

# Ecological site F137XY050GA

## Loamy Backslope Woodland

Last updated: 5/13/2025

Accessed: 08/21/2026

### 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): 137X—Carolina and Georgia Sand Hills

MLRA 137 covers approximately 8,665 square miles (22,450 square kilometers) in the states of South Carolina (44 percent), Georgia (34 percent), and North Carolina (21 percent). The Sand Hills region occurs below the "fall line", which delineates the older crystalline rocks of the Southern Piedmont (MLRA 136) from the younger sediments of the Southern Coastal Plain (MLRA 133A). The term "fall line" came about because the rivers of the Piedmont cut downward through hard bedrock to meet the lower Coastal Plain sediments. The elevational change is evident in the waterfalls and rapids that occur along this transitional line. This region is composed of mainly of unconsolidated sediments deposited during the Cretaceous period. Overlying these sediments is the late Miocene to early Pliocene Pinehurst Formation. The Pinehurst Formation is of windblown or eolian origin. Soils in this formation are the subject of this ecological site. Deposits of kaolin and high-silica sands are found across the area and are often mined.

### Classification relationships

**ATTENTION:** This ecological site meets the requirements for PROVISIONAL. A provisional ecological site is established after ecological site concepts are developed and an initial state-and-transition model is drafted. A provisional ecological site typically will include literature reviews, land use history information, legacy data, and must include some soils data, ocular estimates for canopy and/or species composition by weight, and some line-point intercept information. A provisional ecological site provides the conceptual framework of soil-site correlation for the development of the ESD. For more information about this ecological site, please contact your local NRCS office.

### Ecological site concept

The map unit components to be correlated to this ES occur on backslopes that have predominantly loamy textures. Representative slopes are 7 to 30 percent, and map unit slopes range from 5 to 35 percent. Available water is higher than Dry Sandy Upland Woodland. The site concept was developed to include Ailey, Barnwell, Blaney, Cowarts, Fuquay, and Vaucluse map units based on preliminary analyses of existing data pertaining to sandy uplands of MLRA 137. Additional components were added that are hypothesized to support similar vegetation. This ES concept is distinct because of its native condition (i.e. reference site vegetation), component soils, successional patterns, and wildlife habitat. Reference site vegetation of this ES is edaphically supported by loamy subsoil with some sort of restriction due to the presence of plinthite, fragic properties, or densic materials. Dominant reference site vegetation includes longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*), wiregrass (*Aristida stricta* and *Aristida beyrichiana*), bluejack and blackjack oak (*Quercus incana* and *Q. marilandica*), and an herb layer. Species richness is higher than in the dry ES. Historically, fire was integral to the evolution and maintenance of the native condition in this region. Proposed field investigations are designed to test the association of our initial Dry Sandy Backslope Woodland ES with soil series and specific soil properties. Steeper slopes and other areas protected from fire may support deciduous hardwood species such as oaks and hickories. Separating this community from the longleaf-dominated site will be difficult due to the scale of soil mapping and patchiness of fire-protected areas. Of course, considering the fire suppression efforts of the mid-twentieth century, hardwoods may have become established in areas that under historical fire regimes would be dominated by longleaf pine.

Table 1. Dominant plant species

|      |                                                              |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| Tree | (1) <i>Pinus palustris</i><br>(2) <i>Quercus marilandica</i> |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------|

|            |                                   |
|------------|-----------------------------------|
| Shrub      | (1) <i>Vaccinium crassifolium</i> |
| Herbaceous | (1) <i>Aristida</i>               |

### Physiographic features

The area is one of transition between the Southern Piedmont and Southern Coastal Plain. The majority of the area is located in the Sea Island Section of the Coastal Plain Province of the Atlantic Plain. The western part of the area in Georgia is located in the East Gulf Coastal Plain Section of the same province and division. Portions of the northern half of the MLRA are in the Piedmont Upland Section of the Piedmont Province of the Appalachian Highlands. The area is highly dissected and hilly, with elevations ranging from 165 to 660 feet. Local relief is typically 10 to 20 feet, but can range up to 165 feet.

Figure 1. Physiographic sections of MLRA 137.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

|                    |                                                  |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Landforms          | (1) Hill<br>(2) Marine terrace<br>(3) Interfluve |
| Flooding frequency | None                                             |
| Ponding frequency  | None                                             |
| Elevation          | 50 – 200 m                                       |
| Slope              | 0 – 30 %                                         |

### Climatic features

The average annual precipitation in this area ranges from 41 to 53 inches (1,041 to 1,346 millimeters). Maximum precipitation occurs in midsummer, and the minimum occurs in autumn. High-intensity, convective thunderstorms account for summer rainfall. If snow occurs at all, it is in small amounts.

The average annual temperature ranges from 59 to 65 degrees F (15 to 18 degrees C).

Climate data is based on Normal PRISM data for the period 1981-2010.

Table 3 Representative climatic features

|                               |          |
|-------------------------------|----------|
| Frost-free period (average)   | 210 days |
| Freeze-free period (average)  | 230 days |
| Precipitation total (average) | 1,270 mm |

- (1) AUGUSTA BUSH FLD AP [USW00003820], Augusta, GA
- (2) COLUMBIA [USW00013883], West Columbia, SC
- (3) AIKEN 5SE [USC00380074], Aiken, SC
- (4) CAMDEN 3 W [USC00381310], Camden, SC
- (5) SANDHILL RSCH ELGIN [USC00387666], Elgin, SC
- (6) BYRON EXP STN [USC00091448], Byron, GA
- (7) HAMLET [USC00313784], Hamlet, NC
- (8) MACON MIDDLE GA RGNL AP [USW00003813], Macon, GA
- (9) POPE AFB [USW00013714], Fort Bragg, NC
- (10) CHERAW [USC00381588], Cheraw, SC
- (11) PELION 4 NW [USC00386775], Pelion, SC

### Influencing water features

No water features significantly influence this ecological site.

### Soil features

The Ecological Site concept was developed to include Ailey, Barnwell, Blaney, Cowarts, Fuquay, and Vaucluse map units based on preliminary analyses of existing data pertaining to sandy uplands of MLRA 137. These soils have a loamy subsurface texture and can possess a restrictive layer at depths >= 66 cm (~25 inches).

Photo credit: John Kelly, USDA-NRCS

Figure 6. Profile of the Vaucluse soil series.

Table 4. Representative soil features

|                                             |                                                             |
|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Surface texture                             | (1) Loamy sand<br><br>(2) Sand<br><br>(3) Loamy coarse sand |
| Family particle size                        | (1) Loamy                                                   |
| Drainage class                              | Moderately well drained to well drained                     |
| Permeability class                          | Slow to moderately slow                                     |
| Surface fragment cover <=3"                 | Not specified                                               |
| Surface fragment cover >3"                  | Not specified                                               |
| Available water capacity<br>(0-101.6cm)     | 5.08 – 25.4 cm                                              |
| Calcium carbonate equivalent<br>(0-101.6cm) | Not specified                                               |

|                                                          |               |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Electrical conductivity<br>(0-101.6cm)                   | Not specified |
| Sodium adsorption ratio<br>(0-101.6cm)                   | Not specified |
| Soil reaction (1:1 water)<br>(0-101.6cm)                 | 3.5 – 6.5     |
| Subsurface fragment volume <=3"<br>(Depth not specified) | 0 – 30 %      |
| Subsurface fragment volume >3"<br>(Depth not specified)  | 0 – 10 %      |

## Ecological dynamics

The Loamy Backslope Woodland ecological site is composed of woodland vegetation with a canopy dominated by longleaf pine found on soils with a loamy subsoil on uplands in the Carolina and Georgia Sand Hills (MLRA 137). These sites are prone to wildland fire. The natural fire regime, ignited by lightning, was probably as frequent as every few years (fire return interval = 2-3 years). Other fires were ignited by humans. Prior to the construction of roads, wildland fires may have burned extensively (thousands of acres). While most lightning in this area is associated with rain, lightning combined with high winds can start wildland fires. Today, prescribed fire can be used by land management agencies to restore and/or maintain the site.

The ecological dynamics of the Loamy Backslope Woodland, thick sandy surface are fire-dependent. There are two sources of fuel for the surface fires typical of the site. These are longleaf pine needles and the native herbaceous ground cover, especially native grasses such as wiregrass (*Aristida stricta* and *A. beyrichiana*). Naturally functioning sites need both fuel sources to adequately carry the frequent fires that are needed to maintain the site. The loss of either the longleaf pine trees or the native herbaceous ground cover can lead to less frequent surface fires, since fine fuels are reduced. Prolonged fire suppression alters the structure and composition of the site by driving succession toward hardwood dominated communities. Because of the steeper slopes associated with this ecological site, there may be instances of hardwood communities occurring on different aspects.

During the 19th century, longleaf pine declined as a result of turpentine extraction methods which damaged the trees and left them more susceptible to further damage from fire. Longleaf pine timber was coveted for its strength and durability, and many areas were nearly completely depleted of longleaf pine in the early 20th century (Frost and Langley, 2008). The timber industry moved on to other areas where large longleaf pine trees remained, continuing the cycle of tree loss. Longleaf pine is slower growing than loblolly and slash pine and will not regenerate as easily without fire. Many areas once native to longleaf pine became dominated by loblolly pine and hardwood trees as wildland fires were controlled in the middle of the 20th century. In recent decades land managers have become skilled at managing longleaf pine woodlands, and the value of longleaf pine forest products has gained more attention. The special qualities of longleaf pine woodlands are now recognized for their beauty and high biological diversity. Numerous rare plants and animals persist in the Dry Sandy Upland Woodland habitat, especially on the larger public lands, such as military installations and gamelands.

## Restoration

Of the remaining areas of longleaf pine ecosystems, only about half are managed, leading to substantial alterations in ecosystem structure and composition (Outcalt, 2000). Pre-settlement fire regimes were typified by short fire-return intervals (FRI = 2–3 years), low-intensity surface fires ignited by lightning, and late Holocene Native Americans (Christensen, 1981). Fire suppression transforms these once open savanna–woodland ecosystems into closed canopy forests, with reduced floral and faunal species richness, as well as heavy accumulations of surface fuels. In some cases, changes from one state to another are reversible, but the return path is different from the path taken in the original change. Therefore, a thorough evaluation of reversibility is necessary before adopting a program of rehabilitation. For instance, a case study by Groffman and others (2006) revealed re-introduction of fire to areas that were suppressed was not effective in reversing the loss of longleaf pine because changes in the distribution of the vegetation lost the ability to transmit fire.

Therefore more aggressive management of fire and competing vegetation may be required. General techniques and strategies for restoring upland ecosystems for longleaf pine related to this ecological site are discussed in the individual state and pathway narratives. On- site evaluations are required in order to develop specific recommendations and management prescriptions for desired states.

Prescribed fire is the most common management practice for restoring and maintaining longleaf pine ecosystems. The longleaf pine canopy and wiregrass in the understory function together as keystone species that facilitate but are resistant to fire (Platt et. al., 1988). Growing season burns, especially if frequent, can top kill and remove invading hardwoods effectively while winter fires are best suited for the reduction of hazardous fuels. Seasonality of fires will have varying results, depending on the desired outcome (i.e., vegetation control, seed bed preparation, wildlife forage, etc.) and the specific set of environmental conditions that govern the site.

Chemical control of vegetation, such as the selective application of herbicides, can accelerate the restoration process, especially where the ecosystem is degraded by oak invasion. For instance, low rates of hexazinone application have shown to be very effective in decreasing midstory hardwoods with little or no short-term reduction of understory grasses and forbs on sandhills sites (Brockway et. al., 1998). Other herbicides used in forest management include Velpar L and Pronone 10G. However, the rate of restoration can be significantly more rapid when chemical application is combined with prescribed burning (Boyer, 1991).

Mechanical drum shredders can control large mid-story vegetation. This is a recommended method to accomplish restoration of severely degraded longleaf pine forests. However, the use of mechanical control methods are often expensive, and their effectiveness can be short-lived because brush recovers rapidly in the region (Haywood et al., 2004). In addition, mechanical methods can destroy residual native ground cover propagules. If the management goal is to maintain intact native ground cover, other management options may be more suitable. In most instances, a combination of management practices is recommended in addition to the planting and monitoring of native vegetation.

## State and Transition Model

A State and Transition Model for the Dry Sandy Upland Woodland Ecological Site (DSUW) follows this narrative. Thorough descriptions of each state, plant community phase, and transition and restoration pathways are found in the appropriate State narratives. This model is based on available experimental research, field observations, professional consensus, and interpretations. It is likely to change as knowledge increases.

Plant communities will differ across the MLRA because of the naturally occurring variability in weather, soils, and aspect. The reference plant community (state 1) is not necessarily the management goal. Because landowners have different management goals, the STM outlines methods used to transition to or restore a specific community. Biological processes on this site are complex. Therefore, representative values are presented in a land management context. The species lists are representative and are not complete botanical descriptions of all species occurring, or potentially occurring, on this site. The lists are not intended to cover the full range of botanical potential and site conditions or vegetative response to the conditions.

The following diagram suggests some pathways that the vegetation on this site might take. There may be other states not shown on the diagram. This information is intended to show what might happen in a given set of circumstances. It does not mean the pathway would proceed the same way in every instance. Local professional guidance should always be sought before pursuing a treatment scenario.

## State and transition model

Figure 7. State and transition model.

Figure 8. Simplified STM legend.

## Additional community tables

### Other references

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## Contributors

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## Approval

Matthew Duvall, 5/13/2025

## 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                                        | 08/21/2026        |
| Approved by                                 |                   |
| Approval date                               |                   |
| Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on | Annual Production |

## Indicators

**1. Number and extent of rills:**

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**2. Presence of water flow patterns:**

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**3. Number and height of erosional pedestals or terracettes:**

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**4. Bare ground from Ecological Site Description or other studies (rock, litter, lichen, moss, plant canopy are not bare ground):**

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**5. Number of gullies and erosion associated with gullies:**

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**6. Extent of wind scoured, blowouts and/or depositional areas:**

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**7. Amount of litter movement (describe size and distance expected to travel):**

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**8. Soil surface (top few mm) resistance to erosion (stability values are averages - most sites will show a range of values):**

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**9. Soil surface structure and SOM content (include type of structure and A-horizon color and thickness):**

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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:

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