USDA Natural Resources
Conservation Service

Ecological site HX076XY115
Loamy Hills

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Accessed: 05/21/2025

General information

Approved. An approved ecological site description has undergone quality control and quality assurance review. It contains a working state and transition model, enough information to identify the ecological site, and full documentation for all ecosystem states contained in the state and transition model.

MLRA notes

Major Land Resource Area (MLRA): 076X–Bluestem Hills

MLRA 76, is located in Kansas (84 percent) and Oklahoma (16 percent). It makes up about 7,555 square miles (19,585 square kilometers). The towns of Manhattan and El Dorado, Kansas, and Pawhuska, Oklahoma, are in this MLRA. The part of this area in Oklahoma lies between the towns of Ponca City and Bartlesville. Interstates 35 and 70 cross the part of the area in Kansas. The western edge of the Potawatomi Indian Reservation and the Fort Riley Military Base are in the part of the area in Kansas. Most of the Osage Indian Reservation in Oklahoma is in this area. The area is known as the “Flint Hills” in Kansas and the “Osage Hills” in Oklahoma.

Following are the various kinds of land use in this MLRA: Cropland— private, 18 percent; Grassland—private, 69 percent; Federal, 3 percent; Forest—private, 4 percent; Urban development—private, 3 percent; Water —private, 2 percent; Other —private, 1 percent.

Nearly all of this area is in farms or ranches. Nearly three fourths of the area supports native grasses grazed by beef cattle. Nearly one-fifth of the area is in cropland. These cropland areas are located on the deeper soils in valleys and on some of the uplands. The major crops grown include winter wheat, grain sorghum, alfalfa, and hay. These crops are also grown in small irrigated areas along the Arkansas River.

The major soil resource concerns are water erosion, surface compaction, moisture conservation, and maintenance of the content of organic matter in the soils. Maintenance of plant health and vigor and control of noxious and invading plants are the major management concerns on grassland. Conservation practices on cropland generally

include terraces, grassed waterways, grade-control structures, conservation tillage, and nutrient and pest management. Conservation practices on rangeland generally include brush management, control of noxious weeds, nutrient management, prescribed burning, and prescribed grazing.

Classification relationships

Land Resource Region H. Central Great Plains winter wheat and range region. Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) 76 Bluestem Hills.

Ecological site concept

The Loamy Hills ecological site was formerly known as Loamy Upland (R076XY015KS). This site occurs on summits, shoulders, backskopes, and footslope positions. The Loamy Hills soils are well drained that formed from colluvium and in residuum from interbedded limestone and clayey shale. The Loamy Hills site has moderately deep to very deep soils with a silt loam to silty clay surface usually 14 inches or thicker.

Associated sites

HX076XY112	**Limy Hills** The Limy Hills ecological site sits adjacent to and in conjunction with the Loamy Hills site. This site is characterized by the soil series Clime. This is a moderately deep, well drained soil that formed in residuum from shale. This site occurs on side slopes on uplands with slopes ranging from 1 to 60 percent. The Limy Hills ecological site is usually calcareous to the surface and always strongly calcareous within 10 inches of the soil surface.
HX076XY107	**Clay Hills** The Clay Hills ecological site sits adjacent to and in conjunction with the Loamy Hills site. This site occurs on summit and shoulder positions with a clay content >35 percent at depths >14 inches. The Clay Hills site has moderately deep to very deep soils with a clay loam to silty clay surface (7 to 14 inches) over clayey subsoil. Although this site can retain large amounts of water, it is tightly held and therefore is not available in adequate amounts for the vegetation during stress periods.
HX076XY128	**Shallow Hills** The Shallow Hills ecological site sits adjacent to and in conjunction with the Loamy Hills site. This site is characterized by the shallow depth to limestone or shale. This site generally occurs in narrow bands or shoulders on hillslopes. Limestone at the surface is almost always present on this site. The soil series Sogn and Kipson characterize this site. It consists of shallow and very shallow, somewhat excessively drained, soils that formed in residuum weathered from limestone or shale. Slopes range from 0 to 20 percent.

HX076XY109	**Gravelly Flint Hills** The Gravelly Flint Hills ecological site sits adjacent to and in conjunction with the Loamy Hills ecological site. This site is located on nearly level to strongly sloping areas on interfluves and hillslopes (summits, shoulders, and backslopes) of uplands. Slope ranges from 0 to 15 percent. This site has soils that were formed in limestone residuum and have high amounts of chert fragments (35 to 90 percent) throughout the profile. Because of the high rock fragments in the subsoil this site has a very low to low available water capacity. As a result the total annual production is different when compared to associated sites.

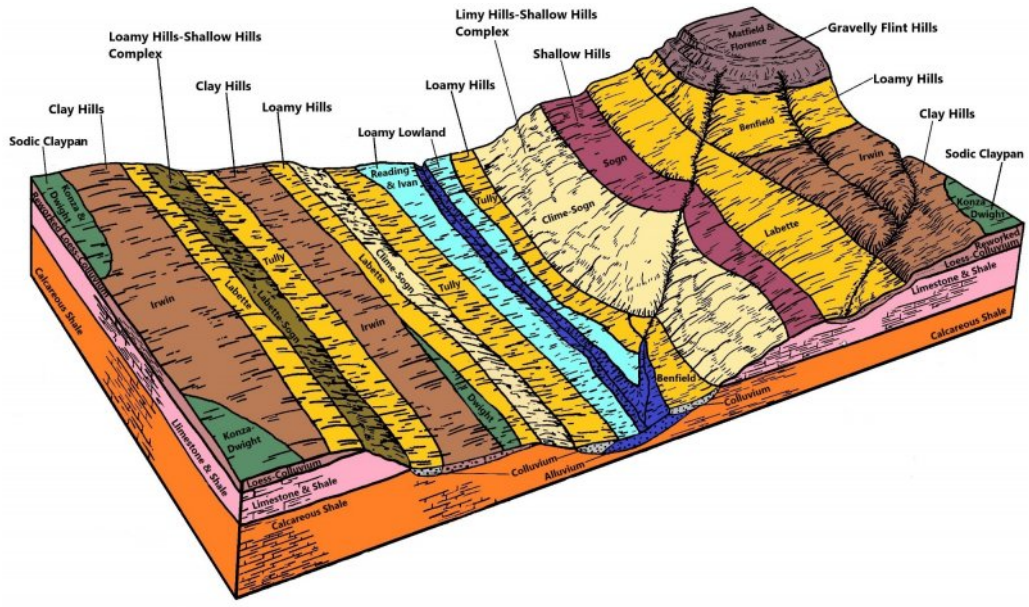


Figure 1. MLRA 76 ESD block diagram.

Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	Not specified
Herbaceous	(1) *Andropogon gerardii* (2) *Sorghastrum nutans*

Legacy ID

R076XY115KS

Physiographic features

Most of MLRA 76 is in the Osage Plains Section of the Central Lowland Province of the Interior Plains. The northern end of the area is in the Dissected Till Plains Section of the same province and division. The landscape consists of rolling hills and cuestas formed in dissected uplands that typically have narrow divides and narrow, steep-sided valleys where Pennsylvanian limestone bedrock is dominant. Stream valleys are less boxlike (broader) where the dominant bedrock is shale. Significant flood plains occur only along a

few large streams. Elevation ranges from 980 to 1,650 feet (300 to 505 meters). Local relief is generally 10 to 25 feet (3 to 8 meters), but it can be 100 to 165 feet (30 to 50 meters).

The extent of the major Hydrologic Unit Areas (identified by four-digit numbers) that make up this MLRA is as follows: Neosho-Verdigris (1107),33 percent; Kansas (1027), 29 percent; Middle Arkansas (1103), 18 percent; Arkansas- Keystone (1106), 18 percent; and Republican (1025), 2 percent. The area has two large rivers. The Kansas River crosses the northern part of the area, and the Arkansas River runs along the southwestern edge. The smaller rivers that cross the area include the Vermillion, Mill, Neosho, Cottonwood, Fall, Verdigris, Grouse, Elk, Caney, and Bird Rivers.

The Loamy Hills ecological site has soils that formed in residuum or colluvium over residuum derived from shale and limestone of Permian age. These soils are located on nearly level to moderately steep sloping areas on interfluves and hillslopes (summits, shoulders, backslopes, and footslopes) of uplands. Soil depth on this site can range from moderately deep to very deep (20 to greater than 80 inches, 50 to greater than 200 centimeters). Aspect does not affect the site. Slope ranges from 0 to 30 percent. Elevation ranges from 980 to 1650 feet (300 to 505 meters). This site has the capability to receive and generate runoff.

The Loamy Hills ecological site is closely associated with the Shallow Limy and Gravelly Flint Hills ecological sites. The Shallow Limy ecological site occurs on bedrock-controlled limestone occurring within 20 inches (50 centimeters). The Gravelly Flint Hills site occurs on summits and shoulders with greater than 35 percent chert rock fragments in the soil profile.

The bedrock beneath this area is primarily Pennsylvanian and Permian shale and limestone. Chert (flint) in the limestone beds gives rise to the local name for this area in Kansas, the “Flint Hills.” The chert is much less erodible than the limestone, so the soils in the area become stony as the limestone erodes away, leaving the flint fragments. Mainly because of the stoniness, the prairie in this area generally has never been converted to cropland. The limestone beds beneath part of this area in Oklahoma are of Pennsylvanian age. Unconsolidated sand and gravel occur in river valleys and on terraces.

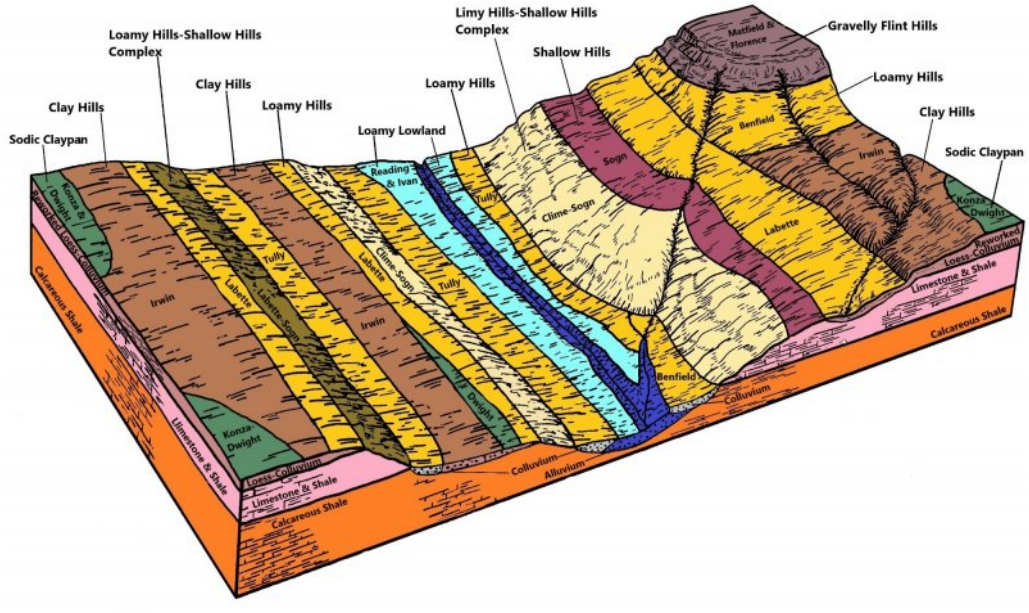


Figure 2. MLRA 76 ESD block diagram.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Hillslope profile	(1) Summit (2) Shoulder (3) Toeslope
Landforms	(1) Hills
Flooding frequency	None
Ponding frequency	None
Elevation	980–1,650 ft
Slope	0–30%
Aspect	Aspect is not a significant factor

Climatic features

The climate of this area is typically continental, being in the interior of a large landmass at mid latitudes. Large daily and annual variations in temperature are common. Winters are cold because of frequent polar air masses moving into the area from the north from December into March. Summer temperatures are warm and usually prevail for about six months of the year. June typically has the most rainfall, and January is the driest. Most of the rainfall occurs as high-intensity, convective thunderstorms. The annual snowfall averages 14 to 20 inches (355 to 510 millimeters). Drought occurs on an average of 3 times in a 30-year period (1981-2010) in MLRA 76.

The climate data listed in the following tables represent minimum and maximum averages and ranges for the climate stations located throughout MLRA 76. The dates referenced are from 1981-2010 (latest 30 year average). Average annual precipitation for this MLRA ranges from 32 to 40 inches (810 to 1020 millimeters). All weather data is supported by

the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) 1981-2010 Climate Normals. For the average annual precipitation of individual climate station locations and additional climate data, access the National Water and Climate Center at http://www.wcc.nrcs.usda.gov

Table 3. Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (characteristic range)	144-162 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	177-192 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	34-39 in
Frost-free period (actual range)	140-171 days
Freeze-free period (actual range)	167-194 days
Precipitation total (actual range)	33-40 in
Frost-free period (average)	154 days
Freeze-free period (average)	185 days
Precipitation total (average)	36 in

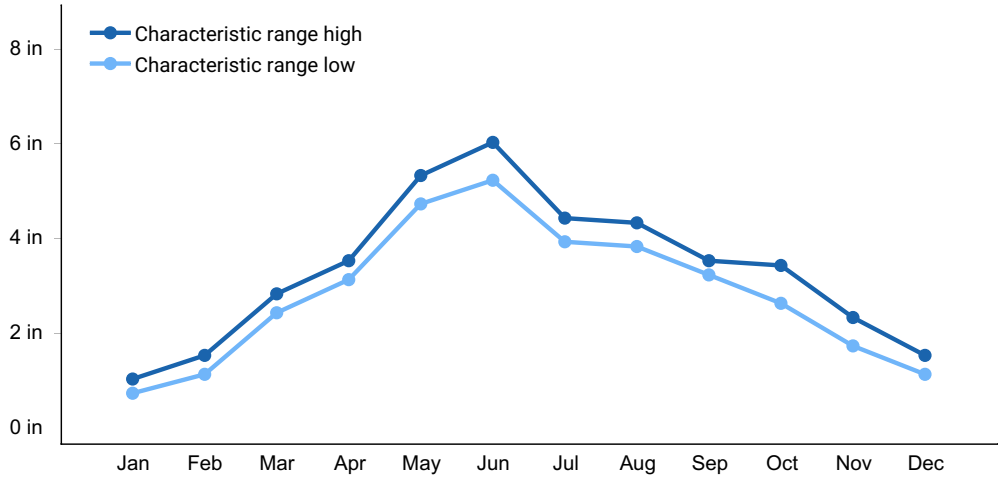


Figure 3. Monthly precipitation range

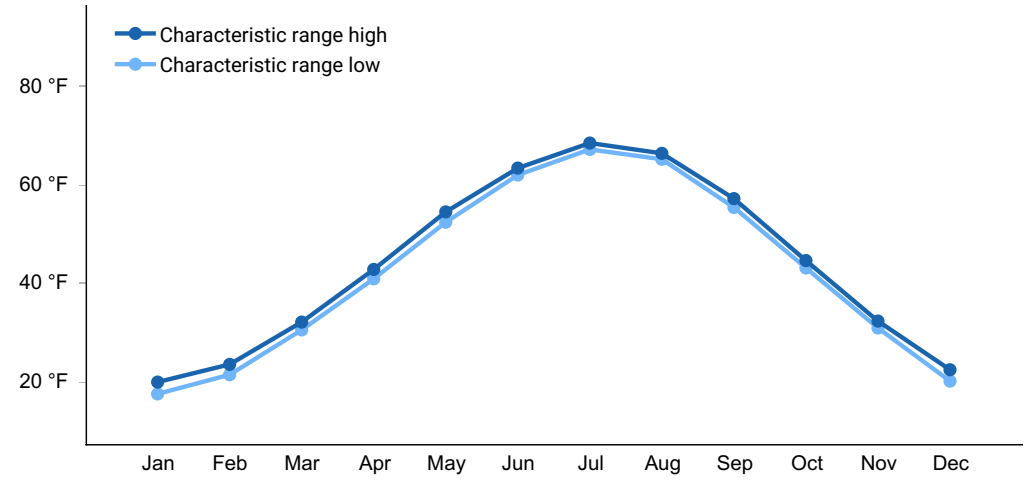


Figure 4. Monthly minimum temperature range

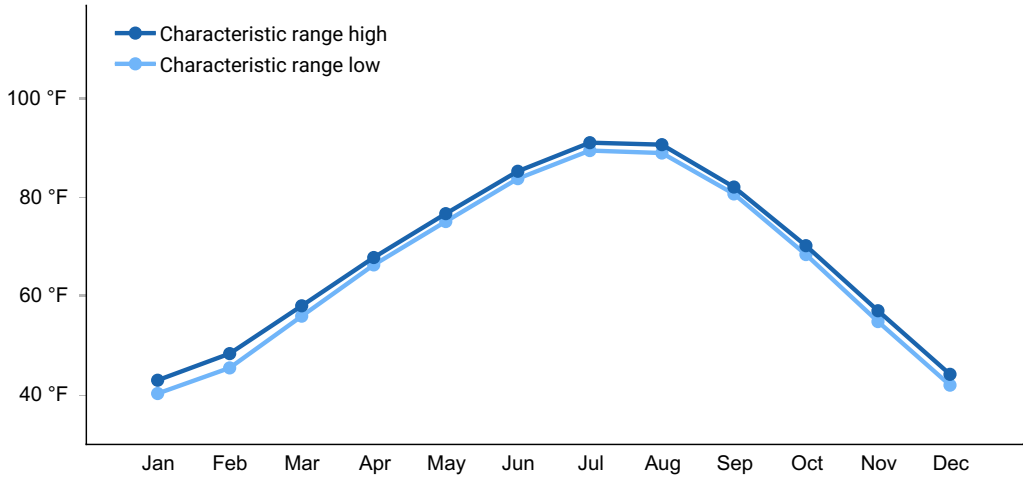


Figure 5. Monthly maximum temperature range

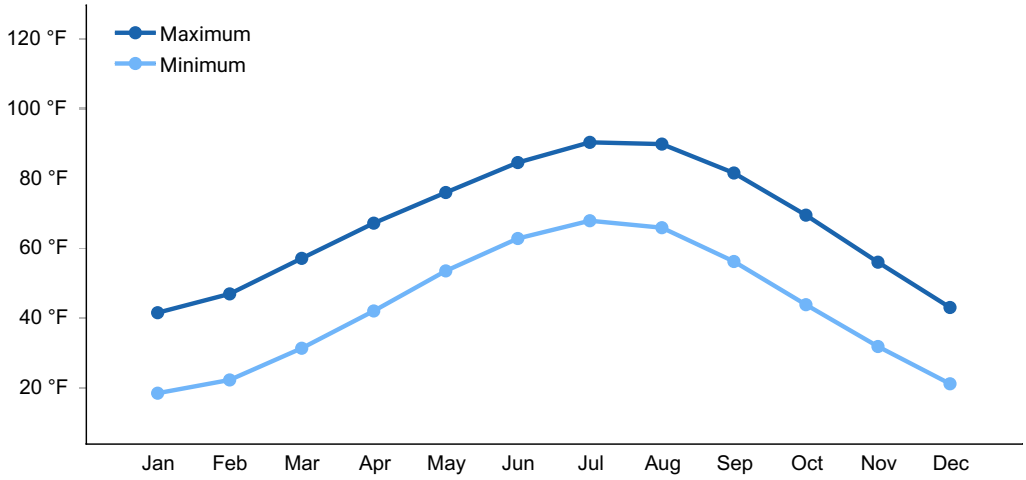


Figure 6. Monthly average minimum and maximum temperature

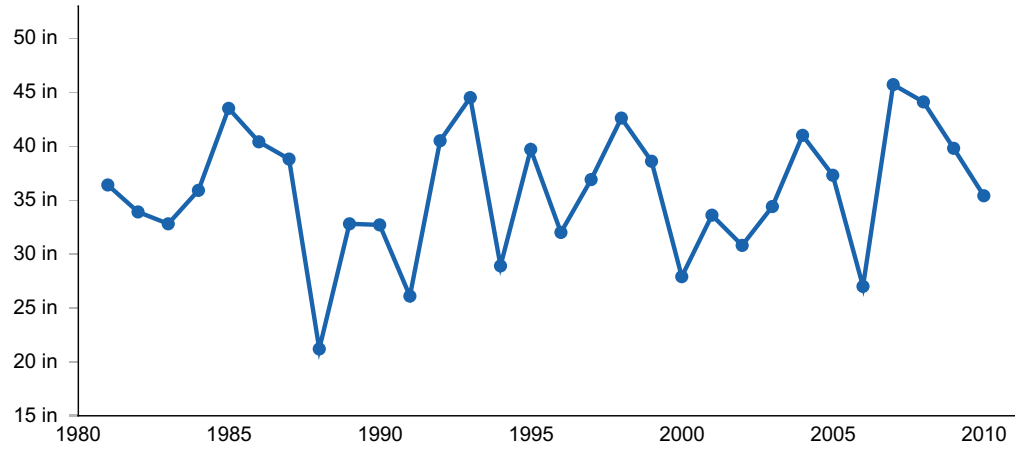


Figure 7. Annual precipitation pattern

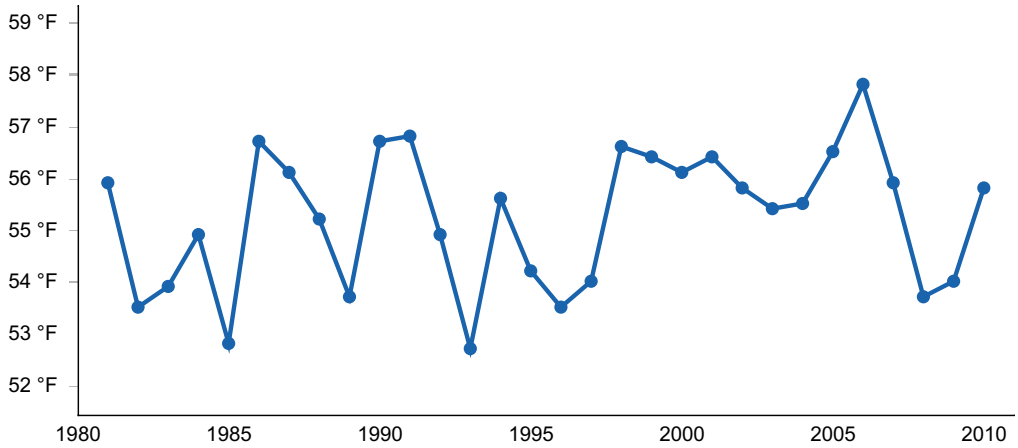


Figure 8. Annual average temperature pattern

Climate stations used

- (1) TUTTLE CREEK LAKE [USC00148259], Manhattan, KS
- (2) MANHATTAN [USC00144972], Manhattan, KS
- (3) WAMEGO 4 W [USC00148563], Wamego, KS
- (4) MANHATTAN MUNI AP [USW00003936], Manhattan, KS
- (5) MANHATTAN 6 SSW [USW00053974], Manhattan, KS
- (6) COUNCIL GROVE LAKE [USC00141867], Council Grove, KS
- (7) TALLGRASS PRAIRIE NP [USC00148061], Strong City, KS
- (8) COTTONWOOD FALLS [USC00141858], Cottonwood Falls, KS
- (9) FLORENCE [USC00142773], Florence, KS
- (10) CASSODAY 2SW [USC00141351], Cassoday, KS
- (11) EL DORADO [USC00142401], El Dorado, KS
- (12) EUREKA 1E [USC00142622], Eureka, KS
- (13) SMILEYBERG 1N [USC00147534], Douglass, KS
- (14) WINFIELD 3NE [USC00148964], Winfield, KS
- (15) HOWARD 1W [USC00143822], Howard, KS

Influencing water features

The Loamy Hills ecological site occurs on upland sites on moderately steep slopes. Runoff is medium to very high. Water moves down slope into drainageways. If cover is adequate, erosion rates are still moderate on the steep terrain. If inadequate vegetative cover is present, sheet and gully erosion becomes excessive. They are moderately well to well-drained soils. Hydrologic group ranges from C to D

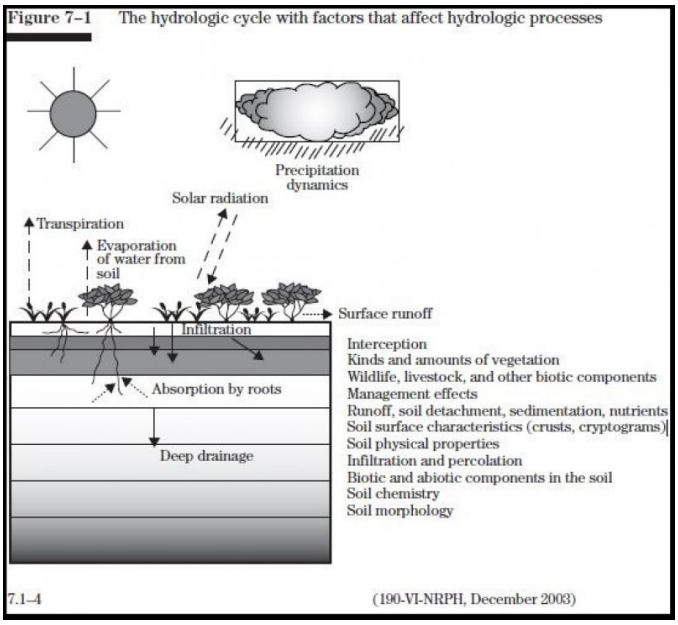


Figure 9. Fig. 7-1 from the National Range and Pasture Handbook.

Soil features

The soils that characterize the Loamy Hills ecological are moderately deep to very deep, well drained, slowly permeable soils on uplands. The slope varies from nearly level on interfluves to moderately steep on backslopes. Runoff is very high on steep slopes and medium on gentle slopes.

These upland soils have silty or loamy surface layers that usually have good structure and generally greater than 14 (18 to greater than 36 centimeters) inches over fine subsoils. In the fine subsoil, soil moisture is tightly held and generally unavailable for plant growth during dry periods.

The major soils that characterize this site are Benfield, Labette, and Tully. There are other soils with similar properties included with this site.

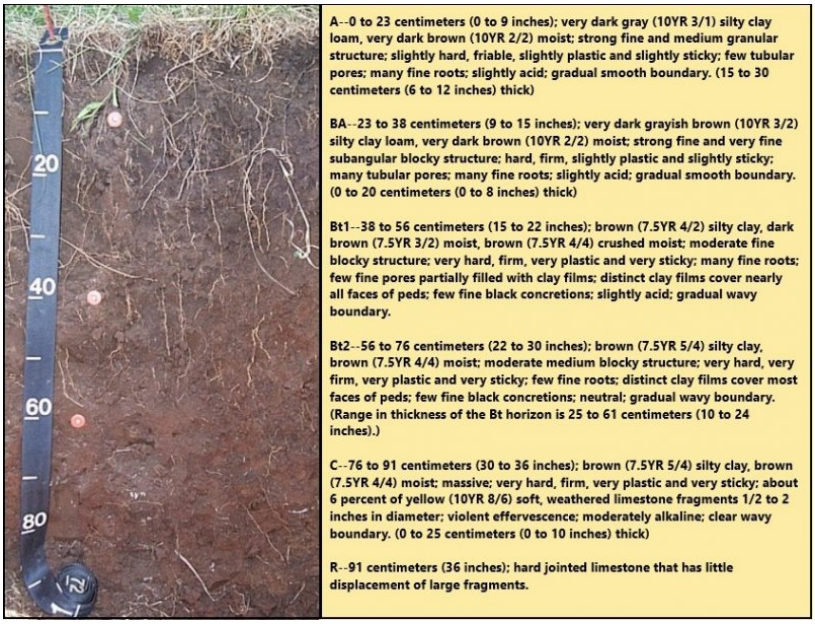


Figure 10. MLRA 76 Labette soil series description.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Residuum–limestone and shale (2) Colluvium
Surface texture	(1) Silt loam (2) Silty clay loam (3) Gravelly silty clay loam
Family particle size	(1) Clayey
Drainage class	Well drained
Permeability class	Slow
Depth to restrictive layer	20–80 in
Soil depth	20–80 in
Surface fragment cover <=3"	0–5%
Surface fragment cover >3"	0–3%
Available water capacity (0-40in)	3.5–7 in
Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-40in)	0–5%
Electrical conductivity (0-40in)	0–2 mmhos/cm
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-40in)	0
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-40in)	5.6–8.4

Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (Depth not specified)	0–4%
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (Depth not specified)	0–20%

Ecological dynamics

The Loamy Hills ecological site in MLRA 76 consist of dynamic plant communities resulting from the complex interaction of many ecological factors and processes. The vegetation evolved on deep to moderately deep soils under a diverse, fluctuating climate. Plants were historically grazed by herds of large herbivores and periodically subjected to intense wildfires.

The deep soils characteristic of this site have loamy surfaces and absorb water moderately well. Water holding capacities are high. The taller grasses that evolved and dominated the original plant community had deep, efficient root systems capable of utilizing moisture throughout most of the soil profile. The soil-plant moisture relationship is mutually exclusive and the site can be very productive. Seed heads of the taller grasses and forbs often reach five to six feet in height.

The original plant community developed with fires of various intensities and frequencies during different seasons of the year playing an important part in ecological processes. Historically, wildfires started by lightning often occurred in spring and early summer months when thunderstorms were prevalent, but also in late summer and fall during dry weather periods. It is also recognized that early Native Americans often used fire to attract herds of migratory herbivores, especially bison.

The dominant tallgrasses were rhizomatous, enabling them to survive the ravages of even intense wildfires and, thus, gain a competitive advantage in the plant community. In contrast, most trees and shrubs were suppressed by fire and occurred only sparsely on protected areas. Growth of perennial forbs, and especially legumes, were usually enhanced following a fire event. After an intense fire there was usually a substantial, but short-term, increase in the abundance of annual forbs as well.

Grazing history has had a major impact on the dynamics of the site. The vegetative community developed under a grazing regime that consisted primarily of periodic grazing by large herds of bison. As the herds moved through an area, grazing was probably intense. When herds moved to adjacent areas, grazed vegetation was afforded an extended period of rest and recovery during the growing season. Other grazing and feeding animals such as elk, pronghorns, deer, rabbits, insects, and numerous burrowing rodents had secondary influences on plant community development.

Variations in climate, especially a pattern of annual late summer drought and long-term drought cycles spanning several years, also had a major impact upon plant community development. Species composition fluctuated according to the duration and severity of

long-term droughts. During prolonged dry cycles, many of the weaker, shallow-rooted plants died and production of deeper-rooted plants was diminished. When sufficient rainfall occurred following an extended dry period, annual forbs and annual grasses would temporarily occur in abundance. When precipitation returned to normal or above normal, the deeper-rooted grasses and forbs responded and returned to their production potentials.

As European settlers began utilizing the site for production of domestic livestock within fenced pastures in place of roaming bison herds, its ecological dynamics and physical aspects were altered and the plant community shifted from its original composition. These changes were usually in proportion to the season and intensity of use by livestock and were accelerated by a combination of drought and overgrazing. Taller grasses and forbs more palatable to bison were similarly selected and consumed by cattle and horses. Those palatable species were repeatedly grazed throughout the growing season, thus weakening them. Over time, they were gradually replaced by the increase and spread of less palatable species. Where the history of overuse by domestic livestock was more intense, even the plants which initially increased were often replaced by less desirable and lower-producing plants. In some instances, production and plant diversity was reduced to a mixture of mid- and short-grasses, annual grasses and unpalatable forbs.

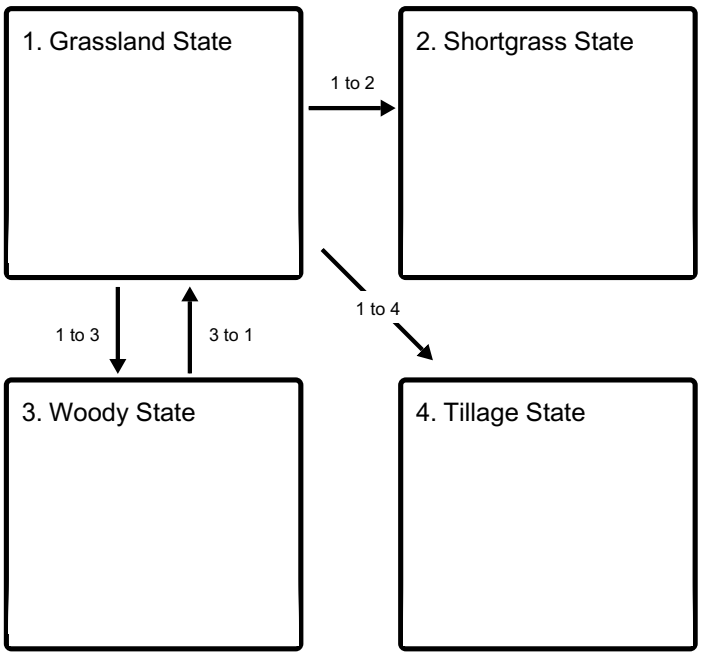
The frequency and role that fires played in maintaining the plant community was reduced with the advent of roads, cultivated fields, and fire suppression techniques developed by European settlers. Use of prescribed fire as a management tool has also diminished in some localities, especially surrounding population centers. In the absence of periodic, intense fire, there has often been a gradual increase in woody species. In some areas, shrubs and trees have encroached to the point of being the dominant influence in the plant community.

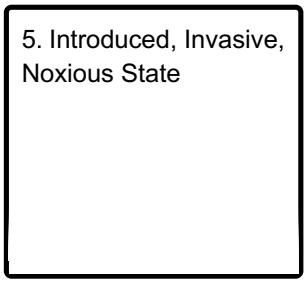
The gently rolling topography of this ecological site was attractive to European settlers who sought to create agrarian lifestyles. Some areas of this site were brought under cultivation and used to grow wheat, corn, sorghum, and other crops. Tillage and crop production caused the total destruction of the original native plant community and often major degradation of the inherent structure and fertility of the surface soil layer. Many acres that were formerly used for cultivated crops have been reseeded or allowed to re-vegetate through natural succession.

The following diagram illustrates some of the pathways that the vegetation on this site may take from the Reference Plant Community as influencing ecological factors change. There may be other states or plant communities not shown on the diagram, as well as noticeable variations within those illustrated.

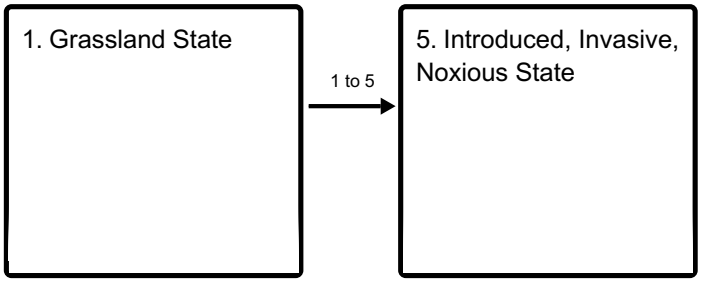
State and transition model

Ecosystem states





States 1 and 5 (additional transitions)



1 to 2 - Long-term, heavy, continuous overgrazing, no rest and recovery

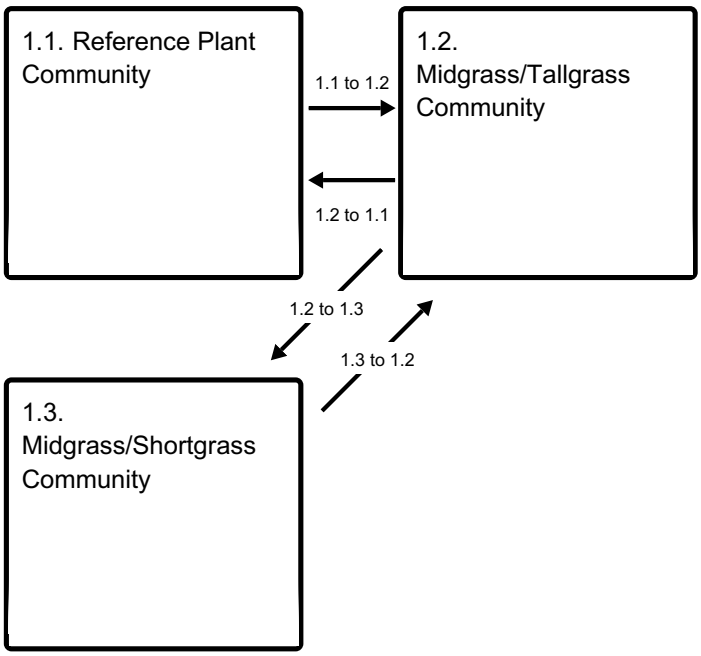
1 to 3 - Lack of fire and brush control

1 to 4 - Tillage by machinery

1 to 5 - Introduction of non-native species

3 to 1 - Prescribed grazing, brush management, and prescribed burning

State 1 submodel, plant communities



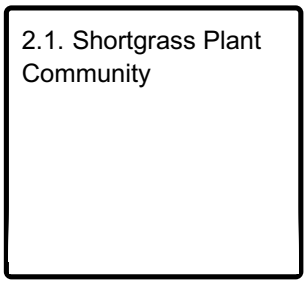
1.1 to 1.2 - Heavy, continuous grazing without adequate rest and recovery

1.2 to 1.1 - Prescribed grazing that incorporates periods of deferment during the growing season

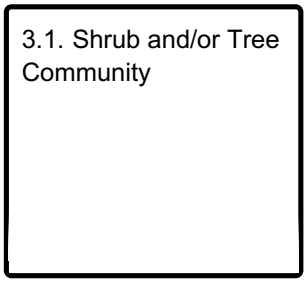
1.2 to 1.3 - Long-term (>20 years) continuous grazing with no rest and no recovery

1.3 to 1.2 - Prescribed grazing with adequate rest and recovery period during the growing season

State 2 submodel, plant communities



State 3 submodel, plant communities



State 4 submodel, plant communities

4.1. Reseed Plant Community

4.2. Go-back Plant Community

State 5 submodel, plant communities

5.1. Caucasian Bluestem Community

5.2. Sericea Lespedeza Community

5.3. Fescue, Brome, Bluegrass Community

State 1
Grassland State

The Grassland State defines the ecological potential and natural range of variability resulting from the natural disturbance regime of the Loamy Hills ecological site. This state is supported by empirical data, historical data, local expertise, and photographs. It is defined by a suite of native plant communities that are a result of periodic fire, drought, and grazing by bison. These events are part of the natural disturbance regime and climatic process. The soil dynamic properties that can influence community phase and state changes are organic matter content, biological activity, aggregate stability, infiltration, soil fertility, and soil reaction. Other grazing and feeding animals such as elk, pronghorns, deer, rabbits, insects, and numerous burrowing rodents had secondary influences on plant community development. Today, cattle are the primary grazers on this ecological site. Within the grassland state, the woody vegetation will generally be less than 15 percent canopy cover per acre. If introduced, invasive or noxious plants are present, they should not exceed 15 percent of the total pounds of vegetation produced per acre in order to avoid crossing a threshold. Plant communities within this state function similarly in their capacity to limit soil loss, cycle water, and produce vegetative biomass. The plant community phases can vary through changes in grazing management or fluctuating climatic conditions. The variables that control the resilience of this grassland state are long-term grazing management and frequency of fire.

Characteristics and indicators. Tallgrasses and Migrasses are dominant in the Grassland State.

Resilience management. Management strategies that will sustain this state include monitoring key forage species and providing a forage and animal balance.

Community 1.1
Reference Plant Community

Figure 11. MLRA 76 Reference Plant Community.

The interpretive plant community for the Loamy Hills ecological site is the Reference Plant Community, and represents the original plant community that existed prior to European settlement. The site is characterized as a grassland essentially free of trees and large shrubs. It is dominated by tall warm-season grasses including big bluestem, switchgrass, and Indiangrass. The major midgrass is little bluestem. Combined these four grasses will account for 70 to 80 percent of vegetation produced annually. Other prevalent grasses are purpletop tridens, sideoats grama, composite dropseed, and purple lovegrass. Eastern gamagrass and prairie cordgrass often occur on favored locations such as seeps or on footslopes where additional run in moisture is received. The site supports a wide variety of warm-season forb species which are interspersed throughout the grass sward. The most important include compassplant, wholeleaf rosinweed, Maximilian sunflower, stiff sunflower, pitcher sage, and pale purple echinacea. Nuttall’s sensitive-briar, prairie bundleflower, slender lespedeza, and roundhead lespedeza are the most abundant legumes. Leadplant and Jersey tea are low-growing shrubs that occur throughout the site. In some locations scattered mottes of flameleaf sumac may be present. Unlike most shrubs, these species are quite tolerant to fire. Depending on winter precipitation patterns, the site often has an early spring aspect which includes numerous cool-season grasses, grasslike plants and forbs. Major grasses and grasslike plants are Canada wildrye, Virginia wildrye, prairie Junegrass, porcupinegrass, western wheatgrass, sedges, and rushes. Early-emerging forbs that may flower as early as March or April may include Carolina

anemone, prairie blue-eyed grass, diamondflowers, prairie pleatleaf, Carolina larkspur, Carolina geranium, Nuttall's prairie parsley, common goldstar, and Virginia springbeauty.

Resilience management. This is a stable plant community when grazing and fire are adquately managed. A prescribed grazing program that incorporates periods of grazing rest and recovery of key forage species during the growing season benefits the tallgrasses and even the more palatable forb species. Early management programs involving transient steers shipped into the area were effective in maintaining a plant composition closely resembling the reference plant community. Pastures were burned in the spring and grazed from green-up until mid to late July when steers were transported to market. The vegetation was then rested the remainder of the growing season permitting full recovery of most plants.

Dominant plant species

- big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), grass
- little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), grass
- Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), grass
- switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), grass
- eastern gamagrass (*Tripsacum dactyloides*), grass

Table 5. Annual production by plant type

Plant Type	Low (Lb/Acre)	Representative Value (Lb/Acre)	High (Lb/Acre)
Grass/Grasslike	2580	4300	5590
Forb	360	600	780
Shrub/Vine	60	100	130
Total	**3000**	**5000**	**6500**

Community 1.2
Midgrass/Tallgrass Community

Figure 13. MLRA 76 Mldgrass/Tallgrass Plant Community.

This plant community developed as a result of many years of repeated, heavy grazing. The composition of this plant community is dominated by a mixture of mid- and tallgrasses. Compared to the Reference Plant Community, there has been a decrease in the more palatable tallgrasses and a subsequent increase in midgrasses. Although reduced by overgrazing, grasses such as big bluestem, Indiangrass, and switchgrass are abundant and comprise 30 to 40 percent of the total vegetation. The proportion of midgrasses in the total production has increased and combined produce 40 to 50 percent. These include composite dropseed, little bluestem, marsh bristlegrass, sideoats grama, purpletop tridens, western wheatgrass, silver beardgrass, and purple lovegrass. Other secondary grasses that have increased are Kentucky bluegrass, blue grama, and buffalograss. More palatable forbs including Maximilian sunflower, stiff sunflower, compassplant, and wholeleaf rosinweed have essentially disappeared. They have been replaced by white heath aster, white sagebrush, Cuman ragweed, interior ironweed, and Missouri goldenrod. Forbs produce approximately 15 to 18 percent of the total herbage. In some locations the site supports an increasing amount of shrubs and trees. The most abundant shrubs are flameleaf sumac, smooth sumac, coralberry, blackberry, and roughleaf dogwood. Osage orange, common hackberry, elm, and honeylocust are the major trees encroaching on the site. Shrubs and trees may comprise 5 to 10 percent of total production.

Resilience management. Periods of rest and recovery from grazing are essential in maintaining the production of some of the major grasses found in this plant community. Big bluestem is especially preferred and selectively grazed by cattle. When the site is grazed continuously throughout the growing season, it is usually overgrazed and thus maintained in a lower state of plant vigor. When continued for many years, overgrazing results in a gradual reduction of all the tallgrasses. However, prescribed grazing that incorporates periods of rest and recovery during the growing season will improve the vigor and eventually the recovery of the palatable tallgrasses and forbs.

Dominant plant species

- little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), grass
- sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*), grass
- composite dropseed (*Sporobolus compositus var. compositus*), grass
- purpletop tridens (*Tridens flavus*), grass
- western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*), grass
- silver beardgrass (*Bothriochloa laguroides*), grass
- purple lovegrass (*Eragrostis spectabilis*), grass
- big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), grass
- switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), grass
- Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), grass

Community 1.3
Midgrass/Shortgrass Community

Figure 14. MLRA 76 Midgrass/Shortgrass Plant Community.

This plant community results from many years of overgrazing. The amount of tallgrasses and the more palatable midgrasses have decreased significantly and the site is dominated by shortgrasses and less desirable midgrasses. Major midgrasses are composite dropseed, sand dropseed, silver beardgrass, purpletop tridens, vine mesquite, sideoats grama, winter bentgrass, and marsh bristlegrass. Broomsedge bluestem is often found on soils derived from sandstone or shale. Major shortgrasses include Kentucky bluegrass, Carolina crabgrass, thin paspalum, Scribner's rosette grass, buffalograss, tumble windmill grass, blue grama, hairy grama, and prairie threeawn. Cool season annual grasses such as cheatgrass, field brome, little barley, and sixweeks fescue are usually prevalent in fall and spring months when precipitation patterns are favorable. Major forbs on the site are Cuman ragweed, Canada goldenrod, Missouri goldenrod, white sagebrush, white heath aster, and interior ironweed. In some locations the site supports an increasing amount of shrubs and trees. The most common shrubs include coralberry, flameleaf sumac, blackberry, and roughleaf dogwood. Elm, common hackberry, eastern redcedar, and

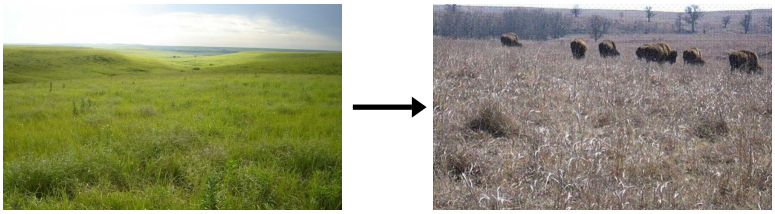
osage orange are the major trees found on the site. Shrubs and trees usually will not comprise over 10 to 15 percent of the total production. Remnant plants of big bluestem, Indiangrass, switchgrass, and little bluestem are often found scattered throughout the site. Usually grazed repeatedly and maintained in a low state of vigor, they respond favorably to periods of rest from grazing during the growing season and often regain vigor in a few years.

Resilience management. Recovery of the tallgrasses, midgrasses, and associated forbs characteristic of the Reference Plant Community will require many years of careful management that includes prescribed grazing and extended periods of rest and recovery during the growing season. If remnant stands of the desired species are not present or located nearby as seed sources for reestablishment, interseeding measures may be needed to create pioneer colonies for seed dispersal throughout the community. Prescribed burning can be a useful tool if used strategically to benefit the desired species, especially in the later stages of the recovery process that may take more than a decade.

Dominant plant species

- composite dropseed (*Sporobolus compositus var. compositus*), grass
- silver beardgrass (*Bothriochloa laguroides*), grass
- purpletop tridens (*Tridens flavus*), grass
- western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*), grass
- sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*), grass

Pathway 1.1 to 1.2
Community 1.1 to 1.2



Reference Plant Community

Midgrass/Tallgrass Community

These mechanisms include management controlled by repetitive heavy use, no rest or recovery of the key forage species and no forage and animal balance for many extended grazing seasons. This type of management lasting for periods greater than 10 years will shift functional and structural plant group dominance towards a midgrass plant community. Annual burning or a fire frequency occurrence <2 years will cause a shift in community phases. The frequency of late spring annual burning in combination with late season rest may result in a shift in species diversity as well as fluctuations in productivity. Herbicide use every 1-3 years will remove legumes and forbs and become a grass dominated community. Drought conditions that persist >3 years with below average rainfall during the first half of the growing season in addition to inadequate rest provided for plant recovery will result in productivity changes.

Context dependence. Plant community composition shifts from Tallgrass to Midgrass dominant.

Pathway 1.2 to 1.1
Community 1.2 to 1.1

Midgrass/Tallgrass Community

Reference Plant Community

Causes of plant community shift include management (10-15 years) with adequate rest and recovery of the key forage species (big bluestem, switchgrass, Indiangrass, and little bluestem) within the Reference Plant Community . If woody species are present, prescription fires every 6-8 years will be necessary for their removal and/or maintenance.

Conservation practices

Prescribed Burning
Prescribed Grazing

Pathway 1.2 to 1.3
Community 1.2 to 1.3

Midgrass/Tallgrass Community

Midgrass/Shortgrass Community

These mechanisms include management controlled by repetitive heavy use, no rest or recovery of the key forage species and no forage and animal balance for many extended grazing seasons. This type of management lasting for periods greater than 20 years will shift functional and structural plant group dominance towards a Midgrass/Shortgrass Plant Community.

Pathway 1.3 to 1.2
Community 1.3 to 1.2

Midgrass/Shortgrass Community

Midgrass/Tallgrass Community

Causes of plant community shift include management (10-15 years) with adequate rest and recovery of the key forage species (little bluestem, sideoats grama, big bluestem, switchgrass, and Indiangrass) within the Midgrass/Tallgrass Plant Community . If woody species are present, prescription fires every 6-8 years will be necessary for their removal and/or maintenance.

Conservation practices

Prescribed Burning
Prescribed Grazing

State 2
Shortgrass State

With heavy, continuous grazing, blue grama and buffalograss will become the dominant species and have a sod-bound appearance. Unable to withstand the grazing pressure, only a remnant population of western wheatgrass remains.

Characteristics and indicators. The Shortgrass State is characterized with specific dynamic soil property changes. Changes between the Grassland State and the Shortgrass State has been documented. As plant community cover decreases from bunchgrasses to more of the sod grasses there is a decrease in infiltration and interception and an increase in surface runoff (Thurow T., 2003).

Resilience management. This is a resistant and resilient state. Grazing management practice should include a forage and animal balance.

Community 2.1
Shortgrass Plant Community

This plant community presents a distinctive shortgrass aspect on the landscape. It is dominated by blue grama and buffalograss with notable amounts of western wheatgrass and sideoats grama present. Other grasses include annual bromes, composite dropseed, Kentucky bluegrass, prairie threeawn, and tumble windmill grass. These species commonly account for 60 to 70 percent of the annual forage production. Like the desirable grasses, palatable legumes and other forbs have been reduced by continuous grazing and competition over many years. Prevalent broadleaf species in this situation include prairie broomweed, annual ragweed, white sagebrush, Cuman ragweed, interior ironweed,

wavyleaf thistle, and curlycup gumweed. Forbs may comprise 15 to 25 percent of the total vegetation. This plant community often contains 15 to 20 percent woody species as a result of fewer fires and more opportunities for their encroachment. Eastern redcedar, smooth and/or fragrant sumac, roughleaf dogwood, and coralberry are representative trees and shrubs which occur on this site. Leadplant and Jersey tea may still be found, but are generally much reduced from their prominence in the Reference Plant Community.

Resilience management. This plant community can be managed as a stable shortgrass plant community. If recovery of the tallgrasses, midgrasses, and associated forbs characteristic of the Reference Plant Community is desired, however, many years of careful management that includes prescribed grazing and extended periods of rest during the growing season will be required. More study is necessary in order to document restoration processes to the Grassland State. This site may recover faster than adjoining ones as remnant plants may be somewhat protected by the steeper slopes and occasional surface rocks. Where remnant stands of the desired species are not available on or near the site, reseeding may be necessary to advance recovery. However, seeding or interseeding may be severely limited by the steepness of slope and occasional surface rocks.

Dominant plant species

- blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*), grass
- buffalograss (*Bouteloua dactyloides*), grass

State 3
Woody State

This state is dominated by a shrub and/or tree plant community. The increase and spread of shrubs and trees results from an absence of fire. Woody plants can increase up to 34% from a lack of fire according to a study from 1937 to 1969, in contrast to a 1% increase on burned areas (Bragg and Hulbert, 1976). Periodic burning will hinder the establishment of most woody species and favor forbs and grasses. However, it should be pointed out that not all unburned areas have a woody plant invasion. Birds, small mammals, and livestock are instrumental in the distribution of seed and accelerating the spread of most trees and shrubs common to this site. The speed of encroachment varies considerably and can occur on both grazed and non-grazed pastures. Many species of wildlife, especially bobwhite quail, turkey, and white-tailed deer benefit from the growth of trees and shrubs for both food and cover. When management for specific wildlife populations is desirable, these options should be considered in any brush management plan.

Characteristics and indicators. Hydrologic function is affected by the amount of vegetative cover. Canopy interception loss can vary from 25.4% to 36.7% (Thurow and Hester, 1997). A small rainfall event is usually retained in the foliage and does not reach the litter layer at the base of the tree. Only when canopy storage is reached and exceeded does precipitation fall to the soil surface. Interception losses associated with the accumulation of leaves, twigs, and branches at the bases of trees are considerably higher

than losses associated with the canopy. The decomposed material retains approximately 40% of the water that is not retained in the canopy (Thurow and Hester, 1997). Soil properties affected include biological activity, infiltration rates, and soil fertility.

Resilience management. Special planning will be necessary to assure that sufficient amounts of fine fuel are available to carry fires with enough intensity to control woody species. In some locations the use of chemicals as a brush management tool may be desirable to initiate and accelerate this transition.

Community 3.1
Shrub and/or Tree Community

This plant community is dominated by shrubs consisting primarily of coralberry, roughleaf dogwood, and smooth sumac. Trees including osage orange, honeylocust, elms, and eastern redcedar are common invaders that become established in some areas. Coralberry is generally the most abundant shrub and often forms low, dense thickets throughout the site. Shrubs and trees may produce 40 to 60 percent of the total vegetation. The spread of shrubs and trees results from the absence of fire because periodic burning tends to hinder the establishment of most of these woody species and favors grasses and forbs. It should be noted, however, that not all unburned areas have a woody plant problem and that the rate of encroachment varies considerably depending on seed availability in surrounding areas and the presence of birds and small mammals that distribute seeds over the site. Longtime, continuous overgrazing can also lead to encroachment. In these situations the associated grasses will usually consist of composite dropseed, purple lovegrass, Kentucky bluegrass, and Scribner’s rosette grass. Shrubs and trees will also invade areas where both grazing and fire have been excluded for many years because the heavy accumulation of plant mulch and litter retards herbage growth and provides a favorable habitat for seed germination and establishment of many shrub species. The associated grasses in this situation may include big bluestem, little bluestem, Indiangrass, switchgrass, sedges, and Canada wildrye. Grass production is significantly reduced by competition from forbs and woody species. Grass yields vary from 20 to 45 percent of the total vegetative production while forbs often produce 10 to 50 percent of the total. Major forbs include white sagebrush, Cuman ragweed, Baldwin ironweed, and common yarrow. Many species of wildlife, especially bobwhite quail, turkey, and white-tailed deer, benefit from woody growth for both food and cover. Conversely, the presence of trees is considered detrimental to populations of greater prairie chickens. When management for specific wildlife populations is desirable, these options should be considered in any brush management plan.

Resilience management. Usually, a well-planned burning program accompanied by prescribed grazing will gradually return the plant community to one dominated by desirable grasses and forbs. Special planning will be necessary to assure that sufficient amounts of fine fuel are available to carry fires with enough intensity to control woody species. Use of labeled herbicides as a brush management tool will usually be necessary to reduce populations of fire-resistant species like osage orange and honeylocust and accelerate the

recovery of desired vegetative cover. Recently, some landowners have relied on the browsing habits of goats to suppress the woody growth.

Dominant plant species

- Osage-orange (*Maclura pomifera*), tree
- honeylocust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*), tree
- Siberian elm (*Ulmus pumila*), tree
- eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), tree
- coralberry (*Symphoricarpos orbiculatus*), shrub
- smooth sumac (*Rhus glabra*), shrub
- roughleaf dogwood (*Cornus drummondii*), shrub

State 4
Tillage State

Extensive areas of the historic Loamy Hills plant communities were plowed and converted to production of cultivated crops by the early European settlers and subsequent generations. In addition to destroying the original plant community, repeated tillage commonly resulted in major changes in soil conditions. Reductions in organic matter, mineral levels, soil structure, oxygen levels, and water holding capacity, along with increased runoff/erosion and shifts in the populations of soil-dwelling organisms, were common on these sites. The extent of these changes depended upon duration of cropping as well as crops grown and other management practices. The Tillage State consists of abandoned cropland that has been naturally revegetated (go-back) or planted/seeded to grassland. Many reseeded plant communities were planted with a local seeding mix under the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) or were planted to a monoculture of sideoats grama. Go-back communities are difficult to define due to the variability of plant communities that can exist. Many of these communities are represented by the genus Aristida (threeawns).

Characteristics and indicators. This is an alternative state since the energy, hydrologic, and nutrient cycles are altered to that of the Reference State in its natural disturbance regime. Bulk density, aggregate stability, soil structure, and plant functional and structural groups are not fully restored to that of the Reference State. Mechanical tillage can destroy soil aggregation. Soil aggregates are an example of dynamic soil property change. Aggregate stability is critical for infiltration, root growth, and resistance to water and wind erosion (Brady and Weil, 2008).

Resilience management. This state is a result of a land use management decision.

Community 4.1
Reseed Plant Community

This plant community occurs on areas that were formerly farmed and reseeded with a mixture of native species common in the Reference Plant Community. Most seeding

mixtures consisted of a blend of grasses that include sand bluestem, Indiangrass, switchgrass, little bluestem, sideoats grama, blue grama, and western wheatgrass. In some locations, seed of legumes and forbs such as prairie bundleflower and Maximilian sunflower were included in the mixture. Once these areas become fully established, production is comparable to that of the Reference Plant Community. Total annual production ranges varies according to the species planted, established plants, and years of establishment. When reseeded areas and areas supporting native rangeland exist in the same pasture, they seldom are utilized at the same intensity because domestic livestock usually prefer plants growing on the native rangeland areas. When feasible, reseeded plant communities should be managed as separate pastures or units. Some seeded areas are invaded by trees and shrubs during the establishment period of the desired plants. These invader species commonly include elm, common hackberry, eastern redcedar, and eastern cottonwood. Occasional burning is effective in controlling establishment of these woody plants.

Resilience management. Following termination of cultivation, total annual production is quite variable and full recovery of the original plant community, including forbs and legumes, may take many decades. Additions of organic matter and minerals, deferred grazing, prescribed burning, and related management practices described earlier for this ecological site can be beneficial to the rehabilitation.

Community 4.2
Go-back Plant Community

This plant community also occurs on areas that were formerly farmed. When tillage operations ceased, the areas were allowed to revegetate or “go back” naturally in contrast to artificial reseeding to a selected species or group of species. The go-back process is a slow, gradual transformation that requires many years and many successional changes or stages in the plant community. The speed and extent of revegetation depends on the size of the area, level of grazing management and the proximity of the area to existing seed sources. In the initial stages of revegetation the site is usually dominated by annual forbs such as annual ragweed, slender snakecotton, Canadian horseweed, prairie sunflower, common sunflower, Mexican fireweed, camphorweed, and annual buckwheat. Gradually these are replaced by annual grasses including prairie threeawn, mat sandbur, tumblegrass, little barley, cheatgrass, and witchgrass. As plant succession progresses the plant community gradually becomes dominated by perennials. The major grasses include sand dropseed, composite dropseed, thin paspalum, purple lovegrass, red lovegrass, Scribner’s rosette grass, Carolina crabgrass, silver beardgrass, and tumble windmillgrass. Common forbs are Cuman ragweed, white sagebrush, Carruth’s sagewort, white heath aster, Missouri goldenrod, and sand milkweed. Combinations of these plants can form a stable community. In time with prescribed grazing management, other perennial grasses and forbs common in the Reference Plant Community return to the site. Blue grama is a shortgrass that is very common to the native plant communities on this site. However, it seldom occurs in go-back communities, even after 40 to 50 years of plant succession. Some go-back areas are invaded by trees and shrubs. The more common include elm,

common hackberry, eastern redcedar, eastern cottonwood, and roughleaf dogwood. Occasional burning is effective in controlling these woody plants. Total annual production varies by site. This depends on seasonal precipitation and the stage of plant succession in the plant community.

Resilience management. Following termination of cultivation, total annual production is quite variable and full recovery of the original plant community, including forbs and legumes, may take many decades. Additions of organic matter and minerals, deferred grazing, prescribed burning, and related management practices described earlier for this ecological site can be beneficial to the rehabilitation.

State 5
Introduced, Invasive, Noxious State

This state includes three community phases which are characterized by the composition of plant species and soil functions that govern the ecological processes. These three plant communities occur and function independent of one another. Species that define this state include sericea lespedeza, caucasian bluestem, tall fescue, smooth brome, and Kentucky bluegrass. These species can and will invade rangelands without proactive control measures. sericea lespedeza and caucasian bluestem community phases are partially defined by the total production exceeding 15% by weight on a per acre basis. Tall fescue, smooth brome, and Kentucky bluegrass are partially defined by the total production exceeding 40% by weight on a per acre basis.

Characteristics and indicators. Ecological processes within this state that are affected and differ from the grassland state are hydrologic cycle and nutrient cycle. Water content and infiltration rates are affected by the species.

Resilience management. The plant communities that make up this state are sustained by fertilizing species and managing as pastureland or by a lack of treatment measures for individual species control, maintenance, and/or eradication.

Community 5.1
Caucasian Bluestem Community

Caucasian bluestem is the dominant species that govern the ecological processes and uses of this community. This species can and will invade rangelands without proactive control measures.

Resilience management. Caucasian bluestem survives all control measures. There is no way of killing the Caucasian bluestem without killing the native rangeland. There have been cases where the native taller grasses appear to shade and out compete the Caucasian bluestem but there are ungrazed places on the Konza Prairie Research and biological station where it was introduced from feeding livestock contaminated hay and where it now is crowding out the native grass as its spreads. Caucasian bluestem might

be the most serious threat and most aggressive of the introduced, invasive, and noxious species of this time. Soil dynamic property changes include infiltration, biological activity, and soil fertility.

Dominant plant species

- Caucasian bluestem (*Bothriochloa bladhii*), grass

Community 5.2
Sericea Lespedeza Community

Sericea lespedeza (*Lespedeza cuneata*) is the dominant species that govern the ecological processes and uses of this community. Sericea lespedeza is invasive and a statewide noxious weed in Kansas. This species will quickly invade rangelands without proactive control measures. It competes with the native grass community with sunlight, water, and nutrients. It also produces allelopathic compounds (toxic chemicals that negatively impact the germination and/or growth of other plants).

Resilience management. Control measures for sericea lespedeza involve herbicide application. Follow recommended rates and chemical use according to Kansas State University Chemical Weed Control book. Conventional management practices such as prescribed grazing and fire have been less than effective in preventing the spread of sericea lespedeza in rangelands. Some suppression of sericea lespedeza has been observed after mowing or burning followed by intensive early stocking with stocker cattle. Goats will provide some control as they do eat it much more readily than cattle.

Dominant plant species

- sericea lespedeza (*Lespedeza cuneata*), shrub

Community 5.3
Fescue, Brome, Bluegrass Community

Tall fescue, smooth brome, and Kentucky bluegrass are the dominant species that govern the ecological processes and uses of this community. Any one or combination of these species can be considered an invaded community at levels of >40% by total weight annual production. Once these levels are reached management choices can change to favor these grasses and as a result land use is transitioned from rangeland to pastureland.

Resilience management. Inputs and energy in order to return species to a grassland state are greater than what is considered to be natural. Control measures for tall fescue, smooth brome, and Kentucky bluegrass might involve herbicide application and/or consecutive prescribed burns. Follow recommended rates and chemical use according to State extension guidelines such as Kansas State University Chemical Weed Control publication. Soil dynamic property changes include biological activity and soil fertility.

Dominant plant species

- Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*), grass
- tall fescue (*Schedonorus arundinaceus*), grass
- smooth brome (*Bromus inermis*), grass

Transition 1 to 2
State 1 to 2

Long-term management (approximately 30 years) without a forage and animal balance and heavy, continuous grazing without adequate recovery periods between grazing events will convert the Grassland State to a Shortgrass State made up of blue grama and buffalograss sod. Drought in combination with this type of management will quicken the rate at which this transition occurs.

Constraints to recovery. The ecological processes affected are the hydrologic and nutrient cycles. There is an increase in evaporation rate, runoff, and in bulk density. There is a decrease in infiltration, a change in plant composition, and the functional and structural groups have changed dominance. These are all examples of the soil and vegetation properties that have compromised the resilience of the Grassland State and therefore transitioned to a Shortgrass State.

Transition 1 to 3
State 1 to 3

Changes from a Grassland State to a Woody State lead to changes in hydrologic function, forage production, dominant functional and structural groups, and wildlife habitat. Understory plants may be negatively affected by trees and shrubs by reductions in light, soil moisture, and soil nutrients. Increases in tree and shrub density and size have the effects of reducing understory plant cover and productivity, and desirable forage grasses often are most severely reduced (Eddleman, 1983). As vegetation cover changes from grasses to trees, a greater proportion of precipitation is lost throughout interception and evaporation; therefore, less precipitation is available for producing herbaceous forage or for deep drainage or runoff (Thurow and Hester, 1997).

Constraints to recovery. Recovery is possible through management.

Transition 1 to 4
State 1 to 4

This transition is triggered by a management action as opposed to a natural event. Tillage, or breaking the ground with machinery for crop production, will move the Grassland State to a Tillage State.

Constraints to recovery. The resilience of the Reference State has been compromised

by the fracturing and blending of the native virgin sod. The energy, hydrologic, and nutrient cycles are altered and vary from that of the Grassland State.

Transition 1 to 5
State 1 to 5

Changes from a Grassland State to an introduced, invasive and/or noxious state can lead to changes in hydrology/erosion, forage production, wildlife habitat, and soil dynamic properties. These changes will vary depending on dominance of species. This transition is usually triggered by an introduction of non-native species. The source from which the species originated from (i.e. adjacent crop field) can usually but not always be detected. A threshold is crossed once the species (sericea lespedeza and Caucasian bluestem) is established and increases to levels of greater than 15% total annual production per acre. For cool season grasses such as tall fescue and smooth brome that level is >40% total annual production per acre. Changes in species diversity reflect changes in soil biota activity. The introduced, invasive and noxious species are not selected and grazed and as a result become increasingly dominant. Hydrology changes begin to occur with the buildup of litter and interception rates increase as canopy increases.

Constraints to recovery. Need further research to document recovery processes.

Restoration pathway 3 to 1
State 3 to 1

Restoration efforts will be costly, labor-intensive, and can take many years, if not decades, to return to a Grassland State. Once canopy levels reach greater than 20 percent, estimated cost to remove trees is very expensive and includes high energy inputs. The technologies needed in order to go from an invaded Woody State to a Grassland State include but are not limited to: prescribed burning— the use of fire as a tool to achieve a management objective on a predetermined area under conditions where the intensity and extent of the fire are controlled; brush management—manipulating woody plant cover to obtain desired quantities and types of woody cover and/or to reduce competition with herbaceous understory vegetation, in accordance with overall resource management objectives; and prescribed grazing—the controlled harvest of vegetation with grazing or browsing animals managed with the intent to achieve a specified objective. In addition, to grazing at an intensity that will maintain enough cover to protect the soil and maintain or improve the quantity and quality of desirable vegetation. When a juniper tree is cut and removed, the soil structure and the associated high infiltration rate may be maintained for over a decade (Hester, 1996). This explains why the area near the dripline usually has substantially greater forage production for many years after the tree has been cut. It also explains why runoff will not necessarily dramatically increase once juniper is removed. Rather, the water continues to infiltrate at high rates into soils previously ameliorated by junipers, thereby increasing deep drainage potential. In rangeland, deep drainage amounts can be 16 percent of the total rainfall amount per year (Thurow and Hester, 1997).

Conservation practices

Brush Management
Prescribed Burning
Prescribed Grazing

Additional community tables

Table 6. Community 1.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production (Lb/Acre)	Foliar Cover (%)
Grass/Grasslike					
1	**Tallgrasses**			1500–3000	
	big bluestem	ANGE	*Andropogon gerardii*	1300–1820	–
	Indiangrass	SONU2	*Sorghastrum nutans*	200–610	–
	eastern gamagrass	TRDA3	*Tripsacum dactyloides*	0–405	–
	switchgrass	PAVI2	*Panicum virgatum*	150–405	–
	composite dropseed	SPCOC2	*Sporobolus compositus var. compositus*	20–100	–
2	**Midgrasses**			800–1100	
	little bluestem	SCSC	*Schizachyrium scoparium*	800–1010	–
	sideoats grama	BOCU	*Bouteloua curtipendula*	20–100	–
	porcupinegrass	HESP11	*Hesperostipa spartea*	0–50	–
	purple lovegrass	ERSP	*Eragrostis spectabilis*	0–50	–
3	**Shortgrasses**			50–100	
	blue grama	BOGR2	*Bouteloua gracilis*	0–70	–
	hairy grama	BOHI2	*Bouteloua hirsuta*	0–40	–
4	**Cool-season grasses**			20–100	
	Canada wildrye	ELCA4	*Elymus canadensis*	10–50	–
	western wheatgrass	PASM	*Pascopyrum smithii*	10–50	–
	Scribner's rosette grass	DIOLS	*Dichanthelium oligosanthes var. scribnerianum*	0–40	–
	Virginia wildrye	ELVI3	*Elymus virginicus*	0–30	–
	prairie Junegrass	KOMA	*Koeleria macrantha*	0–25	–
	sedge	CAREX	*Carex*	0–25	–

	sedge	CAREX	*Carex*	0–20	–
	fall rosette grass	DIWI5	*Dichanthelium wilcoxianum*	0–20	–
Forb					
5	**Forbs**			250–600	
	compassplant	SILA3	*Silphium laciniatum*	15–50	–
	Nuttall's sensitive-briar	MINU6	*Mimosa nuttallii*	10–40	–
	Illinois bundleflower	DEIL	*Desmanthus illinoensis*	10–40	–
	pale purple coneflower	ECPA	*Echinacea pallida*	5–40	–
	pitcher sage	SAAZG	*Salvia azurea var. grandiflora*	5–40	–
	purple prairie clover	DAPU5	*Dalea purpurea*	0–40	–
	roundhead lespedeza	LECA8	*Lespedeza capitata*	5–40	–
	slender lespedeza	LEVI7	*Lespedeza virginica*	5–40	–
	stiff sunflower	HEPA19	*Helianthus pauciflorus*	5–40	–
	Virginia tephrosia	TEVI	*Tephrosia virginiana*	0–20	–
	white prairie clover	DACA7	*Dalea candida*	0–20	–
	white heath aster	SYER	*Symphyotrichum ericoides*	0–20	–
	cutleaf evening primrose	OELA	*Oenothera laciniata*	0–15	–
	stiff goldenrod	OLRI	*Oligoneuron rigidum*	0–15	–
	hairy sunflower	HEHI2	*Helianthus hirsutus*	0–15	–
	tall blazing star	LIAS	*Liatris aspera*	0–15	–
	clasping coneflower	DRAM	*Dracopis amplexicaulis*	0–15	–
	cobaea beardtongue	PECO4	*Penstemon cobaea*	0–15	–
	dotted blazing star	LIPU	*Liatris punctata*	0–15	–
	Missouri goldenrod	SOMI2	*Solidago missouriensis*	0–15	–
	Cuman ragweed	AMPS	*Ambrosia psilostachya*	0–15	–
	button eryngo	ERYU	*Eryngium yuccifolium*	0–15	–
	willowleaf sunflower	HESA2	*Helianthus salicifolius*	0–10	–

	sunflower				
	hoary verbena	VEST	*Verbena stricta*	0–10	–
	Carolina larkspur	DECAV2	*Delphinium carolinianum ssp. virescens*	0–10	–
	fringeleaf wild petunia	RUHU	*Ruellia humilis*	0–10	–
	prairie ironweed	VEFA2	*Vernonia fasciculata*	0–10	–
	pinnate prairie coneflower	RAPI	*Ratibida pinnata*	0–10	–
	upright prairie coneflower	RACO3	*Ratibida columnifera*	0–10	–
	aromatic aster	SYOB	*Symphyotrichum oblongifolium*	0–10	–
	Baldwin's ironweed	VEBA	*Vernonia baldwinii*	0–10	–
	wild bergamot	MOFI	*Monarda fistulosa*	0–10	–
	blackeyed Susan	RUHI2	*Rudbeckia hirta*	0–10	–
	field pussytoes	ANNE	*Antennaria neglecta*	0–5	–
Shrub/Vine					
6	**Shrubs**			25–100	
	leadplant	AMCA6	*Amorpha canescens*	15–50	–
	Jersey tea	CEHE	*Ceanothus herbaceus*	15–50	–

Animal community

Grazing by domestic livestock is the major income-producing industry in the Flint Hills. There are approximately 1,000,000 beef cattle supported by the tallgrass of the Flint Hills each year. Rangeland in this area may provide year-long forage for cattle or horses. Much of this site is used for summer grazing of livestock.

Because of the great variety of forbs and grasses found on this ecological site, it provides excellent habitat for ground nesting birds including both the eastern and western meadowlark as well as the upland sandpiper. The greater prairie chicken often uses this site for booming grounds or “leks” where the males carry out their courtship displays, a unique “flint hills” spring ritual.

Small rodents such as the deer mice and prairie voles and other small furbearers forage on the diverse plant foods available along with numerous insects that are attracted to plants during the growing season. Reptiles including various snakes, lizards and the box turtle are commonly found on this site. Hawks and owls, along with furbearers such as coyotes and badgers, are common predators on this site.

Historically, this site was a preferred grazing location for bison, deer, elk, and pronghorn. Today's big game would include the white-tailed deer and turkey along with some pronghorn. Upland game including bobwhite quail, greater prairie chicken, and the eastern cottontail are found on this site as well.

Some animals are important because of their threatened and endangered status and require special consideration. Please check the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks and Tourism (KDWP&T) website at www.ksoutdoors.com for the most current listing for your county.

Grazing Interpretations

Calculating Safe Stocking Rates: Proper stocking rates should be incorporated into a grazing management strategy that protects the resource, maintains or improves rangeland health, and is consistent with management objectives. In addition to usable forage, safe stocking rates should consider ecological condition, trend of the site, past grazing use history, season of use, stock density, kind and class of livestock, forage digestibility, forage nutritional value, variation of harvest efficiency based on preference of plant species, and/or grazing system, and site grazeability factors (such as steep slopes, site inaccessibility, or distance to drinking water).

Often the current plant community does not entirely match any particular Community Phase as described in this Ecological Site Description. Because of this, a resource inventory is necessary to document plant composition and production. Proper interpretation of inventory data will permit the establishment of a safe initial stocking rate.

No two years have exactly the same weather conditions. For this reason, year-to-year and season-to-season fluctuations in forage production are to be expected on grazing lands. Livestock producers must make timely adjustments in the numbers of animals or in the length of grazing periods to avoid overuse of forage plants when production is unfavorable, and to make advantageous adjustments when forage supplies are above average.

Initial stocking rates should be improved through the use of vegetation monitoring and actual use records that include number and type of livestock, the timing and duration of grazing, and utilization levels. Actual use records over time will assist in making stocking rate adjustments based on the variability factors. Average annual production must be measured or estimated to properly assess useable forage production and stocking rates.

Hydrological functions

Following are the estimated withdrawals of freshwater by use in MLRA 76: Public supply—surface water, 12.9%; ground water, 10.2% Livestock— surface water, 15.8%; ground water, 4.5% Irrigation—surface water, 53.9%; ground water, 2.7% Other—surface water,

0.0%; ground water, 0.0%

The total withdrawals average 35 million gallons per day (130 million liters per day). About 17 percent is from ground water sources, and 83 percent is from surface water sources. The moderate precipitation provides water for pastures and crops. Much of the water for livestock is stored in small reservoirs and ponds. A small area is irrigated with water from the Arkansas River in Oklahoma. The surface water is generally of good quality and is suitable for most uses.

Grassland State 1: Soils on this site are moderately well to well drained and have low to moderately high saturated hydraulic conductivity (very slow to moderate permeability). Hydrologic class C and D soils are common to this site. The water cycle is most functional when the site is dominated by warm-season tall- and midgrasses. Changes in infiltration and runoff from Reference Community to the Tallgrass Community can occur during heavy storm events post spring burning. As a result of grazing pressure and fire frequency the At Risk Community can have less infiltration and more runoff due to the composition of species.

Woody State 2: This state is dominated by woody species and infiltration and runoff is affected. The combination of less water entering the soil and strong ability by the trees and shrubs to extract water means that little water has a chance to drain beneath the root zone. Therefore, invasion of trees and shrubs (primarily juniper) on large areas that were once primarily grassland has strong implications for recharge of aquifers. It can be a common occurrence to have seeps and springs stop flowing in conjunction with increases in tree and shrub cover. Hydrologic function is affected by the amount of vegetative cover. Canopy interception loss can vary from 25.4% to 36.7% (Thurow and Hester, 1997). A small rainfall event is usually retained in the foliage and does not reach the litter layer at the base of the tree. Only when canopy storage is reached and exceeded does precipitation fall to the soil surface. Interception losses associated with the accumulation of leaves, twigs, and branches at the base of trees and shrubs are considerably higher than loss associated with the canopy. The decomposed material retains approximately 40% of the water that is not retained in the canopy (Thurow and Hester, 1997).

Plowed State 3: Reductions in organic matter, mineral levels, soil structure, oxygen levels, and water-holding capacity, increased runoff/erosion and shifts in the populations of soil-dwelling organism are common on these sites. The extent of these changes depended upon the duration of cropping as well as crops grown and other management practices.

Introduced, Invasive, Noxious State 4: There is soil dynamic property changes that affecting infiltration and runoff as native reference communities go to non-native species. The water cycle is affected.

Recreational uses

This site provides opportunities for a variety of outdoor activities which might include bird

watching, hiking, outdoor/wildlife photography, and hunting. A wide array of plants bloom throughout the growing season, especially in those years with average or above average rainfall, and provide much aesthetic appeal to the landscape. This site is subject to water erosion when mismanaged and vehicular traffic can lead to gully formation on steeper areas. This site is often an excellent site for deer and quail hunting.

Wood products

This site generally does not produce trees of sufficient size for commercial harvest.

Other products

Two shrubs, American plum and blackberry, are highly prized for making jellies and jams.

Other information

Site Development and Testing Plan

This site went through the approval process.

Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) 76 Bluestem Hills and often referred to as the Flint Hills is named for the abundant flint (chert) eroded from the bedrock that lies near or at the surface. This area supports tall prairie grasses. Because of its landscape setting with broad vistas, this site may be attractive for homesites and other developments. Specific site considerations should be carefully weighed.

This area supports tall prairie grasses. Big bluestem, Indiangrass, switchgrass, and little bluestem are the dominant species. The Flint Hills is designated as a distinct region because it has the most dense coverage of intact tallgrass prairie in North America. Very little of this area has been cultivated because of the abundance of cherty limestone near and on the surface. It is a focal area for the preservation of this ecosystem. Some of the major wildlife species in this area are whitetailed deer, coyote, fox, badger, beaver, raccoon, skunk, civet, opossum, muskrat, mink, great blue heron, prairie chicken, and bobwhite quail. The species of fish in the area include bass, walleye, catfish, bullhead, and carp.

Inventory data references

Information presented here has been derived from NRCS clipping data, numerous ocular estimates and other inventory data. Field observations from experienced range-trained personnel was used extensively to develop this ecological site description.

NRCS contracted the development of MLRA 79 ESDs in 2005. Extensive review and improvements were made to those foundational ESDs in 2017-2018 which provided an approved product.

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Contributors

Chris Tecklenburg

Approval

David Kraft, 8/12/2019

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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)	Chris Tecklenburg/Revision 1-23-2019 David Kraft, John Henry, Doug Spencer and Dwayne Rice/original authors 1-15-2005.
Contact for lead author	State Rangeland Management Specialist for Kansas.
Date	01/23/2019
Approved by	
Approval date	
Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on	Annual Production

Indicators

1. **Number and extent of rills:** No natural rill formation common or part of the Loamy Hills ecological site.

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2. **Presence of water flow patterns:** There are no water flow patterns evidenced by litter, soil, or gravel redistribution, or pedestalling of vegetation or stones that break the flow of water as a result of overland flow.

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3. **Number and height of erosional pedestals or terracettes:** There is no evidence of pedestals or terracettes that would indicate the movement of soil by water and/or by wind on this site.

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4. **Bare ground from Ecological Site Description or other studies (rock, litter, lichen, moss, plant canopy are not bare ground):** Less than 5% bare ground is found on this site. It is the remaining ground cover after accounting for ground surface covered by vegetation (basal and canopy [foliar] cover), litter, standing dead vegetation, gravel/rock, and visible biological crust (e.g., lichen, mosses, algae).

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5. **Number of gullies and erosion associated with gullies:** No evidence of accelerated water flow resulting in downcutting of the soil.

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6. **Extent of wind scoured, blowouts and/or depositional areas:** No wind-scoured or blowout areas where the finer particles of the topsoil have blown away, sometimes leaving residual gravel, rock, or exposed roots on the soil surface. Also, there are no areas of redeposited soil onto this site from another site due to the wind, i.e., depositional areas.

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7. **Amount of litter movement (describe size and distance expected to travel):** No evidence of litter movement (i.e., dead plant material that is in contact with the soil surface).

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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):** Soil surfaces may be stabilized by soil organic matter which has been fully incorporated into aggregates at the soil surface, adhesion of decomposing organic matter to the soil surface, and biological crusts. A soil stability kit will score a range from 5-6.

---

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

   A--0 to 23 centimeters (0 to 9 inches); very dark gray (10YR 3/1) silty clay loam, very dark brown (10YR 2/2) moist; strong fine and medium granular structure; slightly hard, friable, slightly plastic and slightly sticky; few tubular pores; many fine roots; slightly acid; gradual smooth boundary. (15 to 30 centimeters (6 to 12 inches) thick)

   BA--23 to 38 centimeters (9 to 15 inches); very dark grayish brown (10YR 3/2) silty clay loam, very dark brown (10YR 2/2) moist; strong fine and very fine subangular blocky structure; hard, firm, slightly plastic and slightly sticky; many tubular pores; many fine roots; slightly acid; gradual smooth boundary. (0 to 20 centimeters (0 to 8 inches) thick)

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10. **Effect of community phase composition (relative proportion of different functional groups) and spatial distribution on infiltration and runoff:** Functional and structural groups are that of the Reference Plant Community (see functional and structural group worksheet). Note changes to plant communities if different than that of the functional and structural group worksheet.

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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): There is no evidence of a compacted soil layer less than 6 inches from the soil surface. Soil structure is similar to that described in Indicator 9. Compacted physical features will include platy, blocky, dense soil structure over less dense soil layers, horizontal root growth, and increase bulk density (measured by weighing a known volume of oven-dry soil).

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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: Group 1 Tallgrass dominant 60% 3000 lbs. big bluestem 1300-1820, Indiangrass 200-610, switchgrass 150-405, composite dropseed 20-100, eastern gamagrass 0-405.

    Sub-dominant: Group 2 Midgrass subdominant 22% 800 lbs. little bluestem 800-1010, sideoats grama 20-100, purple lovegrass 0-50, porcupinegrass 0-50.

    Other: Group 3 Shortgrass trace 2% 100 lbs. buffalograss 10-70, blue grama 0-70, hairy grama 0-40.
    Group 4 Cool-season grass Trace 2% 100 lbs. Western wheatgrass 10-50 lbs. sedge 5-25, Canada wildrye 10-50, Virginia wildrye 0-30, prairie junegrass 0-25, Scribner's rosette grass 0-25.

    Additional: Group 5 forbs Minor 12% 600 lbs. see Reference Plant community for entire list
    Group 6 shrub Trace 2% 100 lbs. leadplant 15-50 lbs. Jersey tea 15-50.

---

13. **Amount of plant mortality and decadence (include which functional groups are expected to show mortality or decadence):** Recruitment of plants is occurring and there is a mixture of many age classes of plants. The majority of the plants are alive and vigorous. Some mortality and decadence is expected for the site, due to drought, unexpected wildfire, or a combination of the two events. This would be expected for both dominant and subdominant groups.

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14. **Average percent litter cover (%) and depth (in):** Plant litter is distributed evenly throughout the site. There is no restriction to plant regeneration due to depth of litter. When prescribed burning is practiced, there will be little litter the first half of the growing season.

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15. **Expected annual annual-production (this is TOTAL above-ground annual-production, not just forage annual-production):** All species (e.g., native, seeded, and weeds) alive in the year of the evaluation, are included in the determination of total above ground production. Site potential (total annual production) ranges from 3,000 lbs in a below-average rainfall year and 6,500 lbs in an above-average rainfall year. The representative value for this site is 5,000 lbs production per year.

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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:** There are no noxious weeds present. Invasive plants make up a small percentage of plant community, and invasive brush species are < 5% canopy.

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17. **Perennial plant reproductive capability:** Plants on site exhibit the required vigor and growth to be able to reproduce vegetatively or by seed. Current management activities do not adversely effect the capability of plants to reproduce.
