

Ecological site R220XY446AK

Maritime Scrub Loamy Escarpments

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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): 220X–Alexander Archipelago-Gulf of Alaska Coast

The Alexander Archipelago-Gulf of Alaska Coast area consists of a narrow arc of islands and lower elevation coastal mountains in the Southern Alaska Region. This area spans from the Alexander Archipelago in southeastern Alaska, north and west along the coast of the Gulf of Alaska and Prince William Sound, and further west to the southern tip of the Kenai Peninsula and the northeastern islands of the Kodiak Archipelago. The area makes up about 27,435 square miles (USDA 2006). The terrain primarily consists of low to moderate relief mountains that are deeply incised. Throughout the area glaciers, rivers, and streams have cut deep, narrow to broad valleys. The broader valleys have nearly level to strongly sloping flood plains and stream terraces. Alluvial and colluvial fans and short footslopes are common in the valleys along the base of the mountains. Rocky headlands, sea cliffs, estuaries, and beaches are common along the coast. This area includes the Municipality of Juneau, Alaska's capital, and a number of smaller coastal towns and villages. Federally administered lands within this MLRA include Admiralty Island National Monument and part of Misty Fjords National Monument, Tongass National Forest, Chugach National Forest, and Glacier Bay, Wrangell-St. Elias, and Kenai Fjords National Parks and Preserves. The southern terminus of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline is in Valdez. During the late Pleistocene epoch, the entire area was covered with glacial ice. The numerous fjords of the Alexander Archipelago and Prince William Sound were formed chiefly as a result of glacial scouring and deepening of preglacial river valleys. Most glacial deposits have been eroded away or buried by mountain colluvium and alluvium, which cover about 90 percent of the present landscape. The remaining glacial and glaciofluvial deposits are generally restricted to coastal areas. During the Holocene epoch, volcanic activity within and adjacent to this area deposited a layer of volcanic ash of varying thickness on much of the landscape in the southeastern and northwestern parts of the area. Paleozoic, Mesozoic, and Lower Tertiary stratified sedimentary rocks and Cretaceous and Tertiary intrusive rocks underlie much of the area and are exposed on steep mountain slopes and ridges (USDA 2006). The dominant soil orders in this MLRA are Spodosols, Histosols, and Entisols. Soils in the area typically have a cryic soil temperature regime, an udic moisture regime, and have mixed minerology. Spodosols are common on mountains and hills having been formed in gravelly or cobbly colluvium, glacial till, and varying amounts of silty volcanic ash. These Spodosols commonly range from shallow to deep, are well to somewhat poorly drained, and typically classify as Humicryods or Haplocryods. Histosols that are poorly to very poorly drained occur on footslopes, discharge slopes, and valley floors. These wet histosols commonly classify as Cryosaprists, Cryohemists, and Cryofibrists. Histosols that are well drained occur on steep mountainsides. These dry Histosols commonly classify as Cryofolists. Entisols are common on flood plains, stream terraces, and outwash plains having been formed in silty, sandy, and gravelly to cobbly alluvium. These Entisols are generally deep, range from well to somewhat poorly drained, and commonly classify as Cryaquents and Cryofluvents. Miscellaneous (non-soil) areas make up about 23 percent of the MLRA. The most common miscellaneous areas are avalanche chutes, rock outcrop, rubble land, beaches, river wash, and water. This area represents the northern extent of the Pacific temperate rainforest and is characterized by productive stands of conifers. Western hemlock and Sitka spruce are the dominant trees on mountains and hills at the lower elevations. Due to warmer temperatures, western red cedar and Alaska cedar are more prevalent in the southern part of the area. Black cottonwood and mixed forest types occur on flood plains. Areas of peat and other sites that are too wet for forest growth support sedge-grass meadows and low scrub. The transition to subalpine and alpine communities typically occurs at elevations between 1500 to 3000 feet (Boggs et al. 2010, Carstensen 2007, Martin et al. 1995), which characterize the vegetation of the Southern Alaska Coastal Mountains area. For many decades, logging, commercial fishing, and mining have been the primary industrial land uses throughout much of the area. In recent years, changes in public interests, land use policies, and timber economics have contributed to a significant decline in the timber industry. Commercial fishing continues to be an important industry and most communities support a fleet of boats and fishing related facilities. A number of mines operate in the area and others have been prospected and proposed. Tourism and wildland recreation are becoming increasingly important. Subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering provide food and a variety of other resources to local residents and remain the principal economy for residents of remote villages.

Ecological site concept

This site occurs on hillslopes and escarpments on glaciated hills and mountains. Flooding and ponding do not occur on these well-drained soils. Soils are shallow with lithic contact within the first 20 inches of the soil surface. Soil textures are loamy-skeletal. Slopes range from 20-100% and erosion is the primary source of disturbance. This site supports a reference state composed of two community phases, of which the reference community is characterized as an open tall scrubland, comprised primarily of Sitka alder. Erosion occasionally resets the reference state to an earlier stage of succession, in which dwarf fireweed and dwarf shrubs such as Sitka willow, yellow mountain-avens, and Canada buffaloberry pioneer bare soil and surface fragments. Over time, these dwarf shrubs are replaced by Sitka alder as the dominant shrub species.

Associated sites

F220XY432AK	Maritime Forest Gravelly Plain In areas where these ecological sites abut, ecotonal plant communities that have characteristics from each ecological site are common.
F220XY441AK	Maritime Forest Gravelly Slopes In areas where these ecological sites abut, ecotonal plant communities that have characteristics from each ecological site are common.

Similar sites

R220XY443AK	Maritime Scrub Loamy Steep Slopes Ecological site R220XY443AK supports a similar plant community but occurs on avalanche chutes on mountain slopes.
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Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	(1) <i>Alnus viridis ssp. sinuata</i> (2) <i>Rubus spectabilis</i>
Herbaceous	(1) <i>Athyrium filix-femina</i> (2) <i>Dryopteris expansa</i>

Physiographic features

This site occurs on escarpments and hillslopes on glaciated hills and mountains. Flooding and ponding do not occur on these steep slopes, which range from 20-100%. This site is located at elevations between approximately 100 and 900 feet above sea level.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Mountains > Escarpment (2) Hills > Hillslope
Runoff class	Low
Flooding frequency	None

Ponding frequency	None
Elevation	20 – 270 m
Slope	20 – 100 %
Water table depth	150 – 0 cm
Aspect	W, NW, N, NE, E, SE, S, SW

Table 3. Representative physiographic features (actual ranges)

Runoff class	Low
Flooding frequency	None
Ponding frequency	None
Elevation	20 – 350 m
Slope	20 – 100 %
Water table depth	150 – 0 cm

Climatic features

Cloudy skies, moderate temperatures, and abundant rainfall characterize the temperate maritime climate of this site. Frequent winter storms may consist of snow or heavy rainfall. Moderate to strong winds from the south and southeast are common before and during storms throughout the year. Annual precipitation ranges from 44-94 inches, and annual snowfall ranges from 30-70 inches along the coast and up to 200 inches at higher elevations (USDA 2006). The average annual temperature at lower elevations ranges from about 38-43 degrees F (3-6 degrees C). The frost-free period ranges from about 90-140 days, and the freeze-free period ranges from about 125-180 days.

Table 4 Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (characteristic range)	100-140 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	150-180 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	1,400-3,680 mm
Frost-free period (actual range)	80-170 days

Freeze-free period (actual range)	120-220 days
Precipitation total (actual range)	890-4,370 mm
Frost-free period (average)	120 days
Freeze-free period (average)	170 days
Precipitation total (average)	2,460 mm

- (1) CORDOVA M K SMITH AP [USW00026410], Cordova, AK
- (2) SITKA AIRPORT [USW00025333], Sitka, AK
- (3) JUNEAU INTL AP [USW00025309], Juneau, AK
- (4) ANNETTE ISLAND AP [USW00025308], Metlakatla, AK
- (5) PETERSBURG 1 [USW00025329], Petersburg, AK
- (6) KETCHIKAN INTL AP [USW00025325], Ketchikan, AK
- (7) PELICAN [USC00507141], Hoonah, AK
- (8) GUSTAVUS [USW00025322], Gustavus, AK
- (9) GLACIER BAY [USC00503294], Gustavus, AK
- (10) YAKUTAT STATE AP [USW00025339], Yakutat, AK
- (11) SKAGWAY AP [USW00025335], Skagway, AK
- (12) HAINES AP [USW00025323], Haines, AK
- (13) SELDOVIA AP [USW00025516], Homer, AK
- (14) MAIN BAY [USC00505604], Valdez, AK

Influencing water features

Due to topographic position, no streams or wetlands are associated with this site.

Soil features

The soils of this site formed in shallow colluvium over residuum and glacial till on escarpments and steep slopes. Surface textures are gravelly and cobbly sandy- to coarse sandy loams, and family particle size class is loamy-skeletal. Soils are well-drained and lithic contact occurs within the first 20 inches of the soil surface. Ponding and flooding do not occur on this site.

Figure 7. Typical soil profile for Escures soils in Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve- Gustavus Area, Alaska.

Figure 8. Typical soil profile for Seclusion soils in Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve- Gustavus Area, Alaska.

Figure 9. Typical soil profile for Polkapenn soils in Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve- Gustavus Area, Alaska.

Table 5. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Colluvium (2) Residuum (3) Till
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Surface texture	(1) Gravelly sandy loam (2) Extremely cobbly coarse sandy loam (3) Gravelly coarse sandy loam (4) Gravelly loam (5) Loam (6) Silt loam
Family particle size	(1) Loamy-skeletal (2) Coarse-loamy (3) Loamy
Drainage class	Well drained
Permeability class	Moderate to moderately rapid
Depth to restrictive layer	30 – 50 cm
Soil depth	30 – 50 cm
Surface fragment cover <=3"	Not specified
Surface fragment cover >3"	Not specified
Available water capacity (0-25.4cm)	0.76 – 1.78 cm
Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-101.6cm)	Not specified
Clay content (0-50.8cm)	10 %
Electrical conductivity (0-101.6cm)	Not specified

Sodium adsorption ratio (0-101.6cm)	Not specified
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-101.6cm)	5.8 – 6.4
Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (0-152.4cm)	20 – 40 %
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (0-152.4cm)	10 – 40 %

Table 6. Representative soil features (actual values)

Drainage class	Well drained
Permeability class	Moderate to moderately rapid
Depth to restrictive layer	30 – 100 cm
Soil depth	30 – 100 cm
Surface fragment cover <=3"	0 %
Surface fragment cover >3"	0 %
Available water capacity (0-25.4cm)	0.76 – 2.03 cm
Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-101.6cm)	0 %
Clay content (0-50.8cm)	10 %

Electrical conductivity (0-101.6cm)	0 mmhos/cm
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-101.6cm)	0
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-101.6cm)	5.8 – 6.4
Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (0-152.4cm)	20 – 40 %
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (0-152.4cm)	10 – 40 %

Ecological dynamics

This site is associated with escarpments and hillslopes in the glaciated hills and mountains along the Gulf of Alaska. Until about 10,000 years ago, this area had many continental-scale ice sheets that advanced and retreated many times over millennia (Chapin 1994). The final advance of these glaciers occurred during the Little Ice Age, which peaked about 1750 AD. Since then, many glaciers have thinned and retreated inland, while numerous tidewater glaciers still exist in the area (Lawson 2015). The 250-year glacial retreat is attributed to less regional snowfall in the mountains, rising winter temperatures, and decreased cloud cover and lower precipitation during the growing season in summer (Hall et al. 2003).

During the past 250 years of glacial retreat, meltwater transported and deposited a large amount of silt and sediment via numerous short, high-gradient rivers. Alluvial and colluvial fans and long footslopes are common in the valleys along the base of the mountains. The flood plains in this area are generally broad and braided with a high gradient, and feed into the tidally influenced estuarine areas.

This site supports a reference state composed of two communities that are controlled by erosion and primary successional processes. The reference community phase is characterized as an open tall scrubland, composed primarily of Sitka alder, willow, and salmonberry. Erosion on steep slopes occasionally resets the reference state to an earlier stage of succession, which is then pioneered by dwarf and low shrubs and dwarf fireweed.

State and transition model

Additional community tables

Table 7. Community 1.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 8. Community 1.1 forest overstory composition

Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Nativity	Height M	Canopy Cover (%)	Diameter Cm	Basal Area (square M/hectare)
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Table 9. Community 1.1 forest understory composition

Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Nativity	Height (m)	Canopy Cover (%)
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Table 10. Community 1.2 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 11. Community 1.2 forest understory composition

Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Nativity	Height (m)	Canopy Cover (%)

Inventory data references

NASIS ID Plant Community 13TD06402 Community 1.1 13TD06701 Community 1.1 13TD02201 Community 1.1 13TD02501 Community 1.1 13NP05502 Community 1.1 13NP01902 Community 1.1 13NP01904 Community 1.1 14NP02801 Community 1.1 13TD01202 Community 1.1 13NP05102 Community 1.1 13NP01101 Community 1.1 13NP01304 Community 1.1 13NP01702 Community 1.1 14NP03001 Community 1.1 2015AK105004 Community 1.1 13TD06403 Community 1.1 13TD06601 Community 1.1 13TD06602 Community 1.1 13TD01703 Community 1.1 13TD01901 Community 1.1 13TD01902 Community 1.1 13TD02202 Community 1.1 13TD02801 Community 1.1 13TD03202 Community 1.1 13TD06001 Community 1.1 13NP04602 Community 1.1 13NP04702 Community 1.1 13NP05401 Community 1.1 13NP03001 Community 1.1 13NP02003 Community 1.2 14NP02901 Community 1.2 14DM02001 Community 1.2

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Contributors

Tyler Annetts
Jamin Johanson
Blaine Spellman
Phil Barber

Approval

Blaine Spellman, 6/05/2025

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)	
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Contact for lead author	
Date	06/05/2025
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:
