Ecological site GX060B00X576
Shallow 10-14

Last updated: 8/27/2024
Accessed: 11/06/2026

General information

Provisional. A provisional ecological site description has undergone quality control and quality assurance review. It contains a working state and transition model and enough information to identify the ecological site.

MLRA notes

Major Land Resource Area (MLRA): 060B–Pierre Shale Plains, Northern Part

MLRA 060B, Pierre Shale Plains (Northern Part), is almost entirely in Montana (94 percent) and Wyoming (6 percent). The area makes up about 2,160,000 acres and occurs in the uplands between most of the major rivers in southeastern Montana and northeastern Wyoming. The area is within the Missouri Plateau, Unglaciated, Section of the Great Plains Province of the Interior Plains. It is an area of old plateaus and terraces that have been deeply eroded. The shale plains have long, smooth, gentle to strong slopes. Slopes along drainageways and streams are moderately steep or steep. Elevation ranges from 1,900 to 3,500 feet on uplands. Marine and continental sediments of the Cretaceous Montana Group underlie most of this MLRA. The average annual precipitation in the area is 14 inches and ranges from 11 to 17 inches. Most of the annual precipitation occurs as high-intensity, convective thunderstorms during the growing season. Precipitation in winter occurs mainly as snow, which usually is accompanied by high winds that cause much drifting. The average annual temperature is 43 to 46 degrees Fahrenheit. The freeze-free period averages 142 days and ranges from 130 to 160 days. The frost-free period averages 120 days and ranges from 110 to 135 days. The dominant soil orders in this MLRA are Alfisols, Entisols, and Vertisols. The soils in the area dominantly have a frigid soil temperature regime, an ustic soil moisture regime, and smectitic mineralogy. The soils are shallow to very deep, generally well drained, and clayey. The area supports native prairie vegetation characterized by a diversity of cool-season and warm-season grasses, sedges, forbs, and shrubs. A majority of this area is in farms or ranches and comprised of rangeland used for livestock grazing. Some small areas of nearly level to moderately sloping soils are used for winter wheat or for livestock feed crops.

Classification relationships

NRCS Soil Geography Hierarchy • Land Resource Region: Western Great Plains • Major Land Resource Area (MLRA): 060B Pierre Shale Plains, Northern Part 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: North Central Highlands (331K) and Missouri Plateau Section (331M) National Vegetation Classification Standard (Federal Geographic Data Committee, 2008) • Class: Xeromorphic Woodland, Scrub and Herb Vegetation Class (3) • Subclass: Cool Semi-Desert Scrub and Grassland Subclass (3.B) • Formation: Cool Semi-Desert Scrub and Grassland Formation (3.B.1) • Division: Cool Semi-Desert Scrub and Grassland Division (3.B.1.Ne) • Macrogroup: Artemisia tridentata - Artemisia tripartita ssp. tripartita - Purshia tridentata Steppe and Shrubland Macrogroup (3.B.1.Ne.3) • Group: Artemisia tridentata ssp. wyomingensis - Artemisia tridentata ssp. tridentata Steppe & Shrubland Group (3.B.1.Ne.3.a) EPA Ecoregions • Level 1: Great Plains (9) • Level 2: West-Central Semi-Arid Prairies (9.3) • Level 3: Northwestern Great Plains (9.3.3) • Level 4: Sagebrush Steppe (43e)

Ecological site concept

This ecological site occurs primarily on hills, ridges, and escarpments at elevations ranging from 1,900 to 3,500 feet. Slopes range from 0 to 60 percent. Aspect can be significant, particularly on steep to very steep slopes. Aspect may result in slight variations in plant community composition and production. The soils on this ecological site are well drained to somewhat excessively drained. The soils are generally 10 to 20 inches deep to bedrock or soft beds of decomposed sandstone or siltstone. Plant root penetration is limited and rarely exceeds 20 inches. Soil surface textures on this ecological site are generally loam, silt loams, sandy loams, fine sandy loams, and very fine sandy loams.

Associated sites

GX060B00X032	**Loamy 10-14** The Loamy ecological site occurs on slopes of 0 to 15 percent, has moderately deep to very deep soils (20 to 72 inches to bedrock), and has significantly higher annual production. The Loamy ecological site is positioned below the Shallow ecological site.

Similar sites

GX060B00X032	**Loamy 10-14** The Loamy ecological site occurs on slopes of 0 to 15 percent, has moderately deep to very deep soils (20 to 72 inches to bedrock), and has significantly higher annual production. The Loamy ecological site is positioned below the Shallow ecological site.
GX060B00X131	**Shallow Clay 10-14** The Shallow Clay ecological site occurs on similar slopes, has similar soils depths, and has similar total annual production. The Shallow Clay ecological site has soils with greater than 35 percent clay content. The Shallow Clay and Shallow ecological sites occur on similar landform positions.

Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	(1) *Rhus trilobata*
Herbaceous	(1) *Pseudoroegneria spicata*

Legacy ID

R060BE576MT

Physiographic features

This ecological site occurs primarily on hills, ridges, and escarpments at elevations ranging from 1,900 to 3,500 feet. Slopes range from 0 to 60 percent. Aspect can be significant, particularly on steep to very steep slopes. Aspect may result in slight variations in plant community composition and production.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Hill (2) Ridge (3) Escarpment
Runoff class	Low to medium
Flooding frequency	None

Ponding frequency	None
Elevation	580 – 1,070 m
Slope	0 – 60 %
Water table depth	150 – 180 cm
Aspect	W, NW, N, NE, E, SE, S, SW

Climatic features

MLRA 060B is a semi-arid region and is considered to have a continental climate characterized by cold winters, hot summers, low humidity, light rainfall, and much sunshine. The climate is the result of the MLRA's location in the geographic center of North America. Temperatures can be extreme.

The average annual temperature is 43 to 46 degrees Fahrenheit. Summer daytime temperatures are typically quite warm, generally averaging in the lower to mid-80's for July and August. Summertime temperatures will typically reach 100 degrees or more at some point during the summer and can reach 90 degrees during any month between May and September. Conversely, winter temperatures can be cold, averaging in the mid-teens to mid-20's for December and January. There will typically be several days of below zero temperatures each winter. It is not uncommon for temperatures to reach 30 to 40 degrees below zero, or even colder, most any winter.

The average annual precipitation in this area is 14 inches, and ranges from 11 to 17 inches. During an average year, 70 to 75 percent of the annual precipitation falls between April and September, which are the primary growing season months. A majority of the annual precipitation occurs as frontal storms early in the growing season during the months of May and June and high-intensity, convective thunderstorms during July and August. Some rainfall occurs during the fall.

Seasonal precipitation is often limiting for plant growth. Annual fluctuations in species composition and total production are typical depending on the amount and timing of rainfall. Precipitation during the winter occurs primarily as snow, although snowfall is generally not heavy. Snow cover is typically 1 to 3 inches. Heavy snowfall occurs infrequently, usually late in the winter or early spring. Snowfall is generally accompanied by high winds that causes drifting.

The prevailing wind direction is from the northwest. Precipitation fluctuates widely from year to year and severe drought occurs 2 out of 10 years on average. There are few natural barriers on the northern Great Plains and the winds move freely across the plains and account for rapid changes in temperature. Spring can be windy throughout the MLRA, with winds averaging over 10 mph about 15 percent of the time. Speeds of 50 mph or stronger can occasionally occur.

For local climate station information, refer to https://wrcc.dri.edu/summary/Climsmemt.html.

Table 3 Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (characteristic range)	110-140 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	130-160 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	250-360 mm
Frost-free period (actual range)	
Freeze-free period (actual range)	

Precipitation total (actual range)	250-430 mm
Frost-free period (average)	120 days
Freeze-free period (average)	140 days
Precipitation total (average)	360 mm

- (1) INGOMAR 14 NE [USC00244386], Ingomar, MT
- (2) RIDGEWAY 1 S [USC00247034], Hammond, MT
- (3) ALBION 1 N [USC00240088], Alzada, MT
- (4) BAKER MUNI AP [USW00094055], Baker, MT

Influencing water features

This upland ecological site 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 normally contained within the soil pedon. Soil moisture is recharged by spring rains, but it rarely exceeds field capacity in the upper 40 inches before being depleted by evapotranspiration. During intense precipitation events, precipitation rates frequently exceed infiltration rates and the site delivers moisture to downslope sites through surface runoff. Moisture loss through evapotranspiration exceeds precipitation for a majority of the growing season. Soil moisture is the primary limiting factor for vegetative production on this ecological site.

Soil features

Soils for this ecological site are typically shallow (10 to 20 inches) to paralithic bedrock, well drained, and derived from sandstone and siltstone residuum. Surface horizon textures are typically loam, silt loam, sandy loam, fine sandy loam, very fine sandy loam, or loamy fine sand and contain less than 32 percent clay. The underlying horizons typically contain less than 35 percent clay and have silt loam, loam, or sandy clay loam textures. The soil temperature regime is primarily frigid and the soil moisture regime is aridic ustic.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Alluvium – sandstone and siltstone (2) Colluvium – sandstone and siltstone (3) Residuum – sandstone and siltstone
Surface texture	(1) Loam (2) Silt loam (3) Sandy loam (4) Fine sandy loam (5) Very fine sandy loam (6) Loamy fine sand
Drainage class	Well drained

Permeability class	Moderate
Depth to restrictive layer	30 – 50 cm
Soil depth	30 – 50 cm
Surface fragment cover <=3"	0 – 40 %
Surface fragment cover >3"	0 – 20 %
Available water capacity (0-50.8cm)	5.08 – 10.16 cm
Electrical conductivity (0-50.8cm)	Not specified
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-50.8cm)	Not specified
Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (0-50.8cm)	0 – 40 %
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (0-50.8cm)	0 – 10 %

Ecological dynamics

The Reference state is the plant community in which interpretations are primarily based and is used as a reference in order to understand the original potential of the site. The Reference state evolved under the combined influences of climatic conditions, periodic fire activity, grazing by large herbivores, and impacts from small mammals and insects. Changes may occur to the Reference state due to management actions such as improper grazing management, climatic conditions such as drought, and natural events such as multiple fires in close succession. The Reference state for this ecological site is dominated by a diversity of tall and medium height, cool-season and warm-season grasses which are tightly intermixed and well distributed over the site. Various forbs, half-shrubs, and shrubs are common on this site. The Reference state is not necessarily the management goal, as other vegetative states may be considered desired plant communities as long as critical resource concerns are met.

In addition to the Reference state, other plant communities can occur on this site and are usually the result of historic management practices. Long term overgrazing on this ecological site results in a decrease of tallgrasses, mid-grasses, and more palatable forbs and in an increase of shortgrasses, sedges, and less palatable forbs. Half-shrubs and shrubs increase in the absence of prescribed fire and wildfire. More frequent fire intervals decreases the shrub component resulting in a site dominated by herbaceous species. There are various transitional stages which may occur on this ecological site.

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 (%)

Table 6. Community 1.2 plant community composition

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

Table 7. Community 1.3 plant community composition

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

Table 8. Community 1.4 plant community composition

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

Table 9. Community 2.1 plant community composition

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

Table 10. Community 2.2 plant community composition

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

Table 11. Community 3.1 plant community composition

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

Inventory data references

Specific field data was not obtained for this provisional ecological site description. Existing field data was used in conjunction with a review of scientific literature and professional experience to approximate the plant communities, states, and transitions. All community phases are considered provisional based on the sources identified in this ecological site description.

Other references

Cleland, D.T., et al. 1997. National Hierarchical Framework of Ecological Units. In: M.S. Boyce and A. Haney (eds.) Ecosystem Management Applications for Sustainable Forest and Wildlife Resources, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

Dormaar, J.F., and S. Smoliak. 1985. Recovery of vegetative cover and soil organic matter during revegetation of abandoned farmland in a semiarid climate. Journal of Range Management 38:487-491.

Federal Geographic Data Committee. 2008. The National Vegetation Classification Standard, Version 2. FGDC Vegetation Subcommittee. FGDC-STD-005-2008 (Version 2). pp. 126.

Fire Effects Information System. USDA Forest Service. http://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/shrub/amealn/all.html.

Interagency Ecological Site Handbook for Rangelands. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, USDA Forest Service, USDI Bureau of Land Management. January 2013.

Land Resource Regions and Major Land Resource Areas of the United States, the
Caribbean, and the Pacific Basin. USDA Handbook 296. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. 2006.

McNab, W.H., et al. 2007. Description of Ecological Sub-Regions: Sections of the Conterminous United States. USDA Forest Service. General Technical Report WO-76B.

National Cooperative Soil Survey. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.
https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/soils/survey/partnership/ncss/.

National Ecological Site Handbook. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. March 2017.

National Range and Pasture Handbook. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. December 2003.

National Soil Information System. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.
https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/soils/survey/geo/?cid=nrcs142p2_053552.

National Soil Survey Handbook. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. November 2019.

National Water and Climate Center. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. https://www.wcc.nrcs.usda.gov/.

NRCS Plants Database. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. https://plants.usda.gov/java/.

Samuel, M.J., and R.H. Hart. 1994. Sixty-one years of secondary succession on rangelands of the Wyoming High Plains. Journal of Range Management 47:184-191.

Soil Survey Manual. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. March 2017.

Watts, M.J., and C.L. Wambolt. 1996. Long-term recovery of Wyoming big sagebrush after four treatments. Journal of Environmental Management 46:95-102.

Web Soil Survey. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. https://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/app/HomePage.htm.

Contributors

Jeff Fenton
Scott Brady
Maryjo Kimble

Approval

Kirt Walstad, 8/27/2024

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	08/16/2024
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:**
