

Ecological site F130AY002PA

Metabasalt Upland

Last updated: 9/27/2024
Accessed: 09/14/2026

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): 130A–Northern Blue Ridge

Major Land Resource Area 130A is in the Northern Section of the Blue Ridge Province of the Appalachian Highlands. The region is characterized by rugged mountains with steep slopes, sharp crests, and narrow valleys. The mountain range forms a narrow band that runs north to south between the Piedmont Upland Section to the east, the Ridge and Valley section to the west, and the Southern Section of the Blue Ridge to the south. Stream dissection is deep and intricate. Major streams and their tributaries flow through gorges and gaps. Elevation ranges from about 820 feet (250 meters) in the lower valleys and on footslopes along the Potomac River just east of Harpers Ferry, where West Virginia joins Maryland and Virginia, to more than 4,200 feet (1,280 meters) along the Appalachian Trail in Bedford County, Virginia. Apple Orchard Mountain, the highest peak, is at an elevation of 4,225 feet (1,288 meters) (USDA 2006). The backbone of the northern Blue Ridge is an anticline composed of rocks that can be divided into geological groupings based on age. In general, the oldest rocks are the furthest east, and become younger towards the west (Fichter and Baedke, 2000; Barnes and Sevon, 2002). The first group are plutonic rocks that formed when liquid molten rock, called magma, solidified deep within the earth's crust over a billion years ago. Collectively referred to as the Grenville rocks, they make up much of the eastern half of the mountains and are composed of granites, gneisses, and granulites. The second group, characterized by the Catoclin greenstone formation, is slightly younger, and is made up of metabasalts and metarhyolites, types of igneous rocks that have been metamorphosed by heat and pressure. The third group was formed during the Cambrian period about 500 million years ago and are represented by the Harpers, Antiedam, Weverton, and Loudoun formations which comprise the Chilhowee group. These rocks are primarily quartzites, phyllites, and meta-sandstones, and form the western flank of the Blue Ridge. Preliminary ecological site differentiation is based on these three main age groups and geologies. The variable characteristics of the underlying rocks give rise to different soil physical and chemical properties and exert control on the landscape, slope shape, aspect, and elevation, all of which affect vegetation.

Classification relationships

This ecological site is found in Major Land Resource Area 130a - the Northern Blue Ridge. MLRA 130a is located within Land Resource Region N - the East and Central Farming and Forest Region (USDA 2006), and in United States Forest Service ecoregion M221D - the Central Appalachian Broadleaf Forest-Coniferous Forest-Meadow Province (Bailey 1995). In addition, MLRA 130a falls within area #66 of EPA Ecoregion Level III - the Blue Ridge Mountains (USEPA 2013). The Metabasalt Upland ecological site occurs primarily within 66a - Northern Igneous Ridges of EPA Ecoregion IV (Woods et. al. 1996). Northeastern Interior Dry-Mesic Oak Forest System - CES202.592 (NatureServe, 2009) *Quercus rubra* - *Quercus prinus* - *Carya ovalis* / (*Cercis canadensis*) / *Solidago caesia* Forest association (CEGL008514; NatureServe 2017). Southern and Central Appalachian Cove Forest Systems - CES202.373 *Acer saccharum* - *Fraxinus americana* - *Tilia americana* - *Liriodendron tulipifera* / *Actaea racemosa* Forest association (CEGL006237; NatureServe 2017). Southern and Central Appalachian Mafic Glade and Barrens System - CES202.348 *Fraxinus americana* / *Physocarpus opulifolius* / *Carex pensylvanica* - *Allium cernuum* - (*Phacelia dubia*) Wooded Grassland association (CEGL008529; NatureServe 2017)

Ecological site concept

The Metabasalt Upland ecological site occurs on geologies of primarily metabasalt (greenstone), as well as some gabbro, gneiss, metarhyolite, and diorite. Typical landscapes are mountain slopes, summits, interfluvies, and some fans. The ecological site can be found on the entire hill or mountain slope from top to bottom, with the shallower areas occupying the most convex summits and shoulders. This site is distinguished from other mountainous areas of the Blue Ridge by its distinctive metabasalt geology. Soils in this ecological site weathered primarily from greenstone, and have relatively higher fertility compared to soils weathered from granite, quartzite, phyllite and schist. Oak and hickory species characteristic of dry to mesic conditions are the dominant trees in mature stands. American chestnut was once a major part of the canopy, but has been nearly eradicated by the chestnut blight. Patches of exposed ridgetop and rocky areas with shallow soils may support a mosaic of open woodland, short-shrub or grassy herbaceous vegetation characteristic of glades and barrens. Coves and lower slopes support species that are more mesic (moisture loving) like maple, basswood, elm, birch, and beech. Vegetation

varies according to soil chemistry. Disturbance agents in these forests include fire, wind throw, and ice damage. Gypsy moths can wreak havoc in the oak over story periodically. Fire suppression since the early 20th century in the eastern United States is believed to be leading to the overall replacement of oaks with fire-sensitive, non-oak species like maple, beech, birch, tuliptree, and black cherry. Much of this ecological site has been subjected to human activity including logging, settlement, or other disturbance, therefore many of the forests are mid successional, in which pines (typically Virginia or white) or tuliptree may be codominant or dominant. At least 6 percent of this ecological site has been converted to agricultural use, mainly pasture and hayland.

Associated sites

F130AY005PA	Mixed Metamorphic - Metabasalt Footslopes And Terraces The Mixed Metamorphic-Metabasalt footslope and terraces ecological site occurs on concave areas within the Metabasalt Uplands ecological site and on adjacent lower slopes.
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Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	(1) <i>quercus rubra</i> (2) <i>carya ovalis</i>
Shrub	(1) <i>cercis canadensis</i>
Herbaceous	(1) <i>solidago caesia</i>

Physiographic features

The Metabasalt Upland ecological site occurs on geologies of primarily metabasalt (greenstone), as well as some gabbro, gneiss, metarhyolite, and diorite. Typical landscapes are mountain slopes, summits, interfluves, and some fans. The ecological site can be found on the entire hill or mountain slope from top to bottom, with the shallower areas occupying the most convex summits and shoulders. Elevation is generally around 1380 feet (420m) but can range from 800 to 3200 feet (244 to 976m). Slopes range from 2 to 65 percent. Depth to bedrock is 22 to 72inches (56 to 183 cm) but can be deeper. This ecological site is not subject to flooding nor ponding.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Mountain slope (2) Ridge (3) Hill
Runoff class	Low to very high
Elevation	240 – 980 m
Slope	0 – 70 %
Water table depth	150 cm
Aspect	Aspect is not a significant factor

Climatic features

The Northern Blue Ridge, Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) 130A, appears to have three somewhat distinct sections based on PRISM data for average annual precipitation and minimum average annual temperature (PRISM 2013). The northernmost section that runs from Adams County, Pennsylvania south through Washington County, Maryland has an average annual average precipitation of 38 inches (97cm) in the lower elevations up to 50 inches (127 cm) in the higher elevations - about 2000 feet (610m). The average annual minimum temperature is 40 to 44°F (4.4 to 6.7°C). From Washington County, Maryland south to the northern tip of Rappahannock County, Virginia, the average annual precipitation is less variable, ranging from approximately 38 to 42 inches (97 to 107cm). The average annual minimum temperature remains about the same as to the north, 40 to 44°F (4.4 to 6.7°C). The lower third of MLRA 130A starting from northern Rappahannock County down through Bedford County, Virginia receives more moisture and is colder, with average annual precipitation that ranges from 40 (107cm) to greater than 50 inches (127cm) at elevations higher than 2000 feet (610m) which is a significant part of this section of the MLRA. Average minimum temperatures range from 34°F (1.1°C) at elevation greater than 3000 feet (914m) to 38°F (3.3°C) at the lowest elevations, less than 1000 feet (305m).

These three climate regions seem to correspond to differences in elevation and relief. Most of the Blue Ridge ranging from Adams County, Pennsylvania through Maryland to Rappahannock County, Virginia rises no higher than 2000 feet (610m). Much of the Blue Ridge south of and including Rappahannock County rises above 2000 feet up to 4000 feet (610 to 1219m).

The higher elevations interact with moist air that flows inland from the Atlantic Ocean. Along the east coast of the United States, winter storms moving across the continent encounter the warm Gulf Stream waters and begin to track northeastward paralleling the coast. As the moisture-laden air from the storms crosses Virginia, the eastern slopes and foothills of the Blue Ridge receive much of this precipitation (Hayden and Michaels 2017). In addition, the high relief of the mountains intercepts much of any moisture moving inland from the east coast. The Shenandoah Valley which lies just to the west of the Blue Ridge is one of the driest parts of the state of Virginia. Where the Blue Ridge elevation is greater than 2000 feet (610m), the east-facing slopes appear to receive over 50 inches (127cm) of annual rainfall on average while the Valley to the west of the mountains receives less than 38 inches (97 cm), and the mountains' western footslopes receive 2 to 4 inches (5 to 10cm) less of precipitation than the eastern ones (PRISM). This rain shadow effect is not as pronounced where the ridges are below 1640 ft (500m) of elevation.

Currently, the Metabasalt Upland provisional ecological site is mapped throughout the MLRA. Field work is needed to determine if the precipitation and annual average temperature differences are significant enough to cause major shifts in ecological sites from north to south or from east to west necessitating the further subdivision of broadly mapped PES into more refined climatic groupings.

Data for mean annual precipitation, frost-free and freeze-free periods and monthly precipitation for this ecological site are shown below. The original data used in developing the tables was obtained from the USDA-NRCS National Water & Climate Center (2015) climate information database for 4 weather stations throughout MLRA 130A in proximity to this ecological site. All climate station monthly averages for maximum and minimum temperature and precipitation were then added together and averaged to make this table.

Table 3 Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (characteristic range)	130-160 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	170-190 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	1,090-1,270 mm
Frost-free period (actual range)	120-160 days
Freeze-free period (actual range)	160-190 days
Precipitation total (actual range)	1,070-1,350 mm
Frost-free period (average)	140 days
Freeze-free period (average)	180 days

Precipitation total (average)	1,190 mm
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- (1) MT WEATHER [USC00445851], Paris, VA
- (2) CATOCTIN MTN PARK [USC00181530], Sabillasville, MD
- (3) BIG MEADOWS [USC00440720], Syria, VA
- (4) LURAY 5 E [USC00445096], Luray, VA

Influencing water features

This ecological site is not influenced by wetland or riparian water features.

Soil features

The representative soil series associated with this site are Ravenrock, Pignut, Myersville, Lew, Highfield, Fauquier, Catoctin, and Alanthus. They formed primarily from metabasalt (greenstone), and some metarhyolite, diorite, gabbro, and gneiss. Most of these soils have formed from residuum, which is bedrock that has been deeply weathered in place. Some areas are formed from colluvium, which is soil material that has been transported, usually down a slope gradient. Depth to bedrock is 22 to 72 inches (56 to 183 cm) but can be deeper. The soils are well drained with average water table depth at approximately 57 inches (145cm) below the soil surface. Permeability ranges widely from impermeable where bedrock is closer to the surface or moderately rapid where the soil contains many coarse fragments. Soil pH is strongly to slightly acid ranging from 5.0 to 6.5. Surface textures are loams, silt loams, and silty clay loams, while subsoils tend to be loamy. Soils data was obtained from the Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS) National Soils Information System database (USDA 2015).

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Residuum – greenstone (2) Colluvium – diorite
Surface texture	(1) Channery silt loam (2) Very stony silty clay loam (3) Very channery loam
Family particle size	(1) Loamy
Drainage class	Well drained
Permeability class	Moderate
Soil depth	60 – 180 cm
Surface fragment cover <=3"	0 – 30 %
Surface fragment cover >3"	0 – 30 %

Available water capacity (0-101.6cm)	6.6 – 16.26 cm
Electrical conductivity (0-101.6cm)	Not specified
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-101.6cm)	10 – 6.5
Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (Depth not specified)	0 – 40 %
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (Depth not specified)	0 – 70 %

Ecological dynamics

The vegetation groupings described in this section are based on the terrestrial ecological system classification and vegetation associations developed by NatureServe (Comer 2003) and the Natural Heritage Programs of Pennsylvania (Zimmerman et al. 2012), Virginia (Fleming et al. 2013), West Virginia (WVDNR 2014), and Maryland (Harrison 2004). Terrestrial ecological systems are specifically defined as a group of plant community types (associations) that tend to co-occur within landscapes with similar ecological processes, substrates, and/or environmental gradients. They are intended to provide a classification unit that is readily mappable, often from remote imagery, and readily identifiable by conservation and resource managers in the field. A given system will typically manifest itself in a landscape at intermediate geographic scales of tens to thousands of hectares and will persist for 50 or more years. A vegetation association is a plant community that is much more specific to a given soil, geology, landform, climate, hydrology, and disturbance history. It is the basic unit for vegetation classification. Each association will be named by the dominant species that occupy the different strata (tree, sapling, shrub, and herb). Within the NatureServe database, individual vegetation associations are assigned an identification number called a Community Element Global Code (CEGL). Most of the information contained in this section was adapted from several sources, including the Nature Conservancy's Northeast Terrestrial and Aquatic Habitat map (Anderson et al., 2013), NatureServe's Ecological Systems of the United States (Comer 2003; NatureServe 2009), and Landfire's Biophysical Settings and Existing Vegetation Type layers (Landfire 2010; Landfire 2013).

The characteristic forest system of this ecological site, and in most of the Northern Blue Ridge is the Northeastern Interior Dry-Mesic Oak Forest (NatureServe 2009; Anderson et. al 2013). This is an oak-dominated, mostly closed canopy forest that occurs as a matrix (dominant) type through much of the Appalachians. It occurs at low to mid elevations on gently rolling to steep topography on planar, slightly concave, and slightly convex slopes. Oak species characteristic of dry to mesic conditions and hickories are dominant in mature stands. These include *Quercus rubra*, *Quercus alba*, *Quercus velutina*, and *Quercus coccinea* (red, white, black, and scarlet oaks) and *Carya* spp. (hickories). *Acer rubrum* (Red maple), *Betula lenta* (Sweet birch), and *Betula alleghaniensis* (Yellow birch) may be common associates. Heath shrubs like *Vaccinium* spp. (blueberries) and *Kalmia latifolia* (Mountain laurel) are often present but not well developed. *Castanea dentata* (American chestnut) was a prominent tree before chestnut blight eradicated it as a canopy constituent.

Patches of exposed ridgetop and rocky areas with shallow soils may support a mosaic of open woodland, short-shrub or grassy herbaceous vegetation characteristic of the Southern and Central Appalachian Mafic Glade and Barrens system (NatureServe 2009; Anderson et. al 2013). Vegetation varies according to soil chemistry. Stunted and sparsely distributed tree species include *Fraxinus americana* (white ash), *Juniperus virginiana* (Eastern red cedar), *Quercus prinus* (Chestnut oak), and *Carya glabra* (Pignut hickory). *Rhus aromatic* (aromatic sumac) and *Physocarpus opulifolius* (Ninebark) are common species in a shrub layer that may be thick. An herb layer dominated by graminoid species can be fairly dense away from bare rock; some typical forbs are *Allium cernuum* (nodding onion) and *Helianthus divaricatus* (woodland sunflower).

Concave slopes and drainageways will hold moisture and provide shade relative to other areas. Vegetation consists of forests dominated by various combinations of mesophytic (moisture-loving but non wetland) species of primarily deciduous trees. *Liriodendron tulipifera* (Tulip tree), *Tilia americana* (American basswood), *Fraxinus americana* (White ash), *Betula lenta* (Sweet birch), *Pinus strobus* (Eastern

white pine) and *Tsuga canadensis* (Eastern hemlock) are the most frequent dominant canopy species. These forests are characteristic of the Southern and Central Appalachian Cove Forest System (NatureServe 2009).

Disturbance agents in these forests include fire, wind throw, and ice damage. Gypsy moths can wreak havoc in the oak over story periodically. Oak forests historically have been maintained by periodic fire. Fire suppression since the early 20th century in the eastern United States is believed to be leading to the overall replacement of oaks with fire-sensitive, non-oak species like maples, beeches, birches, tulip poplars, and black cherry (Brose et. al., 2008). Oak forest regeneration is also hindered by heavy deer browsing (Latham et. al. 2005). Deer will selectively consume many native species including oak seedlings and acorns over less palatable species like hay-scented fern and several non-native species including Japanese barberry, Eurasian species of honeysuckle, and garlic mustard.

Much of this ecological site has been subjected to human activity including logging, settlement, or other disturbance, therefore many of the forests are mid successional, in which pines (typically Virginia or white) or tuliptree may be codominant or dominant. These ruderal (growing where the natural vegetation has been disturbed by humans) forests and woodlands comprise about 9% of the area and are generally characterized by unnatural combinations of species, primarily native species, though they often contain slight or substantial numbers and amounts of species alien to the region as well. Less than 5 percent of this ecological site has been converted to agricultural use, mainly pasture and hayland (Landfire 2013).

The information presented is representative of very complex vegetation communities. Key indicator plants and ecological processes are described to help inform land management decisions. Plant communities will differ across the major land resource region because of the naturally occurring variability in weather, soils, and aspect. The reference plant community is not necessarily the management goal. The species lists are representative and are not botanical descriptions of all species occurring, or potentially occurring, on this site. They are not intended to cover every situation or the full range of conditions, species, and responses for the site.

State and transition model

Figure 7. State and Transition Model

Figure 8. Legend

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 1.2 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 7. Community 1.3 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 8. Community 2.1 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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Table 10. Community 4.1 plant community composition

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

Site Development and Testing Plan Future work is needed, as described in a future project plan, to validate the information presented in this provisional ecological site description. Future work includes field sampling, data collection and analysis by qualified vegetation ecologists and soil scientists. As warranted, annual reviews of the project plan can be conducted by the Ecological Site Technical Team. A final field review, peer review, quality control, and quality assurance reviews of the ESD are necessary to approve a final document.

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Contributors

Regional Soil Survey Staff

Approval

Greg Schmidt, 9/27/2024

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	09/14/2026
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:

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:
