Ecological site R083AY023TX
Sandy Loam

Last updated: 9/19/2023
Accessed: 04/17/2026

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): 083A–Northern Rio Grande Plain

This area is entirely in Texas and south of San Antonio. It makes up about 11,115 square miles (28,805 square kilometers). The towns of Uvalde, Cotulla, and Hondo are in the western part of the area, and Beeville, Goliad, and Kenedy are in the eastern part. The town of Alice is just outside the southern edge of the area. Interstate Highways 35 and 37 cross this area. This area is comprised of inland, dissected coastal plains.

Classification relationships

USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, 2006. -Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) 83A

Ecological site concept

The Sandy Loam ecological site typically has a fine sandy loam or very fine sandy loam surface. Sandy clay loam subsoil horizons are generally present 12 inches below the surface.

Associated sites

R083AY002TX	**Shallow Ridge**
R083AY004TX	**Shallow Sandy Loam**
R083AY024TX	**Tight Sandy Loam**
R083AY007TX	**Lakebed**
R083AY010TX	**Vega**
R083AY011TX	**Claypan Prairie**

R083AY019TX	**Gray Sandy Loam**
R083AY020TX	**Sand Hills**
R083AY021TX	**Sandy**

Similar sites

R083BY023TX	**Sandy Loam**
R083CY023TX	**Sandy Loam**
R083DY023TX	**Sandy Loam**
R083EY023TX	**Sandy Loam**

Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	(1) *Prosopis glandulosa*
Shrub	(1) *Acacia* (2) *Opuntia*
Herbaceous	(1) *Schizachyrium* (2) *Trichloris*

Physiographic features

The Sandy Loam ecological site was formed from loamy residuum and alluvium. These soils are on nearly level to gently sloping interfluves on coastal plains. Slopes range from 0 to 5 percent. Elevation ranges from 200 to 1,000 feet. This area is comprised of inland, dissected coastal plains.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Coastal plain > Interfluve (2) Coastal plain > Ridge
Runoff class	Negligible to medium

Flooding frequency	None
Ponding frequency	None
Elevation	20 – 310 m
Slope	0 – 10 %
Aspect	Aspect is not a significant factor

Climatic features

MLRA 83A is subtropical, subhumid on the western boundary and subtropical humid on the eastern boundary. Winters are dry and mild and the summers are hot and humid. Tropical maritime air masses predominate throughout spring, summer, and fall. Modified polar air masses exert considerable influence during winter, creating a continental climate characterized by large variations in temperature. Average precipitation for MLRA 83A is 20 inches on the western boundary and 35 inches on the eastern boundary. Peak rainfall, because of rain showers, occurs late in spring and a secondary peak occurs early in fall. Heavy thunderstorm activities increase in April, May, and June. July is hot and dry with little weather variations. Rainfall increases again in late August and September as tropical disturbances increase and become more frequent. Tropical air masses from the Gulf of Mexico dominate during the spring, summer, and fall. Prevailing winds are southerly to southeasterly throughout the year except in December when winds are predominately northerly.

Table 3 Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (characteristic range)	220-250 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	260-370 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	640-810 mm
Frost-free period (actual range)	210-260 days
Freeze-free period (actual range)	250-370 days
Precipitation total (actual range)	610-940 mm
Frost-free period (average)	240 days
Freeze-free period (average)	310 days
Precipitation total (average)	740 mm

- (1) MATHIS 4 SSW [USC00415661], Mathis, TX

- (2) TILDEN 4 SSE [USC00419031], Tilden, TX
- (3) UVALDE 3 SW [USC00419268], Uvalde, TX
- (4) CALLIHAM [USC00411337], Calliham, TX
- (5) BEEVILLE 5 NE [USC00410639], Beeville, TX
- (6) CROSS [USC00412125], Tilden, TX
- (7) DILLEY [USC00412458], Dilley, TX
- (8) FLORESVILLE [USC00413201], Floresville, TX
- (9) GOLIAD [USC00413618], Goliad, TX
- (10) LYTLE 3W [USC00415454], Natalia, TX
- (11) PLEASANTON [USC00417111], Pleasanton, TX
- (12) HONDO MUNI AP [USW00012962], Hondo, TX
- (13) CHEAPSIDE [USC00411671], Gonzales, TX
- (14) CUERO [USC00412173], Cuero, TX
- (15) NIXON [USC00416368], Stockdale, TX
- (16) FOWLERTON [USC00413299], Fowlerton, TX
- (17) HONDO [USC00414254], Hondo, TX
- (18) PEARSALL [USC00416879], Pearsall, TX
- (19) POTEET [USC00417215], Poteet, TX
- (20) CARRIZO SPRINGS 3W [USC00411486], Carrizo Springs, TX
- (21) CHARLOTTE 5 NNW [USC00411663], Charlotte, TX
- (22) KARNES CITY 2N [USC00414696], Karnes City, TX

Influencing water features

Water is not a typically influencing factor on these sites.

Wetland description

N/A

Soil features

The soils in this site are moderately deep to very deep, well drained with moderate to moderately slow permeability. The surface horizon is typically 12 inches with a fine sandy loam texture over a sandy clay loam subsoil. Soil series correlated to this site include: Colmena, Duval, Goliad, Premont, Raisin, Runge, Weesatche, and Willacy.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Alluvium – sedimentary rock (2) Residuum – sedimentary rock
Surface texture	(1) Fine sandy loam (2) Very fine sandy loam (3) Sandy clay loam (4) Loam
Family particle size	(1) Fine-loamy
Drainage class	Well drained
Permeability class	Moderate to moderately slow

Soil depth	50 – 200 cm
Surface fragment cover <=3"	Not specified
Surface fragment cover >3"	Not specified
Available water capacity (0-101.6cm)	7.62 – 15.24 cm
Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-101.6cm)	0 – 20 %
Electrical conductivity (0-101.6cm)	0 – 10 mmhos/cm
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-101.6cm)	Not specified
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-101.6cm)	6.1 – 8.4
Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (Depth not specified)	0 – 10 %
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (Depth not specified)	Not specified

Ecological dynamics

Climatic variation and topoedaphic heterogeneity interact to influence vegetation responses to disturbances such as fire and grazing. Plants of the reference plant community evolved with and are generally well adapted to grazing and fire. Prior to European settlement, fires would likely have been frequent, between 5 and 10 years. These fires would have resulted from lightning during the hot, dry summer months or were set by Native Americans. The occurrence of fire promotes grasses while making it difficult for woody plants to achieve dominance. During the Pleistocene, there were significant populations of large-bodied grazers and browsers. Most of these went extinct, so that by the Holocene (about 10,000 years ago) only bison (Bos bison), white-tailed deer (Odocoileus virginianus), and antelope (Antilocapra americana) remained. Archeological evidence indicates that bison occurred in the region, but there is also evidence of centuries of absence. In addition, their numbers may have varied seasonally as herds migrated. When present, bison may have grazed certain areas heavily, but then moved on. Activities of other native herbivores (termites, cutter ants, soil nematodes, kangaroo rats (Dipodomys spp.)) also influenced vegetation productivity and dynamics.

Accounts of earlier explorers and settlers suggest the Rio Grande Plains was likely a mosaic of grasslands, savannahs, shrublands, and woodlands. Historical photographs suggest the nature of the vegetation structure likely varied from place-to-place depending on topography, soil properties and time since the last major disturbances (such as drought or fire). However, the occurrence of extensive grasslands and grassland fauna (antelope, for example) is mentioned in numerous historical accounts. Grasses dominating Sandy Loam uplands at the time of European settlement likely included little bluestem (Schizachyrium scoparium), false Rhodes grass (Chloris crinata), and multiflower false Rhodes grass (Chloris pluriflora), Arizona cottontop (Digitaria californica), plains bristlegrass (Setaria vulpiseta), and pink pappusgrass (Pappophorum bicolor). The composition and productivity of grass communities would have varied with annual rainfall, soil depth and the extent of argillic horizon development. Many Sandy Loam sites are now dominated by mesquite (Prosopis glandulosa), various acacias (Acacia spp.), granjeno (Celtis pallida), condalia (Condalia obovata), lime prickly ash (Zanthoxylum fagara), and prickly pear (Opuntia spp.). These woody plants are not new arrivals, but are native to the region and have increased in size and abundance within their historic ranges.

Grazing and fire are two factors that critically influence the relative abundance of grasses and woody plants through time. By the early 1800's cattle and sheep numbers appear to have been quite high in the Rio Grande Plains, resulting in heavy, year-round grazing. The resulting reduction in abundance of late seral grasses lead to a decline in soil organic matter, a reduction in fire frequency/intensity (due to lack of fine fuels), and a shift from midgrass domination to shortgrass, like hooded windmill grass (Chloris cucullata), three-awns (Aristida spp.) and forbs, like orange zexmenia (Wedelia hispida), and croton (Croton spp.). These changes would have favored woody plants, most of which are unpalatable to livestock, and enabled them to establish and attain dominance. This would be especially true for leguminous shrubs such as mesquite, whose seeds are widely spread by livestock.

The shift from grass to woody plant domination became the impetus for brush management practices. By the 1950's, large-scale mechanized clearing was common and by the 1970's, aerial herbicide applications were widespread. However, by the 1980's it was clear that brush management practices were often treating symptoms rather than underlying problems and having undesirable environmental consequences, including adverse effects on wildlife populations. Sites cleared of brush regenerated rapidly and often formed thickets that were denser and of lower diversity than the original stands. This realization, coupled with the fact that brush management treatments were typically short-lived, lead to the development of Integrated Brush Management Systems (IBMS). The IBMS approach takes a holistic, large-scale, long-term, whole-farm, ecosystem-based approach to brush management and recognizes multiple-use options for rangeland resources. Shrublands developing on former grasslands have other potential socioeconomic values that should be considered when contemplating brush management. These include alternate classes of livestock, lease hunting, deer and exotic game ranching, and ecotourism.

While shrublands on Sandy Loam sites have traditionally been viewed as degraded from a livestock production standpoint, it is important to recognize that they are not necessarily degraded from the ecological perspectives of primary productivity, nutrient cycling and biodiversity. The productivity of shrublands may be comparable to the grassland they replaced. In addition, shrubs modify soils and microclimate to increase levels of organic matter and nutrients in the upper four inches of the soil profile. This nutrient enrichment by shrubs can offset grazing-induced losses of soil nutrients and contribute to enhance grass production when shrub cover is reduced by natural or management-induced means. While the development of shrub communities may have adverse impacts on grasses and grassland fauna, other plants and animals may benefit. Thus, while ecosystem biodiversity certainly changes, it does not necessarily decrease with a shift from grass to woody plant domination on Sandy Loam sites.

State and transition model

Figure 7. STM

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 2.1 plant community composition

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

Table 9. Community 2.2 plant community composition

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

Table 10. Community 3.1 plant community composition

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

Table 11. Community 3.2 plant community composition

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

Animal community

As a historic tall/midgrass prairie, this site was occupied by bison, antelope, deer, quail, turkey, and dove. This site was also used by many species of grassland songbirds, migratory waterfowl, and coyotes. This site now provides forage for livestock and is still used by quail, dove, migratory waterfowl, grassland birds, coyotes, and deer. Feral hogs (Sus scrofa) can be found on most ecological sites in Texas. Damage caused by feral hogs each year includes, crop damage by rutting up crops, destroyed fences, livestock watering areas, and predation on native wildlife, and ground-nesting birds. Feral hogs have few natural predators, thus allowing their population to grow to high numbers. Wildlife habitat is a complex of many different plant communities and ecological sites across the landscape. Most animals use the landscape differently to find food, shelter, protection, and mates. Working on a conservation plan for the whole property, with a local professional, will help managers make the decisions that allow them to realize their goals for wildlife and livestock. Grassland State (1): This state provides the maximum amount of forage for livestock such as cattle. It is also utilized by deer, quail and other birds as a source of food. When a site is in the reference plant community phase (1.1) it will also be used by some birds for nesting, if other habitat requirements like thermal and escape cover are near. Tree/Shrubland State (2): This state can be maintained to meet the habitat requirements of cattle and wildlife. Land managers can find a balance that meets their goals and allows them flexibility to manage for livestock and wildlife. Forbs for deer and birds like quail will be more plentiful in this state. There will also be more trees and shrubs to provide thermal and escape cover for birds as well as cover for deer. Converted Land State (3): The quality of wildlife habitat this site will produce is extremely variable and is influenced greatly by the timing of rain events. This state is often manipulated to meet landowner goals. If livestock production is the main goal, it can be converted to pastureland. It can also be planted to a mix of grasses and forbs that will benefit both livestock and wildlife. A mix of forbs in the pasture could attract pollinators, birds and other types of wildlife. Food plots can also be planted to provide extra nutrition for deer. This rating system provides general guidance as to animal preference for plant species. It also indicates possible competition between kinds of herbivores for various plants. Grazing preference changes from time to time, especially between seasons, and between animal kinds and classes. Grazing preference does not necessarily reflect the ecological status of the plant within the plant community. For wildlife, plant preferences for food and plant suitability for cover are rated. Refer to habitat guides for a more complete description of a species habitat needs.

