyweed (*Iva axillaris*). Mid-statured rhizomatous grasses are eliminated or nearly so.

Hydrology is another major ecological driver for this site. Hydrologic alterations, particularly alterations that raise the water table or cause excessive flooding and ponding of the site, may have a significant effect on species composition and production. In some cases, severe

salinization may occur. On a large portion of this site the hydrology has been significantly altered by irrigation, major dams, and diversions. The implications of this alteration have not been fully studied and require further investigation.

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 species.

Most, if not all, extant examples of this site have some degree of invasion by non-native species. Potential invasive species on this site are curly dock (*Rumex crispus*), knotweed (*Polygonum* spp), and kochia (*Bassia scoparia*). In most cases native ecological function is relatively intact, but invasive species dynamics are not well understood at this time and further investigation is needed to fully document ecological pathways and processes.

The Saline Lowland ecological site is poorly suited to cropland. Regardless, some of it has been converted to cropland. Cereal grains such as wheat and barley are, at best, marginally successful on this site. Typically, cropping operations are directed at increasing perennial hay production. Seeding of introduced grasses for hay production may be successful, particularly if salt-tolerant species such as RS, or hybrid, wheatgrass (*Elymus hoffmannii*) are used. Irrigation is sometimes used in an effort to increase production, but this site is poorly suited to irrigation practices due to accumulated salts, very low intake rates, and in some cases, a seasonally high water table.

When taken out of production, the site is either allowed to revert back to perennial grassland or is seeded with introduced species. Sites left to undergo natural plant succession after cultivation can, over several decades, support rhizomatous grasses such as western wheatgrass and inland saltgrass. Those sites seeded with non-native species, particularly salt-tolerant grasses, may persist with this cover type indefinitely. Even when reseeded to native species, the site is unlikely to return to reference conditions in a reasonable amount of time.

The state-and-transition model (STM) (Figure 3) 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 5. Community 1.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 6. Community 2.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 7. Community 2.2 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 8. Community 3.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 9. Community 4.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 10. Community 5.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 11. Community 6.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 12. Community 6.2 plant community composition

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

Data for this provisional ecological site was obtained from one medium-intensity plot representing the Contemporary Reference State (2). Two medium intensity plots from MLRA 53B were also used for comparison purposes. 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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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:

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:
