

Ecological site R083EY020TX Sand Hills

Last updated: 9/21/2023
Accessed: 09/19/2026

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): 083E--Sandsheet Prairie

Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) 83E makes up about 4,300 square miles (11,150 square kilometers). The towns of Falfurrias, Premont, and Sarita are in this area. U.S. Highways 77 and 281 run through the area in a north-south direction.

Classification relationships

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

Ecological site concept

Sand Hill sites are very deep sands with little horizon development. Active dunes can form without vegetation to hold the soil in place.

Associated sites

R083EY008TX	Salty Prairie
R083EY021TX	Sandy
R083EY023TX	Sandy Loam
R083EY014TX	Sandy Flat
R083EY022TX	Loamy Sand

Similar sites

R083AY020TX	Sand Hills
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Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	(1) <i>Quercus virginiana</i>
Herbaceous	(1) <i>Schizachyrium littorale</i> (2) <i>Paspalum plicatulum</i>

Physiographic features

The Sand Hills Ecological Site was formed in very deep sandy eolian deposits on the Sandsheet Prairie of the South Texas Sand Plain. The sands have been worked and reworked by the dominant southeasterly winds. The site is found on nearly level to moderately steep vegetated dunes. Slopes range from 0 to 15 percent. Elevation is 15 to 500 feet.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Sand plain > Dune (2) Sand plain > Sand sheet
Runoff class	Negligible to very low
Flooding frequency	None
Ponding frequency	None
Elevation	10 – 90 m
Slope	0 – 20 %
Aspect	Aspect is not a significant factor

Climatic features

MLRA 83 has a subtropical subhumid climate. Winters are dry and fairly warm, 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. Peak rainfall 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)	240-370 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	370 days

Precipitation total (characteristic range)	610-740 mm
Frost-free period (actual range)	220-370 days
Freeze-free period (actual range)	370 days
Precipitation total (actual range)	560-760 mm
Frost-free period (average)	290 days
Freeze-free period (average)	370 days
Precipitation total (average)	660 mm

- (1) KINGSVILLE NAAS [USW00012928], Kingsville, TX
- (2) FALFURRIAS [USC00413063], Encino, TX
- (3) MCCOOK [USC00415721], Edinburg, TX
- (4) RAYMONDVILLE [USC00417458], Raymondville, TX
- (5) SARITA 7 E [USC00418081], Sarita, TX
- (6) HEBBRONVILLE [USC00414058], Hebbronville, TX

Influencing water features

Runoff is negligible or very low due to the sandy surface texture. Drainage is somewhat excessive or excessive.

Wetland description

N/A.

Soil features

The soils are very deep, somewhat excessive or excessively drained with rapidly permeability. Surface and subsurface textures are fine sands or sands. The soils are classified as Typic Ustipsamments and have little horizon development. Soil series correlated to this site include: Arenisco, Falfurrias and Medanito.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Eolian sands – sedimentary rock
Surface texture	(1) Fine sand
Family particle size	(1) Sandy
Drainage class	Somewhat excessively drained to excessively drained

Permeability class	Rapid
Soil depth	200 cm
Surface fragment cover <=3"	Not specified
Surface fragment cover >3"	Not specified
Available water capacity (0-101.6cm)	5.08 – 7.62 cm
Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-101.6cm)	Not specified
Electrical conductivity (0-101.6cm)	Not specified
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-101.6cm)	0 – 10
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-101.6cm)	5.1 – 8.4
Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (Depth not specified)	Not specified
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (Depth not specified)	Not specified

Ecological dynamics

The plant communities of this site are dynamic and community composition may vary dramatically with variations in annual rainfall, grazing, and fire. During dry periods the amount of bare ground increases. Bare ground may predominate during droughts. Shortgrasses such as hairy grama (*Bouteloua hirsuta*), thin paspalum (*Paspalum setaceum*), fringed signalgrass (*Brachiaria ciliatissima*), red lovegrass (*Eragrostis secundiflora*), sandbur (*Cenchrus* spp.), and forbs increase in abundance at the expense of the taller grasses. During wet years, tallgrasses such as seacoast bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium* var. *littorale*) increase in abundance. The shortgrasses and forbs form a multi-layered community.

In 1834, Jean Luis Berlandier referred to the region as a “wilderness of plains covered with small forests of oaks.” Berlandier remarked that it was grazed by cattle (*Bos* spp.) and large herds of wild horses (*Equus caballus*). In the 1840's and 1850's, parts of Nueces, Kleberg, Brooks and Kenedy Counties were known as the “Wild Horse Desert.” Wild horses were reported in other portions of the Rio

Grande Plains as early as 1821. Bartlett in 1853 noted in Kleberg county thousands of wild horses fleeing a prairie fire.

Property lines of Spanish and Mexican land grants were often laid out from one live oak (*Quercus virginiana*) motte to another. Some of the live oaks are more than 300 years old. Scattered mesquites (*Prosopis glandulosa*) also occur, the oldest presently about 250 years old. Historically, fire was an important factor. Wildfires are common on this site at present, and Native Americans set periodic fires for hunting and reducing insects. Natural fires, and fires set by Native Americans, reduced woody plant cover, kept live oak mottes scattered and isolated, and maintained the open stretches of grassland witnessed by Berlandier. White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) and pronghorns (*Antilocapra americana*) were the major large herbivores on this site at the time of colonization by Europeans. In 1846 McClintock reported “thin bushes on the sands of Kleberg County at wide intervals and thousands of deer.” The extent to which bison (*Bos bison*) utilized the site is unknown.

The reference plant community is a grassland with scattered live oak mottes and occasional mesquite trees. Seacoast bluestem is the prevailing dominant. Gulfdune paspalum (*Paspalum monostachyum*) is a co-dominant with seacoast bluestem on moderately drained flats and swales. Gulfdune paspalum declines dramatically in abundance in the drier microhabitats of well-drained flats and ridges where seacoast bluestem becomes the primary dominant. Gulfdune paspalum also declines in abundance with declining annual rainfall away from the coast. Pan-American balsamscale (*Elyonurus tripsacoides*) becomes a co dominant with seacoast bluestem in areas more than 25 to 30 miles from the coast. Other important associated grasses include big bluestem, brownseed paspalum (*Paspalum plicatulum*), Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum* spp.), switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), and thin paspalum. The reference community supports a diverse understory of perennial legumes and forbs.

Continued overuse by livestock results in a decline of seacoast bluestem, gulfdune paspalum, and other perennial grasses. This causes an increase in forbs, particularly camphor daisy (*Rayjacksonia phyllocephala*), partridgepea (*Chamaecrista fasciculata*), and crotons (*Croton* spp.). Camphor daisy has increased in recent history and now dominates this site, forming 10 to 20 percent of the canopy cover, even under good to excellent range conditions. Camphor daisy was apparently absent from the site as recently as 1963. Pan-American balsamscale, three-awns (*Aristida* spp.), and thin paspalum increase in abundance with heavy grazing, but decline on severely grazed rangeland. On severely grazed rangeland, seacoast bluestem is virtually absent. Sandbur, fringed signalgrass, red lovegrass, camphor daisy, and other forbs dominate severely grazed sites. Overuse results in a large amount of bare ground, which results in blowing sand. Blowing sand further accelerates community degradation. Live oak mottes expand and coalesce forming continuous oak forests with continued overuse. The oak colonies often become short and thicketed with high stem density, rather than forming large, single-trunked trees. Mesquite increases with continued overuse. Once the mesquites reach sufficient size, understory shrubs including granjeno (*Celtis pallida*), brasil (*Condalia hookeri*), and lime prickly-ash (*Zanthoxylum fagara*) establish underneath.

Active sand dunes occur on this site. Overuse by livestock exacerbates dune formation. Continuous dunes sometimes cover several square miles. The dunes add to landscape diversity, but pose management problems because they migrate across the landscape and may cover fences, roads, buildings, and other structures. Cutting, mulching, and lightly incorporating native hay near a sand dune is an effective method of stabilizing dunes.

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 (%)
Grass/Grasslike					
1	Tallgrasses			841-1793	
	shore little bluestem	SCL111	<i>Schizachyrium littorale</i>	560-1681	–
	switchgrass	PAVI2	<i>Panicum virgatum</i>	112-1121	–
	gulfdune paspalum	PAMO4	<i>Paspalum monostachyum</i>	560	–
2	Tallgrasses			0-336	
	big bluestem	ANGE	<i>Andropogon gerardii</i>	0-336	–
	Indiangrass	SONU2	<i>Sorghastrum nutans</i>	0-336	–
3	Midgrasses			112-336	
	tanglehead	HECO10	<i>Heteropogon contortus</i>	112-280	–
	brownseed paspalum	PAPL3	<i>Paspalum plicatulum</i>	112-280	–
	crinkleawn grass	TRACH2	<i>Trachypogon</i>	112-280	–
4	Midgrasses			224-448	

	crabgrass	DIGIT2	<i>Digitaria</i>	112-224	–
	balsamscale grass	ELION	<i>Elionurus</i>	112-224	–
	knotgrass	PADI6	<i>Paspalum distichum</i>	112-224	–
	thin paspalum	PASE5	<i>Paspalum setaceum</i>	112-224	–
	Wright's threeawn	ARPUW	<i>Aristida purpurea var. wrightii</i>	56-112	–
Forb					
5	Forbs			28-112	
	bundleflower	DESMA	<i>Desmanthus</i>	28-84	–
	coastal indigo	INMI	<i>Indigofera miniata</i>	28-84	–
	dotted blazing star	LIPU	<i>Liatris punctata</i>	28-84	–
	sensitive plant	MIMOS	<i>Mimosa</i>	28-84	–
	yellow puff	NELU2	<i>Neptunia lutea</i>	28-84	–
	American snoutbean	RHAM	<i>Rhynchosia americana</i>	28-84	–
6	Forbs			0-56	
	Forb, annual	2FA	<i>Forb, annual</i>	0-56	–
Shrub/Vine					
7	Shrubs			84-140	
	live oak	QUVI	<i>Quercus virginiana</i>	84-224	–
8	Shrubs			0-28	
	spiny hackberry	CEEH	<i>Celtis ehrenbergiana</i>	0-1	–
	snakewood	CONDA	<i>Condalia</i>	0-1	–
	pricklypear	OPUNT	<i>Opuntia</i>	0-1	–
	mesquite	PROSO	<i>Prosopis</i>	0-1	–

Table 6. Community 1.2 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 7. Community 2.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 8. Community 2.2 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 9. Community 3.1 plant community composition

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

Cattle (*Bos* spp.) and many species of wildlife make extensive use of this ecological site. White-tailed deer may be found scattered across the prairie, and are found in heavier concentrations where woody cover exists. Feral hogs (*Sus scrofa*) are present and, at times, become abundant. Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) are abundant, and probably have replaced the red wolf (*Canis rufus*) in this mammalian predator niche. Rodent populations rise during drier periods and fall during periods of inundation. Geese (family Anatidae) and sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis*) abound during winter. Many species of avian predators including northern harriers (*Circus cyaneus*), red-tailed hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*), kestrels (*Falco sparverius*), white-tailed kites (*Elanus leucurus*), and, occasionally, swallow-tailed kites (*Elanoides forficatus*). Many species of grassland birds use the ecological site, including blue grosbeaks (*Guiraca caerulea*), dickcissels (*Spiza americana*), eastern meadowlarks (*Sturnella magna*), and several sparrows, including Cassin's sparrow (*Aimophila cassinii*), vesper sparrow (*Pooecetes gramineus*), lark sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*), savannah sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*), grasshopper sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*), and Le Conte's sparrow (*Ammodramus leconteii*).

Hydrological functions

Water infiltration is rapid in the fine sands of the site. Therefore, runoff and soil erosion from water is seldom a problem on the site.

Recreational uses

Ecotourism and hunting are popular activities.

Inventory data references

The data in this document was obtained by reviewed historical accounts, research reports, limited clipping data, and from the experience of range trained field personnel.

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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.

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Approval date	
Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on	Annual Production

Indicators

1. Number and extent of rills: None.
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2. Presence of water flow patterns: None.

3. Number and height of erosional pedestals or terracettes: None.

4. Bare ground from Ecological Site Description or other studies (rock, litter, lichen, moss, plant canopy are not bare ground):
0 to 5 percent bare ground. Small and non-connected areas.

5. Number of gullies and erosion associated with gullies: None.

6. Extent of wind scoured, blowouts and/or depositional areas: Due to the sandy properties of the soil, severe soil erosion by wind can occur.

7. Amount of litter movement (describe size and distance expected to travel): Under normal rainfall, little litter movement should be expected; however, litter of all sizes may move long distances.

8. Soil surface (top few mm) resistance to erosion (stability values are averages - most sites will show a range of values): Soil surface under the reference community is resistant to erosion. Stability class range is expected to be 5 to 6.

9. Soil surface structure and SOM content (include type of structure and A-horizon color and thickness): 0 to 3 inches, very pale brown (10YR 7/3) fine sand, brown (10YR 5/3) moist; single grain; loose; common fine roots; slightly acid; clear smooth boundary.

10. Effect of community phase composition (relative proportion of different functional groups) and spatial distribution on infiltration and runoff: High canopy, basal cover and density with small interspaces should make rainfall impact negligible. This site has well drained soils, deep with level to gently sloping (0 to 5 percent) which produces negligible runoff and water erosion.

11. Presence and thickness of compaction layer (usually none; describe soil profile features which may be mistaken for compaction on this site): No evidence of compaction.

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: Warm-season tallgrasses >

Sub-dominant: Warm-season midgrasses >

Other: Forbs > Shrubs

Additional: Forbs make up 5 percent species composition while shrubs make up 5 percent.

13. Amount of plant mortality and decadence (include which functional groups are expected to show mortality or decadence):
Perennial grasses will naturally exhibit a minor amount (less than 5%) of senescence and some mortality every year.
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14. Average percent litter cover (%) and depth (in): Litter is primarily herbaceous.
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15. Expected annual annual-production (this is TOTAL above-ground annual-production, not just forage annual-production):
2,500 to 3,500 pounds per acre.
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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: Mesquite and bur grass are the primary invaders. Other invaders include guineagrass, King Ranch bluestem, lotebush, pricklypear, yucca, spiny hackberry, brasil, and live oak.
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17. Perennial plant reproductive capability: All perennial species should be capable of reproducing every year unless disrupted by extended drought, overgrazing, wildfire, insect damage, or other events occurring immediately prior to, or during the reproductive phase.
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