Hydrological functions

The Midgrass Community (1.1) water cycle functions well with good infiltration and deep percolation of rainfall. The water cycle functions best in the Midgrass Community (1.1) and degrades as the vegetation community declines. Rapid rainfall infiltration, high soil organic matter, good soil structure and good porosity accompany high bunchgrass cover. Surface runoff quality will be high and erosion and sedimentation rates will be low. High rates of infiltration will allow water to move below the rooting zone during periods of heavy rainfall. A shift to the Shortgrass Community (1.2) means reduced plant and litter cover, which impairs the water cycle. Infiltration will decrease and runoff will increase due to reduced ground cover, rainfall splash, soil capping, reduced organic matter, and poor structure. With a combination of a sparse ground cover and intensive rainfall, this site can contribute to an increased frequency and severity of flooding within a watershed. Soil erosion is accelerated, quality of surface runoff is poor and sedimentation increases. Domination of the site by woody species further degrades the water cycle in the Shrubland State (2). Interception of rainfall by tree canopies increases, which reduces the amount of rainfall reaching the surface and being available to understory plants. Increased stem flow, due to the funneling effect of the canopy, will increases soil moisture at the base of trees, especially on mesquite. Increases in woody canopy create declines in grass cover, which creates similar causes impacts as those described for improper grazing above. Return of the Shrubland State (2) to the Midgrass Community (1.1) through brush management and good grazing management can help improve hydrologic function of the site. Under the dense canopy of the shrubland, leaf litter builds up. This increases soil organic matter, builds structure, improves infiltration, and reduces surface erosion. These conditions improve the function of the water cycle compared to lower levels of canopy cover. Water flow patterns are common and follow old stream meanders. Deposition and erosion is uncommon for normal rainfall but may occur during intense rainfall events.

Recreational uses

Hunting, bird watching, and eco-tourism are all common activities.

Inventory data references

Information presented was derived from the revised Range Site, literature, limited NRCS clipping data (417s), field observations, and personal contacts with range-trained personnel.

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Approval

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Acknowledgments

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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	04/17/2026
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:**

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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):**

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12. **Functional/Structural Groups (list in order of descending dominance by above-ground annual-production or live foliar cover using symbols: >>, >, = to indicate much greater than, greater than, and equal to):**

    Dominant:

    Sub-dominant:

    Other:

    Additional:

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13. **Amount of plant mortality and decadence (include which functional groups are expected to show mortality or decadence):**

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14. **Average percent litter cover (%) and depth (in):**

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15. **Expected annual annual-production (this is TOTAL above-ground annual-production, not just forage annual-production):**

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16. **Potential invasive (including noxious) species (native and non-native). List species which BOTH characterize degraded states and have the potential to become a dominant or co-dominant species on the ecological site if their future establishment and growth is not actively controlled by management interventions. Species that become dominant for only one to several years (e.g., short-term response to drought or wildfire) are not invasive plants. Note that unlike other indicators, we are describing what is NOT expected in the reference state for the ecological site:**

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17. **Perennial plant reproductive capability:**
