

Ecological site FX053A99X040 Loamy Steep (LoStp)

Last updated: 4/23/2025
Accessed: 05/21/2025

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): 053A–Northern Dark Brown Glaciated Plains

The Northern Dark Brown Glaciated Plains, MLRA 53A, is a large, agriculturally and ecologically significant area. It consists of approximately 6.1 million acres and stretches 140 miles from east to west and 120 miles from north to south, encompassing portions of 8 counties in northeastern Montana and northwestern North Dakota. This region represents part of the southern edge of the Laurentide Ice Sheet during maximum glaciation. It is one of the driest and westernmost areas within the vast network of glacially derived prairie pothole landforms of the Northern Great Plains and falls roughly between the Missouri Coteau to the east and the Brown Glaciated Plains to the west. Elevation ranges from 1,800 feet (550 meters) to 3,300 feet (1,005 meters).

Soils are primarily Mollisols, but Inceptisols and Entisols are also common. Till from continental glaciation is the predominant parent material, but alluvium and bedrock are also common. Till deposits are typically less than 50 feet thick (Soller, 2001). Underlying the till is sedimentary bedrock largely consisting of Cretaceous shale, sandstone, and mudstone (Vuke et al., 2007). The bedrock is commonly exposed on hillslopes, particularly along drainageways. Significant alluvial deposits occur in glacial outwash channels and along major drainages, including portions of the Missouri, Poplar, and Big Muddy Rivers. Large eolian deposits of sand occur in the vicinity of the ancestral Missouri River channel east of Medicine Lake (Fullerton et al., 2004). The northwestern portion of the MLRA contains a large unglaciated area containing paleoterraces and large deposits of sand and gravel known as the Flaxville gravel.

Much of this MLRA was glaciated towards the end of the Wisconsin age, and the maximum glacial extent occurred approximately 20,000 years ago (Fullerton and Colton,

1986; Fullerton et al., 2004). Subsequent erosion from major stream and river systems has created numerous drainageways throughout much of the MLRA. The result is a geologically young landscape that is predominantly a dissected till plain interspersed with alluvial deposits and dominated by soils in the Mollisol and Inceptisol orders. Much of this area is typic ustic, making these soils very productive and generally well suited to production agriculture.

Dryland farming is the predominant land use, and approximately 50 percent of the land area is used for cultivated crops. Winter, spring, and durum varieties of wheat are the major crops, with over 48 million bushels produced annually (USDA-NASS, 2017). Areas of rangeland typically are on steep hillslopes along drainages. The rangeland is mostly native mixedgrass prairie similar the *Stipa-Agropyron*, *Stipa-Bouteloua-Agropyron*, and *Stipa-Bouteloua* faciations (Coupland, 1950; 1961). Cool-season grasses dominate and include rhizomatous wheatgrasses, needle and thread, western porcupine grass, and green needlegrass. Woody species are generally rare; however, many of the steeper drainages support stands of trees and shrubs such as green ash and chokecherry. Seasonally ponded, prairie pothole wetlands may occur throughout the MLRA, but the greatest concentrations are in the east and northeast where receding glaciers stagnated and formed disintegration moraines with hummocky topography and numerous areas of poorly drained soils.

Classification relationships

National Hierarchical Framework of Ecological Units (Cleland et al., 1997; McNab et al., 2007)

- Domain: Dry
- Division: Temperate Steppe
- Province: Great Plains-Palouse Dry Steppe Province 331
- Section: Glaciated Northern Grasslands Section 331L
- Subsection: Glaciated Northern Grasslands Subsection 331La
- Landtype association/Landtype phase: N/A

National Vegetation Classification Standard (Federal Geographic Data Committee, 2008)

- Class: Mesomorphic Shrub and Herb Vegetation Class (2)
- Subclass: Temperate and Boreal Grassland and Shrubland Subclass (2.B)
- Formation: Temperate Grassland and Shrubland Formation (2.B.2)
- Division: Central North American Grassland and Shrubland Division (2.B.2.Nb)
- Macrogroup: *Hesperostipa comata* - *Pascopyrum smithii* - *Festuca hallii* Grassland Macrogroup (2.B.2.Nb.2)

- Group: *Pascopyrum smithii* - *Hesperostipa comata* - *Schizachyrium scoparium* Mixedgrass Prairie Group (2.B.2.Nb.2.c)

- Group: Needle-and-Thread - Blue Grama Dry Mixedgrass Prairie Group (2.B.2.Nb.2.b)

EPA Ecoregions

- Level 1: Great Plains (9)
- Level 2: West-Central Semi-Arid Prairies (9.3)
- Level 3: Northwestern Glaciated Plains (42)
- Level 4: Glaciated Dark Brown Prairie (42i)
Glaciated Northern Grasslands (42j)

Ecological site concept

Loamy Steep occurs on hillslopes, till plains, and bluffs where slopes are 15 percent or greater. This site is typically found on linear or concave backslopes. The distinguishing characteristics of this site are moderately steep to very steep slopes, a relatively well developed soil profile, surface textures within the fine-loamy textural family (18 to 35 percent clay), and less than 5 percent calcium carbonate (lime) concentration in the upper 5 inches of soil.

Associated sites

FX053A99X032	Loamy (Lo) This site is generally adjacent to the Loamy Steep ecological site. It is most commonly on summits where slopes are less than 15 percent and linear or concave in shape.
FX053A99X029	Limy Steep (LyStp) This site occurs on moderate to steeply sloping hillslopes adjacent to the Loamy Steep ecological site. It is generally in backslope positions with a convex slope shape rather than a linear or concave slope shape.
FX053A99X030	Limy (Ly) This site occurs on gentler slopes (less than 15 percent) upslope from the Loamy Steep ecological site. It is generally on shoulders or crests with a convex slope shape whereas the Loamy Steep site is in backslope positions with a linear or concave slope shape.

Similar sites

FX053A99X032	Loamy (Lo) This site differs from Loamy Steep in that slopes are less than 15 percent.
FX053A99X029	Limy Steep (LyStp) This site differs from Loamy Steep in that soils contain 5 percent or greater calcium carbonate in the upper 5 inches (as evidenced by strong or violent effervescence).

Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	Not specified

Herbaceous	(1) <i>Hesperostipa comata</i> (2) <i>Pascopyrum smithii</i>
------------	---

Legacy ID

R053AY708MT

Physiographic features

Loamy steep is an extensive ecological site occurring on a variety of landforms across MLRA 53A. It typically occurs on hillslopes and bluffs where the till plain is dissected by drainageways. Slopes are typically 15 to 45 percent.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Hillslope profile	(1) Backslope
Landforms	(1) Till plain > Hillslope (2) Till plain > Bluff
Flooding frequency	None
Ponding frequency	None
Elevation	549–1,006 m
Slope	15–45%
Aspect	W, NW, N, NE, E, SE, S, SW

Climatic features

The Northern Dark Brown Glaciated Plains is a semi-arid region with a temperate continental climate that is characterized by frigid winters and warm to hot summers (Coupland, 1958; Richardson and Hanson, 1977; Heidel et al., 2000). The majority of precipitation occurs as steady, soaking, frontal system rains in late spring to early summer. Summer rainfall comes mainly from convection thunderstorms that typically deliver scattered amounts of rain in intense bursts. These storms may be accompanied by damaging winds and large-diameter hail and result in flash flooding along low-order streams. Approximately 80 percent of the annual precipitation occurs during the growing season. June is the wettest month, followed by July and May (Richardson and Hanson, 1977; Heidel et al., 2000). Average annual precipitation ranges from 11 inches (280 mm) near Richey, Montana, to 15 inches (380 mm) in the Little Muddy drainage near Williston, North Dakota, but precipitation varies greatly from year to year. On average, severe drought and very wet years occur with the same frequency, which is 1 out of 10 years (Coupland, 1958; Heidel et al., 2000). Extreme climatic variations, especially droughts, have the greatest influence on species cover and production (Coupland, 1958, 1961; Biondini et al., 1998). The frost-free period for this ecological site ranges from 90 to 130 days, and the freeze-free period ranges from 115 to 155 days.

Table 3. Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (characteristic range)	90-130 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	115-155 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	279-381 mm
Frost-free period (average)	110 days
Freeze-free period (average)	135 days
Precipitation total (average)	330 mm

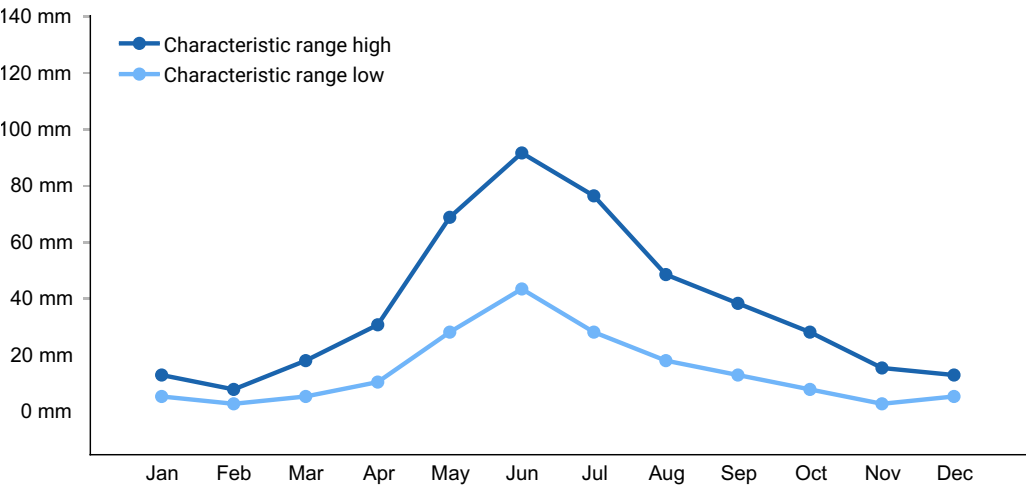


Figure 1. Monthly precipitation range

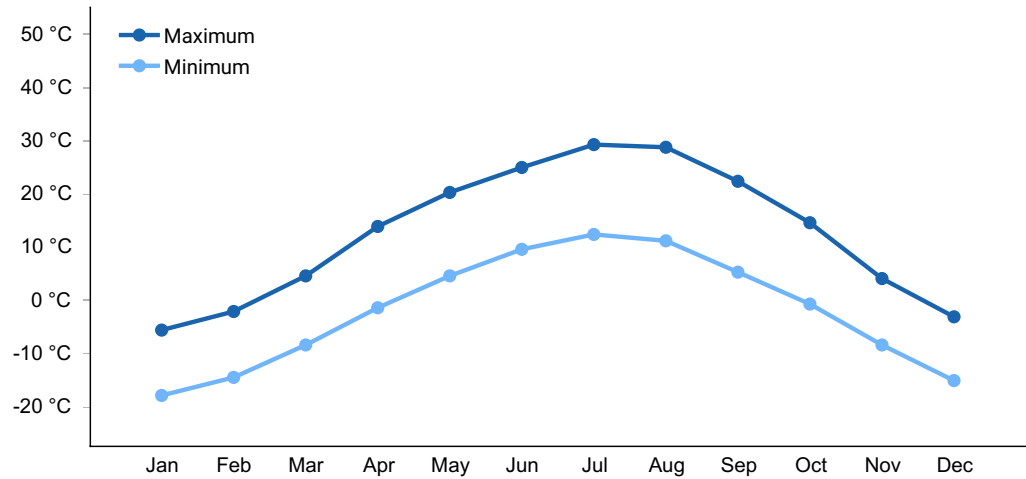


Figure 2. Monthly average minimum and maximum temperature

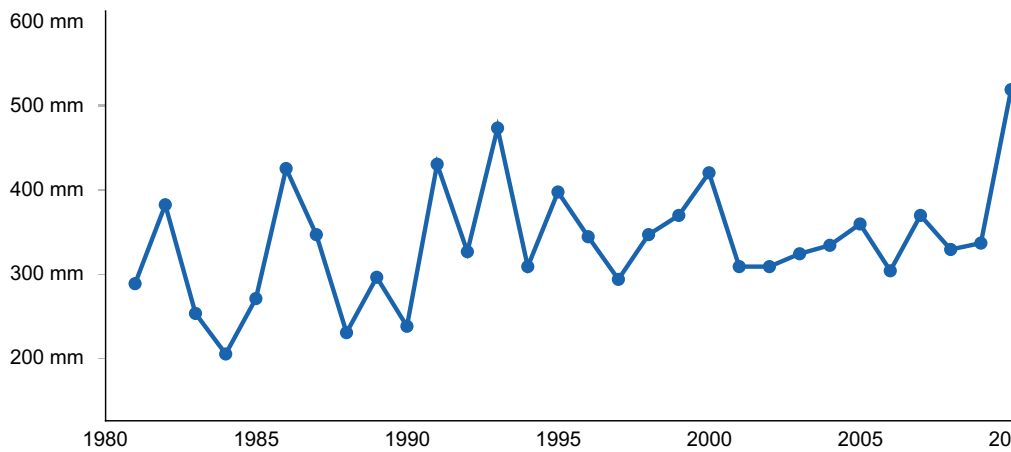


Figure 3. Annual precipitation pattern

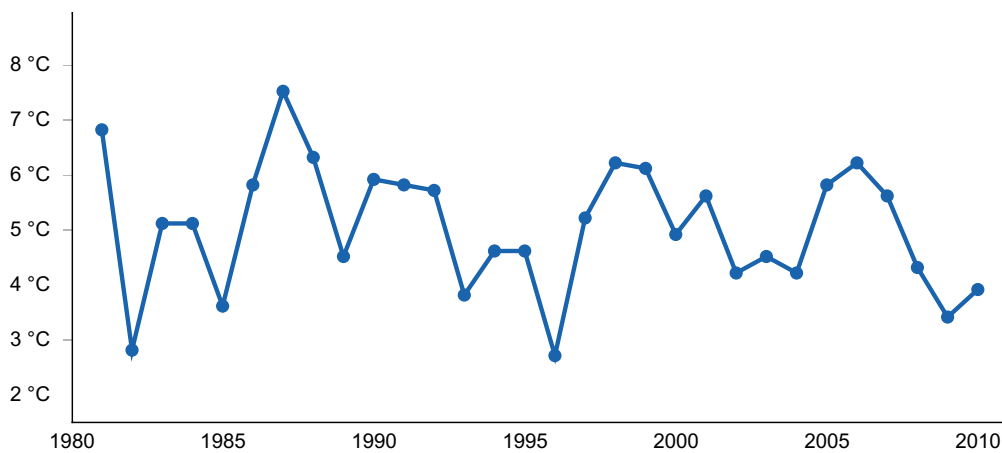


Figure 4. Annual average temperature pattern

Climate stations used

- (1) BREDETTE [USC00241088], Poplar, MT
- (2) CULBERTSON [USC00242122], Culbertson, MT
- (3) OPHEIM 10 N [USC00246236], Opheim, MT
- (4) OPHEIM 12 SSE [USC00246238], Opheim, MT
- (5) PLENTYWOOD [USC00246586], Plentywood, MT
- (6) SCOBEEY 4 NW [USC00247425], Scobey, MT
- (7) SIDNEY [USC00247560], Sidney, MT
- (8) VIDA 6 NE [USC00248569], Vida, MT
- (9) WILLISTON SLOULIN INTL AP [USW00094014], Williston, ND

Influencing water features

This is an upland ecological site and is not influenced by a water table or run-in from adjacent sites. Due to the semi-arid climate in which it occurs, the water budget is normally contained within the soil pedon. Soil moisture is recharged by spring rains, but it rarely exceeds field capacity in the upper 40 inches before being depleted by evapotranspiration. During intense precipitation events, precipitation rates frequently

exceed infiltration rates and this site delivers moisture to downslope sites via surface runoff. Moisture loss through evapotranspiration exceeds precipitation for the majority of the growing season, and soil moisture is the primary limiting factor for plant production on this ecological site.

Soil features

Soils are typically moderately deep to very deep (greater than 20 inches to bedrock) and derived from glacial till. They commonly have a mollic epipedon. Soil surface horizons fall within the fine-loamy textural family and contain 18 to 35 percent clay. Underlying horizons typically, but not always, have an argillic horizon that contains between 18 to 45 clay, depending on the soil series.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Till–igneous, metamorphic and sedimentary rock
Surface texture	(1) Loam (2) Fine sandy loam (3) Clay loam
Drainage class	Well drained
Soil depth	51–183 cm
Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-12.7cm)	0–4%
Electrical conductivity (0-50.8cm)	0–3 mmhos/cm
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-50.8cm)	0–12
Subsurface fragment volume ≤3" (0-50.8cm)	0–34%
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (0-50.8cm)	0–34%

Ecological dynamics

The information in this ecological site description, including the state-and-transition model (STM) (Figure 3), was developed based on historical data, 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.

The Loamy Steep provisional ecological site in MLRA 53A consists of four states: the Historic Reference state (1), the Current Potential state (2), the Shortgrass state (3), and the Invaded state (4). Plant communities associated with this ecological site evolved under

the combined influences of climate, grazing, and fire. Extreme climatic variability results in frequent droughts, which have the greatest influence on the relative contribution of species cover and production (Coupland, 1958, 1961; Biondini et al., 1998). Due to the dominance of cool-season graminoids, annual production is highly dependent upon mid- to late-spring precipitation (Heitschmidt and Vermeire, 2005; Anderson, 2006).

The historic ecosystem experienced periodic lightning-caused fires with estimated fire return intervals of 6 to 25 years (Bragg, 1995). Historically, Native Americans also set periodic fires. The majority of lightning-caused fires occurred in July and August, whereas Native Americans typically set fires during spring and fall to correspond with the movement of bison (Higgins, 1986). The precise effects of the historic fire return interval are not definitive, but in general the mixed-grass ecosystem was resilient to fire. Potential effects are generally temporary and may include reduction of litter, fluctuations in production, and changes in species composition (Vermeire et al., 2011, 2014).

Native grazers also shaped these plant communities. American Bison (*Bison bison*) were the dominant historic grazer, but pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*), elk (*Cervus canadensis*), and deer (*Odocoileus* spp.) were also common. Additionally, small mammals such as prairie dogs (*Cynomys* spp.) and ground squirrels (*Urocitellus* spp.) influenced this plant community (Salo et al., 2004). Grasshoppers and periodic outbreaks of Rocky Mountain locusts (*Melanoplus spretus*) also played an important role in the ecology of these communities (Lockwood, 2004). The mixed-grass ecosystem was resilient to grazing, although localized areas could experience shifts in species composition due to heavy grazing.

Following European settlement, fire was largely eliminated, domestic livestock replaced native ungulates as the primary grazers, and non-native species were introduced to the ecosystem. Aside from drought, livestock grazing is now the principle disturbance on the landscape.

Improper grazing of this site can result in a reduction in the cover of mid-statured grasses and an increase in shortgrasses such as blue grama (Smoliak et al., 1972; Smoliak, 1974). Improper grazing practices include any practices that do not allow sufficient opportunity for plants to physiologically recover from a grazing event or multiple grazing events within a given year and/or that do not provide adequate cover to prevent soil erosion over time. These practices may include, but are not limited to, overstocking, continuous grazing, and/or inadequate seasonal rotation moves over multiple years. Periods of extended drought (approximately 3 years or more) can reduce mid-statured, cool-season grasses and shift the species composition of this community to one dominated by blue grama (Coupland, 1958, 1961). Further degradation of the site due to improper grazing can result in a community dominated by shortgrasses such as blue grama and prairie Junegrass (*Koeleria cristata*).

Most, if not all, extant examples of this site have some degree of invasion by non-native species. Non-native grasses such as crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron cristatum*) and

bluegrasses (*Poa* spp.) are the most common invasive species. These species are widespread throughout the Northern Great Plains can invade relatively undisturbed grasslands (Heidinga and Wilson, 2002; Henderson and Naeth, 2005; Toledo et al., 2014). In most cases native ecological function is relatively intact, but in some cases non-native grasses will displace native species and dominate the ecological functions of the site.

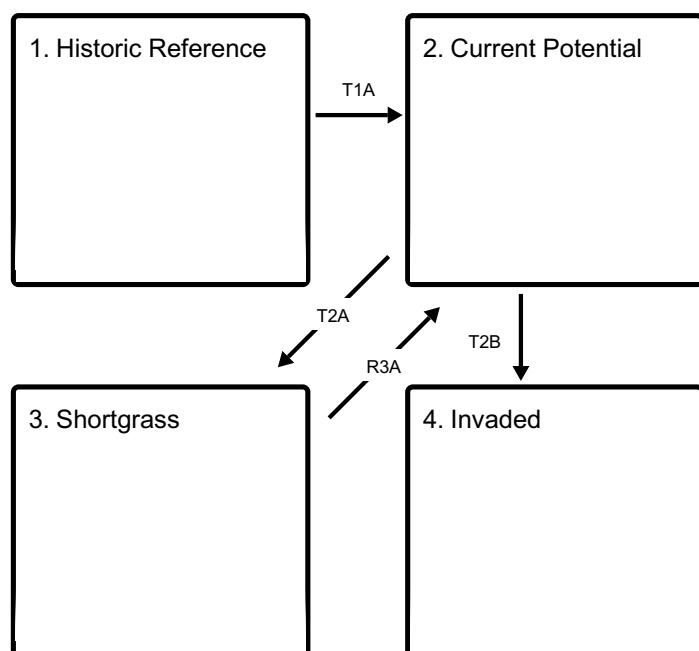
The effects of an altered fire regime are not completely understood at the time of this writing, but evidence suggests that long-term fire suppression can result in accumulations of litter and may contribute to increased abundance of non-native grasses (Murphy and Grant, 2005; Vermeire et al., 2011; Whisenant, 1990). Conversely, fire return intervals of less than 6 years, such as annual burning, can reduce productivity and shift species composition toward warm-season, short-statured grasses (Shay et al., 2001; Smith and McDermid, 2014).

Due to the steep slopes this ecological site is generally not suitable for cropland. In general, this site has not been converted to cropland and has remained in native vegetation.

The state-and-transition model (STM) suggests possible pathways that plant communities on this site may follow as a result of a given set of ecological processes and management. The site may also support states not displayed in the STM diagram. Landowners and land managers should seek guidance from local professionals before prescribing a particular management or treatment scenario. Plant community responses vary across this MLRA due to variability in weather, soils, and aspect. The reference community phase may not necessarily be the management goal. The lists of plant species and species composition values are provisional and are not intended to cover the full range of conditions, species, and responses for the site. Species composition by dry weight is provided when available and is considered provisional based on the sources identified in the narratives associated with each community phase.

State and transition model

Ecosystem states



T1A - Introduction of non-native grass species, such as Kentucky bluegrass, smooth brome, and crested wheatgrass.

T2A - Prolonged drought, improper grazing management, or a combination of these factors

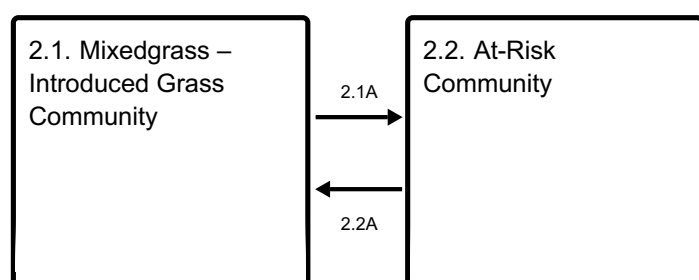
T2B - Displacement of native species by non-native invasive species (Crested Wheatgrass, Kentucky bluegrass, noxious weeds, etc.)

R3A - Range seeding, grazing land mechanical treatment, timely moisture, proper grazing management (management intensive and costly)

State 1 submodel, plant communities



State 2 submodel, plant communities



2.1A - Drought, improper grazing management

2.2A - Return to normal or above average precipitation, proper grazing management

State 3 submodel, plant communities

3.1. Shortgrass
Community

State 4 submodel, plant communities

4.1. Invaded
Community

State 1 Historic Reference

The Historic Reference state (1) contains one community phase characterized mid-statured bunchgrasses and rhizomatous wheatgrasses. This state is considered extinct and is included here for historical reference purposes. It evolved under the combined influences of climate, grazing, and fire, with climatic variation having the greatest influence on cover and production. In general, this state was resilient to grazing; however, localized areas likely received heavy grazing, which resulted in the species composition shifting to short-statured species. Fire most likely resulted in a short-term shift in species composition to more warm-season grasses such as blue grama and fewer cool-season bunchgrasses.

Community 1.1 Mixedgrass Community

The Mixedgrass Community Phase (1.1) was characterized by a mid-statured bunchgrasses and rhizomatous wheatgrasses. Plant communities were dominantly western porcupine grass (*Hesperostipa curtiseta*) and thickspike wheatgrass (*Elymus lanceolatus*) in the north and gradually transitioned to western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*) and needle and thread (*Hesperostipa comata*) in the south as conditions became warmer and drier. Sedges such as threadleaf sedge (*Carex filifolia*) were common, but not abundant. The mat-forming, warm-season, perennial grass blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*) and prairie Junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*) were the predominant shortgrasses (Coupland, 1950, 1961). Forbs comprised about 10 percent of the cover and shrubs about 1 to 5 percent.

State 2

Current Potential

The Current Potential state (2) contains two community phases characterized by mid-statured bunchgrasses and rhizomatous wheatgrasses. It evolved under the combined influences of climate, grazing, and fire, with climatic variation having the greatest influence on cover and production. This state differs from the historical reference state in that it is influenced by introduced plant species and has altered fire and grazing regimes. In general, this state is resilient to grazing and fire, although these factors can influence species composition in localized areas.

Community 2.1

Mixedgrass – Introduced Grass Community

The Mixedgrass – Introduced Grass Community Phase (2.1) is predominantly native mid-statured grasses but has some degree of non-native grass establishment. Plant communities are dominantly western porcupine grass and thickspike wheatgrass in the north and gradually transition to western wheatgrass and needle and thread in the south as conditions became warmer and drier. Sedges such as threadleaf sedge and needleleaf sedge (*Carex duriuscula*) are common, but not abundant. Blue grama and prairie Junegrass are the predominant shortgrasses (Coupland, 1950, 1961). Forbs comprise about 10 percent of the cover and shrubs about 1 to 5 percent. Non-native species typically comprise 1 to 3 percent of the plant community and may include crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron cristatum*) and Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*).

Community 2.2

At-Risk Community

The At-Risk Community Phase (2.2) occurs when site conditions decline due to drought or improper grazing management. It is characterized by nearly equal proportions of shortgrasses and mid-statured grasses. Shortgrasses such as blue grama and prairie Junegrass are increasing while mid-statured grasses are decreasing. Prairie sagewort may also increase in this phase.

Pathway 2.1A

Community 2.1 to 2.2

Drought, improper grazing management, or a combination of these factors can shift the Mixedgrass - Introduced Grass Community Phase (2.1) to the At-Risk Community Phase (2.2). These factors favor an increase in shortgrasses such as blue grama and a decrease in midgrasses (Coupland, 1961).

Pathway 2.2A

Community 2.2 to 2.1

Normal or above-normal spring precipitation and proper grazing management transition

the At-Risk Community Phase (2.2) back to the Mixedgrass - Introduced Grass Community Phase (2.1).

State 3

Shortgrass

The Shortgrass state (3) consists of one community phase. The dynamics of this state are driven by long-term drought, improper grazing management, or a combination of these factors. Shortgrasses increase with long-term improper grazing at the expense of cool-season midgrasses (Coupland, 1961; Biondini and Manske, 1996). In particular, communities dominated by blue grama can alter soil properties, creating conditions that resist establishment of other grass species (Dormaar and Willms, 1990; Dormaar et al., 1994). Reductions in stocking rates can reduce shortgrass cover and increase the cover of cool-season midgrasses, although this recovery may take decades (Dormaar and Willms, 1990; Dormaar et al., 1994).

Community 3.1

Shortgrass Community

The Shortgrass Community Phase (3.1) occurs when site conditions decline due to long-term drought or improper grazing. Mid-statured grasses such as bunchgrasses and rhizomatous wheatgrasses have been largely eliminated. Short-statured species such as blue grama and prairie Junegrass dominate the plant community. The subshrub prairie sagewort is common.

State 4

Invaded

The Invaded state (4) occurs when invasive plant species invade adjacent native grassland communities and displace the native species. Data suggest that the diversity of native species declines significantly when invasive species exceed 30 percent of the plant community. Non-native perennial grasses, such as crested wheatgrass and Kentucky bluegrass, are the most widespread concerns. Crested wheatgrass has been planted on an estimated 20 million acres in the western U.S. since the 1930s (Holechek, 1981) and is the greatest concern on this ecological site. It is extremely drought tolerant, establishes readily on a variety of soil types, has high seedling vigor, and can dominate the seedbank of invaded grasslands (Rogler and Lorenz, 1983; Henderson and Naeth, 2005). Kentucky bluegrass is widespread throughout the Northern Great Plains (Toledo et al., 2014) and mainly affects the moister portions of this site. It is very competitive and displaces native species by forming dense root mats, altering nitrogen cycling, and having allelopathic effects on germination (DeKeyser et al., 2013). It may also alter soil surface hydrology and modify soil surface structure (Toledo et al., 2014). Plant communities dominated by Kentucky bluegrass have significantly less cover of native grass and forb species (Toledo et al., 2014; DeKeyser et al., 2009). Invasive grass species can invade relatively undisturbed grasslands, and it is not clear what triggers them to displace native species. In

some cases, they have been found to substantially increase under long-term grazing exclusion (DeKeyser et al., 2009, 2013; Grant et al., 2009), but a consistent correlation to grazing management practices cannot be made at this time. Noxious weeds such as leafy spurge and Canada thistle are not widespread in MLRA 53A, but they can be a concern in localized areas. These species are very aggressive perennials. They typically displace native species and dominate ecological function when they invade a site. In some cases, these species can be suppressed through intensive management (herbicide application, biological control, or intensive grazing management). Control efforts are unlikely to eliminate noxious weeds, but their density can be sufficiently suppressed so that species composition and structural complexity are similar to that of the Current Potential state (2). However, cessation of control methods will most likely result in recolonization of the site by the noxious species.

Community 4.1

Invaded Community

Encroachment by introduced grasses, noxious weeds, and other invasive species is common. Reduced plant species diversity, simplified structural complexity, and altered biologic processes result in a state that is substantially departed from both the Reference state (1) and the Current Potential state (2).

Transition T1A

State 1 to 2

Introduction of non-native grass species occurred in the early 20th century. The naturalization of these species in relatively undisturbed grasslands, coupled with changes in fire and grazing regimes, transitions the Reference state (1) to the Current Potential state (2).

Transition T2A

State 2 to 3

Prolonged drought, improper grazing management, or a combination of these factors weakens the resilience of the Current Potential state (2) and drives its transition to the Shortgrass state (3). The Current Potential state (2) transitions to the Shortgrass state (3) when mid-statured grasses become rare and contribute little to production. Shortgrasses such as blue grama and prairie Junegrass dominate the plant community.

Transition T2B

State 2 to 4

The Current Potential state (2) transitions to the Invaded state (4) when aggressive perennial grasses or noxious weeds displace native species. The most common concerns are crested wheatgrass and introduced bluegrasses, which are widespread invasive species in the Northern Great Plains (Henderson and Naeth, 2005; Toledo et al., 2014).

The precise triggers of this transition are not clear, but data suggest that exclusion of grazing and fire may be a contributing factor in some cases (DeKeyser et al., 2013). In addition, other rangeland health attributes, such as reproductive capacity of native grasses and soil quality, have been substantially altered.

Restoration pathway R3A
State 3 to 2

A reduction in livestock grazing pressure alone may not be sufficient to reduce the cover of shortgrasses in the Shortgrass state (3) (Dormaar and Willms, 1990). Blue grama, in particular, can resist displacement by other species (Dormaar and Willms, 1990; Laycock, 1991; Dormaar et al., 1994; Lacey et al., 1995). Intensive management, such as reseeding and mechanical treatment, may be necessary (Hart et al., 1985), but these practices are labor intensive, costly, may not be possible on this site due to topography. Therefore, returning the Shortgrass state (3) to the Current Potential state (2) may require considerable energy and cost, and may not be feasible within a reasonable amount of time.

Conservation practices

Prescribed Grazing
Grazing Land Mechanical Treatment
Range Planting

Additional community tables

Inventory data references

Data for this provisional ecological site was obtained from one low-intensity plot representing the Contemporary Reference State (2). This plot was used in conjunction with a review of the scientific literature and professional experience to approximate the plant communities for the Contemporary Reference State (2). Information for remaining states was obtained from professional experience and a review of the scientific literature. All community phases are considered provisional based on these plots and the sources identified in this ecological site description.

Other references

Anderson, R.C. 2006. Evolution and origin of the central grassland of North America: Climate, fire, and mammalian grazers. *Journal of the Torrey Botanical Society* 133:626-647.

Biondini, M.E., and L. Manske. 1996. Grazing frequency and ecosystem processes in a northern mixed prairie, USA. *Ecological Applications* 6:239-256.

- Biondini, M.E., B.D. Patton, and P.E. Nyren. 1998. Grazing intensity and ecosystem processes in a northern mixed-grass prairie, USA. *Ecological Applications* 8:469-479.
- Bragg, T.B. 1995. The physical environment of the Great Plains grasslands. In: A. Joern and K.H. Keeler (eds.) *The Changing Prairie*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 49-81.
- Christian, J.M., and S.D. Wilson. 1999. Long-term ecosystem impacts of an introduced grass in the Northern Great Plains. *Ecology* 80:2397-2407.
- Clarke, S.E, E.W. Tisdale, and N.A. Skoglund. 1947. The effects of climate and grazing practices on short-grass prairie vegetation in southern Alberta and southwestern Saskatchewan. Canadian Department of Agriculture Technical Bulletin No. 46.
- Cleland, D.T., et al. 1997. National hierarchical framework of ecological units. In: M.S. Boyce and A. Haney (eds.) *Ecosystem Management Applications for Sustainable Forest and Wildlife Resources*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Coupland, R.T. 1950. Ecology of the mixed prairie of Canada. *Ecological Monographs* 20:271-315.
- Coupland, R.T. 1958. The effects of fluctuations in weather upon the grasslands of the Great Plains. *Botanical Review* 24:273-317.
- Coupland, R.T. 1961. A reconsideration of grassland classification in the Northern Great Plains of North America. *Journal of Ecology* 49:135-167.
- Coupland, R.T., and R.E. Johnson. 1965. Rooting characteristics of native grassland species in Saskatchewan. *Journal of Ecology* 53:475-507.
- DeKeyser, S., G. Clambey, K. Krabbenhoft, and J. Ostendorf. 2009. Are changes in species composition on central North Dakota rangelands due to non-use management? *Rangelands* 31:16-19.
- DeKeyser, E.S., M. Meehan, G. Clambey, and K. Krabbenhoft. 2013. Cool season invasive grasses in Northern Great Plains natural areas. *Natural Areas Journal* 33:81-90.
- Derner, J.D., and R.H. Hart. 2007. Grazing-induced modifications to peak standing crop in northern mixed-grass prairie. *Rangeland Ecology and Management* 60:270-276.
- Dix, R.L. 1960. The effects of burning on the mulch structure and species composition of grasslands in western North Dakota. *Ecology* 41:49-56.
- Dormaar, J.F., and S. Smoliak. 1985. Recovery of vegetative cover and soil organic matter during revegetation of abandoned farmland in a semiarid climate. *Journal of Range*

Management 38:487-491.

Dormaar, J.F., and W.D. Willms. 1990. Effect of grazing and cultivation on some chemical properties of soils in the mixed prairie. *Journal of Range Management* 43:456-460.

Dormaar, J.F., S. Smoliak, and W.D. Willms. 1990. Soil chemical properties during succession from abandoned cropland to native range. *Journal of Range Management* 43:260-265.

Dormaar, J.F., B.W. Adams, and W.D. Willms. 1994. Effect of grazing and abandoned cultivation on a *Stipa-Bouteloua* community. *Journal of Range Management* 47:28-32.

Dormaar, J.F., M.A. Naeth, W.D. Willms, and D.S. Chanasyk. 1995. Effect of native prairie, crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron cristatum*) and Russian wildrye (*Elymus junceus*) on soil chemical properties. *Journal of Range Management* 48:258-263.

Federal Geographic Data Committee. 2008. The National Vegetation Classification Standard, Version 2. FGDC Vegetation Subcommittee. FGDC-STD-005-2008 (Version 2), p. 126.

Fullerton, D.S., and R.B. Colton. 1986. Stratigraphy and correlation of the glacial deposits on the Montana Plains. U.S. Geological Survey.

Fullerton, D.S., R.B. Colton, C.A. Bush, and A.W. Straub. 2004. Map showing spatial and temporal relations of mountain and continental glaciations on the northern plains, primarily in northern Montana and northwestern North Dakota. U.S. Geologic Survey pamphlet accompanying Scientific Investigations Map 2843.

Grant, T.A., B. Flanders-Wanner, T.L. Shaffer, R.K. Murphy, and G.A. Knutsen. 2009. An emerging crisis across northern prairie refuges: Prevalence of invasive plants and a plan for adaptive management. *Ecological Restoration* 27:58-65.

Hart, M., S.S. Waller, S.R. Lowry, and R.N. Gates. 1985. Disking and seeding effects on sod bound mixed prairie. *Journal of Range Management* 38:121-125.

Heidel, B., S.V. Cooper, and C. Jean. 2000. Plant species of special concern and plant associations of Sheridan County, Montana. Report to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Montana Natural Heritage Program, Helena, MT.

Heidinga, L., and S.D. Wilson. 2002. The impact of an invading alien grass (*Agropyron cristatum*) on species turnover in native prairie. *Diversity and Distributions* 8:249-258.

Heitschmidt, R.K., and L.T. Vermeire. 2005. An ecological and economic risk avoidance drought management decision support system. In: J.A. Milne (ed.) *Pastoral Systems in Marginal Environments*, XXth International Grasslands Congress, July 2005, p. 178.

Henderson, A.E., and S.K. Davis. 2014. Rangeland health assessment: A useful tool for linking range management and grassland bird conservation? *Rangeland Ecology and Management* 67:88-98.

Henderson, D.C., and M.A. Naeth. 2005. Multi-scale impacts of crested wheatgrass invasion in mixed-grass prairie. *Biological Invasions* 7:639-650.

Herrick, J.E., J.W. Van Zee, K.M. Havstad, L.M. Burkett, and W.G. Whitford. 2009. Monitoring manual for grassland, shrubland and savanna ecosystems. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service, Jornada Experimental Range, Las Cruces, NM.

Higgins, K.F. 1986. Interpretation and compendium of historical fire accounts in the Northern Great Plains. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Resource Publication 161.

Holechek, J.L. 1981. Crested wheatgrass. *Rangelands* 3:151-153.

Knopf, F.L. 1996. Prairie legacies—birds. In: F.B. Samson and F.L. Knopf (eds.) *Prairie Conservation: Preserving North America's Most Endangered Ecosystem*, Island Press, Washington, DC, pp. 135-148.

Knopf, F.L., and F.B. Samson. 1997. Conservation of grassland vertebrates. In: F.B. Samson and F.L. Knopf (eds.) *Ecology and Conservation of Great Plains Vertebrates: Ecological Studies* 125, Springer-Verlag, New York, NY, pp. 273-289.

Krzic, M., K. Broersma, D.J. Thompson, and A.A. Bomke. 2000. Soil properties and species diversity of grazed crested wheatgrass and native rangelands. *Journal of Range Management* 53:353-358.

Lacey, J., R. Carlstrom, and K. Williams. 1995. Chiseling rangeland in Montana. *Rangelands* 17:164-166.

Laycock, W.A. 1991. Stable states and thresholds of range condition on North American rangelands. *Journal of Range Management* 44:427-433.

Lockwood, J.A. 2004. *Locust: The devastating rise and mysterious disappearance of the insect that shaped the American frontier*. Basic Books, New York, NY.

McNab, W.H., et al. 2007. Description of ecological subregions: Sections of the conterminous United States [CD-ROM]. USDA Forest Service, General Technical Report WO-76B.

Montana State College. 1949. Similar vegetative rangeland types in Montana. Montana State College, Agricultural Experiment Station.

Murphy, R.K., and T.A. Grant. 2005. Land management history and floristics in mixed-grass prairie, North Dakota, USA. *Natural Areas Journal* 25:351-358.

Nesser, J.A., G.L. Ford, C.L. Maynard, and D.S. Page-Dumroese. 1997. Ecological units of the Northern Region: Subsections. USDA Forest Service, Intermountain Research Station, General Technical Report INT-GTR-369.

Ogle, S.M., W.A. Reiners, and K.G. Gerow. 2003. Impacts of exotic annual brome grasses (*Bromus* spp.) on ecosystem properties of the northern mixed grass prairie. *American Midland Naturalist* 149:46-58.

Richardson, R.E., and L.T. Hanson. 1977. Soil survey of Sheridan County, Montana. USDA Soil Conservation Service, Bozeman, MT.

Rogler, G.A., and R.J. Lorenz. 1983. Crested wheatgrass: Early history in the United States. *Journal of Range Management* 36:91-93.

Romo, J.T., 2011. Clubmoss, precipitation, and microsite effects on emergence of graminoid and forb seedlings in the semiarid Northern Mixed Prairie of North America. *Journal of Arid Environments* 75:98-105.

Romo, J.T., and Y. Bai. 2004. Seedbank and plant community composition, Mixed Prairie of Saskatchewan. *Journal of Range Management* 57:300-304.

Rowe, J.S. 1969. Lightning fires in Saskatchewan grassland. *Canadian Field Naturalist* 83:317-327.

Salo, E.D., et al. 2004. Grazing intensity effects on vegetation, livestock and non-game birds in North Dakota mixed-grass prairie. *Proceedings of the 19th North American Prairie Conference*, Madison, WI.

Samuel, M.J., and R.H. Hart. 1994. Sixty-one years of secondary succession on rangelands of the Wyoming High Plains. *Journal of Range Management* 47:184-191.

Schoeneberger, P.J., D.A. Wysocki, E.C. Benham, and Soil Survey Staff. 2012. Field book for describing and sampling soils. Version 3.0. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, National Soil Survey Center, Lincoln, NE.

Shay, J., D. Kunec, and B. Dyck. 2001. Short-term effects of fire frequency on vegetation composition and biomass in mixed prairie in south-western Manitoba. *Plant Ecology* 155:157-167.

Smith, B., and G.J. McDermid. 2014. Examination of fire-related succession within the dry mixed-grass subregion of Alberta with the use of MODIS and Landsat. *Rangeland Ecology and Management* 67:307-317.

- Smoliak, S. 1974. Range vegetation and sheep production at three stocking rates on Stipa-Bouteloua prairie. *Journal of Range Management* 27:23-26.
- Smoliak, S., J.F. Dormaar, and A. Johnston. 1972. Long-term grazing effects on Stipa-Bouteloua prairie soils. *Journal of Range Management* 25:246-250.
- Soil Survey Staff. 2014. Keys to Soil Taxonomy, 12th edition. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.
- Soller, D.R. 2001. Map showing the thickness and character of Quaternary sediments in the glaciated United States east of the Rocky Mountains. U.S. Geological Survey Miscellaneous Investigations Series I-1970-E, scale 1:3,500,000.
- Thorpe, J. 2014. Saskatchewan Rangeland Ecosystems Publication 10. Communities on the Thin ecosites. Version 2. Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan. Saskatchewan Research Council Pub. No. 11881-10E14.
- Toledo, D., M. Sanderson, K. Spaeth, J. Hendrickson, and J. Printz. 2014. Extent of Kentucky bluegrass and its effect on native plant species diversity and ecosystem services in the Northern Great Plains of the United States. *Invasive Plant Science and Management* 7:543-552.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2017. Montana Annual Bulletin, Volume LIV, Issue 1095-7278.
https://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Montana/Publications/Annual_Statistical_Bulletin/2017/Montana_Annual_Bulletin_2017.pdf (Accessed 14 February 2017).
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service. Glossary of landform and geologic terms. National Soil Survey Handbook, Title 430-VI, Part 629.02c.
http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/soils/ref/?cid=nrcs142p2_054242 (Accessed 13 April 2016).
- Van Dyne, G.M., and W.G. Vogel. 1967. Relation of Selaginella densa to site, grazing, and climate. *Ecology* 48:438-444.
- Vaness, B.M., and S.D. Wilson. 2007. Impact and management of crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron cristatum*) in the northern Great Plains. *Canadian Journal of Plant Science* 87:1023-1028.
- Vermeire, L.T., J.L. Crowder, and D.B. Wester. 2011. Plant community and soil environment response to summer fire in the northern Great Plains. *Rangeland Ecology and Management* 64:37-46.
- Vermeire, L.T., J.L. Crowder, and D.B. Wester. 2014. Semiarid rangeland is resilient to

summer fire and postfire grazing utilization. *Rangeland Ecology and Management* 67:52-60.

Vuke, S.M., K.W. Porter, J.D. Lonn, and D.A. Lopez. 2007. Geologic map of Montana - information booklet: Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology Geologic Map 62-D.

Whisenant, S.G. 1990. Postfire population dynamics of *Bromus japonicus*. *American Midland Naturalist* 123:301-308.

Wilson, S.D., and J.M. Shay. 1990. Competition, fire, and nutrients in a mixed-grass prairie. *Ecology* 71:1959-1967.

Contributors

Scott Brady
Stuart Veith

Approval

Kirt Walstad, 4/23/2025

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgements

A number of USDA-NRCS staff supported this project. Staff contributions are as follows:

Soil Concepts, Soils Information, and Field Descriptions

Charlie French, USDA-NRCS (retired)

Steve Sieler, USDA-NRCS

NASIS Reports, Data Dumps, and Soil Sorts

Bill Drummond, USDA-NRCS (retired)

Pete Weikle, USDA-NRCS

Peer Review

Kirt Walstad, USDA-NRCS

Mark Hayek, USDA-NRCS

Kami Kilwine, USDA-NRCS

Robert Mitchell, USDA-NRCS

Quality Control

Kirt Walstad, USDA-NRCS

Quality Assurance

Stacey Clark, USDA-NRCS

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	04/23/2025
Approved by	Kirt Walstad
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:**
