

Ecological site R236XY151AK

Subarctic Open Willow Loamy Plain Swales

Last updated: 2/13/2024
Accessed: 09/22/2026

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): 236X–Bristol Bay-Northern Alaska Peninsula Lowlands

The Bristol Bay-Northern Alaska Peninsula Lowland Major Land Resource Area (MLRA 236) is located in Western Alaska. This MLRA covers approximately 19,500 square miles and is defined by an expanse of nearly level to rolling lowlands, uplands and low to moderate hills bordered by long, mountain footslopes. Major rivers include the Egegik, Mulchatna, Naknek, Nushagak, and Wood River. MLRA 236 is in the zone of discontinuous permafrost. It is primarily in areas with finer textured soils on terraces, rolling uplands and footslopes. This MLRA was glaciated during the early to middle Pleistocene. Moraine and glaciofluvial deposits cover around sixty percent of the MLRA. Alluvium and coastal deposits make up a large portion of the remaining area (Kautz et al., 2012; USDA, 2006). Climate patterns across this MLRA shift as one moves away from the coast. A maritime climate is prominent along the coast, while continental weather, commonly associated with Interior Alaska, is more influential inland. Across the MLRA, summers are general short and warm while winters are long and cold. Mean annual precipitation is 13 to 50 inches, with increased precipitation at higher elevations and areas away from the coast. Mean annual temperatures is between 30 and 36 degrees F (USDA, 2006). The Bristol Bay-Northern Alaska Peninsula MLRA is principally undeveloped wilderness. Federally managed land includes parts of the Katmai and Aniakchak National Parks, and the Alaska Peninsula, Becharof, Togiak and Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuges. The MLRA is sparsely populated. Principal communities include Dillingham, Naknek, and King Salmon. Commercial fishing in Bristol Bay and the Bering Sea comprises a major part of economic activity in the MLRA. Other land uses include subsistence activities (fishing, hunting, and gathering) and sport hunting and fishing (USDA, 2006).

Classification relationships

Alaska Vegetation Classification: Open tall scrubland (II.B.2 - level III) / Willow scrubland (II.B.2.a - level IV) (Viereck et al., 1992)

Ecological site concept

This ecological site is in concave swales on hills and plains. Site elevation is between 450 and 1,820 feet above sea level. Slope gradients are nearly level to strong (0 - 12 percent). Soil hydrology, soil acidity, and microtopography shape the vegetation on this landform. Occasional, brief ponding during the growing season, along with somewhat poorly drained soils with aquic conditions, restricts vegetation to predominantly facultative wet to obligate wetland species. The reference state supports one stable community. The reference plant community is characterized as an open, tall willow scrubland (Viereck et al., 1992). It is composed of one or more willow species in the overstory with an understory of bluejoint, diverse forbs, and ericaceous shrubs.

Associated sites

R236XY105AK	Subarctic Scrub Mosaic Gravelly Hillslopes Both sites are on hills. R236XY151AK describes concave swales features on the shrub hillslopes described by R236XY105AK.
R236XY106AK	Subarctic Dwarf Scrub Dry Loamy Slopes Both sites are on hills and plains. R236XY151AK describes concave swales features on the ericaceous shrub hills and plains described by R236XY106AK.

Similar sites

F236XY152AK	Boreal Forest Volcanic Loamy Swales Both sites are swale features on plains. F236XY152AK is distinguished by its ability to support a boreal forest on its soil. R236XY151AK does not support trees.
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Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	(1) <i>Salix pulchra</i> (2) <i>Salix barclayi</i>
Herbaceous	(1) <i>Equisetum</i> (2) <i>Calamagrostis canadensis</i>

Physiographic features

This site is in concave swales on hills and plains. Elevation typically ranges from 450 feet to 1,820 feet above sea level. Slopes are generally nearly level to strongly sloped (0 – 12 percent). Ponding is occasional and brief and ponding is absent. This site is found at all aspects.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Slope shape up-down	(1) Linear
Slope shape across	(1) Concave
Geomorphic position, flats	(1) Dip
Landforms	(1) Hills > Hill > Swale (2) Plains > Plain > Swale
Runoff class	Negligible to medium
Flooding frequency	None
Ponding duration	Brief (2 to 7 days)
Ponding frequency	Occasional
Elevation	140 – 560 m

Slope	0 – 10 %
Water table depth	30 – 50 cm
Aspect	W, NW, N, NE, E, SE, S, SW

Table 3. Representative physiographic features (actual ranges)

Runoff class	Negligible to high
Flooding frequency	None
Ponding duration	Brief (2 to 7 days)
Ponding frequency	Occasional
Elevation	0 – 990 m
Slope	0 – 50 %
Water table depth	30 – 50 cm

Climatic features

The climate of this site reflects that of the MLRA, which is described as maritime polar (EPA, 2013). Temperatures are moderated by the nearby Bristol Bay and northern Pacific bodies of water. Annual precipitation ranges from 21 – 34 inches with approximately 40 percent occurring during the June-September growing season (PRISM, 2018).

Table 4 Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (characteristic range)	80-100 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	70-90 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	530-860 mm
Frost-free period (actual range)	80-100 days
Freeze-free period (actual range)	70-90 days
Precipitation total (actual range)	380-1,040 mm

Frost-free period (average)	90 days
Freeze-free period (average)	80 days
Precipitation total (average)	740 mm

Influencing water features

This site attracts inflow from surrounding slopes. Ponding is occasional and brief. Site hydrology is reflected in the vegetation, which is comprised of hydrophytic willows and graminoids. Precipitation, snow melt, and inflow are the main sources of water.

Soil features

Soils are Inceptisols or Spodosols. Soils are very deep and range from somewhat poorly to well drained. All soils contain a minimally developed cambic horizon, andic soil properties within the top 17 inches, and are very strong to moderately acidic. They support a cryic temperature regime. Parent material is colluvium or slope alluvium.

Soil characteristics and position within the swale affect the patchiness of vegetation within these swales. Inceptisols are more poorly drained with aquic soil conditions and a reduced matrix. These soils coincide with swale low points and swale edge positions where snowpack is deepest. These soils support more willows and graminoids. Spodosols in these swales are acidic and minimally developed, suggesting low fertility. These soils typically support more ericaceous shrubs.

Correlated soil components in MLRA 236:

Cryaquepts, D36-Western maritime scrub loamy swales, Fluventic Dystrocrypts, E36-Maritime tall scrub/meadow-gravelly swales

Table 5. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Organic material (2) Slope alluvium (3) Colluvium
Surface texture	(1) Highly organic silt loam (2) Silt
Drainage class	Somewhat poorly drained to well drained
Permeability class	Moderate
Soil depth	150 cm
Surface fragment cover <=3"	Not specified
Surface fragment cover >3"	Not specified

Available water capacity (0-25.4cm)	5.59 – 7.37 cm
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-25.4cm)	4.6 – 6.1
Subsurface fragment volume ≤3" (Depth not specified)	30 – 40 %
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (Depth not specified)	0 – 20 %

Table 6. Representative soil features (actual values)

Drainage class	Somewhat poorly drained to well drained
Permeability class	Moderate
Soil depth	150 cm
Surface fragment cover ≤3"	0 %
Surface fragment cover >3"	0 %
Available water capacity (0-25.4cm)	2.03 – 7.62 cm
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-25.4cm)	4.6 – 6.1
Subsurface fragment volume ≤3" (Depth not specified)	30 – 40 %
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (Depth not specified)	0 – 20 %

Ecological dynamics

This site is on concave swales on hills and plains. Local site factors, including microtopographic elevation, drainage, and soil characteristics support one stable vegetative community. The reference plant community is an open, tall willow scrubland.

This site is stable and there is no known early sere. This community is likely to persist well beyond the typical human management scale (Landfire, 2009; Viereck et al., 1992). Slope gradients are too shallow and soils too stable for erosion. There is no evidence of fire in this community.

Vegetative patchiness is present within this site. Wetter areas are more likely to support willow and other hydrophytic vegetation. These wet areas are typically in topographic lows within the swale and in areas of deep snowpack along the swale edges. Drier soils are more likely to support low and dwarf shrubs. The pattern of patchiness within any swale is determined by distinct local factors.

Willows and herbaceous plants are moderately browsed by moose throughout the year. This does not appear to affect the ecological processes of the site.

The information in this Ecological Dynamics section, including the state-and-transition model (STM), was developed based on current field data, professional experience, and a review of the scientific literature. As a result, all possible scenarios or plant species may not be included. Key indicator plant species, disturbances, and ecological processes are described to inform land management decisions.

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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Inventory data references

Modal points for Community 1.1 08AO06402 08LL06802 09SS15510 09SC00503

References

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Approval

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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	09/22/2026
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:
