

## Ecological site R104XY007IA Loamy Upland Savanna

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### General information

**Provisional.** A provisional ecological site description has undergone quality control and quality assurance review. It contains a working state and transition model and enough information to identify the ecological site.



**Figure 1. Mapped extent**

Areas shown in blue indicate the maximum mapped extent of this ecological site. Other ecological sites likely occur within the highlighted areas. It is also possible for this ecological site to occur outside of highlighted areas if detailed soil survey has not been completed or recently updated.

### MLRA notes

Major Land Resource Area (MLRA): 104X–Eastern Iowa and Minnesota Till Prairies

The Eastern Iowa and Minnesota Till Prairies (MLRA 104) includes the Iowan Surface, Oak Savanna, and Western Coulee and Ridges landforms (Prior 1991; MDNR 2005;

WDNR 2015). It spans three states (Iowa, 74 percent; Minnesota, 22 percent; Wisconsin, 4 percent), encompassing approximately 9,660 square miles (Figure 1). The elevation ranges from approximately 1,310 feet above sea level (ASL) on the highest ridges to about 985 feet ASL in the lowest valleys. Local relief is mainly 10 to 20 feet. Glacial till and outwash deposits cover the uplands of the MLRA with recent alluvium located in the major river valleys. Paleozoic bedrock sediments, comprised primarily of shale and limestone, lies beneath the glacial material. The depth to limestone is shallow, resulting in karst topography across much of the area (USDA-NRCS 2006).

The vegetation in the MLRA has undergone drastic changes over time. Spruce forests dominated the landscape 30,000 to 21,500 years ago. As the last glacial maximum peaked 21,500 to 16,000 years ago, they were replaced with open tundras and parklands. The end of the Pleistocene Epoch saw a warming climate that initially prompted the return of spruce forests, but as the warming continued, spruce trees were replaced by deciduous trees (Baker et al. 1990). Not until approximately 9,000 years ago did the vegetation transition to prairies as climatic conditions continued to warm and subsequently dry. Between 4,000 and 3,000 years ago, oak savannas began intermingling within the prairie landscape, while the more wooded and forested areas maintained a foothold in sheltered areas. This prairie-forest transition ecosystem formed the dominant landscapes until the arrival of European settlers (Baker et al. 1992).

## **Classification relationships**

USFS Subregions: North Central U.S. Driftless and Escarpment (222L), Minnesota and Northeast Iowa Morainal-Oak Savannah (222M), Central Dissected Till Plains (251C) Sections; Menominee Eroded Pre-Wisconsin Till (222La), Oak Savannah Till and Loess Plains (222Me), Southeast Iowa Rolling Loess Hills (251Ch) Subsections (Cleland et al. 2007)

U.S. EPA Level IV Ecoregion: Eastern Iowa and Minnesota Drift Plains (47c), Rolling Loess Prairies (47f), Lower St. Croix and Vermillion Valleys (47g), Rochester/Paleozoic Plateau Upland (52c) (USEPA 2013)

National Vegetation Classification – Ecological Systems: North-Central Interior Oak Savanna (CES202.698) (NatureServe 2015)

National Vegetation Classification - Plant Associations: *Quercus macrocarpa* – (*Quercus alba*, *Quercus stellata*) Wooded Grassland (CEGL002159) (Nature Serve 2015)

Biophysical Settings: North-Central Interior Oak Savanna (BpS 4213940) (LANDFIRE 2009)

Natural Resources Conservation Service – Iowa Plant Community Species List: Opening, North-Central Bur Oak (USDA-NRCS 2007)

Iowa Department of Natural Resources: Tallgrass Savanna (INAI 1984)

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources: Ups24 Southern Mesic Savanna (MDNR 2005)

Ecological site concept

Loamy Upland Savannas are located within the green areas on the map (Figure 1). They occur on dissected till plains on uplands. The soils are Mollisols and Alfisols that are somewhat poorly to well-drained and deep, formed from loamy sediments.

The historic pre-European settlement vegetation on this ecological site was dominated by tallgrass prairie interspersed with trees. Bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa* Michx.) is the dominant tree, and big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii* Vitman) and white heath aster (*Symphyotrichum ericoides* (L.) G.L. Nesom) are the dominant and characteristic herbs, respectively. Other grasses present can include Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans* (L.) Nash), little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium* (Michx.) Nash), and prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis* (A. Gray) A. Gray) (MDNR 2005). Forbs indicative of an undisturbed plant community associated with this ecological site include white prairie clover (*Dalea candida* Michx. ex Willd.), tall blazing star (*Liatris aspera* Michx.), and meadow zizia (*Zizia aptera* (A. Gray) Fernald) (Drobney et al. 2001; MDNR 2005). Fire is the primary disturbance factor that maintains this site, while herbivory and drought are secondary factors (LANDFIRE 2009).

Associated sites

|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| R104XY006IA | <b>Wet Loamy Upland Prairie</b><br>Loamy parent materials that are shallow to the water table including Clyde, Garwin, Jameston, Marshan, Maxcreek, Maxfield, Maxmore, and Tripoli   |
| R104XY005IA | <b>Loamy Upland Prairie</b><br>Loamy parent materials that support prairie vegetation including Aredale, Ashdale, Atkinson, Bolan, Carmi, Cerlin, Cresco, Cresken, Dinsdale, Dinsmore, Floyd, Fort Dodge, Kenyon, Klinger, Klingmore, Marquis, Merton, Moland, Norville, Ostrander, Plano, Port Byron, Protivin, Readlyn, Tallula, Tama, Warsaw, and Winnebago |

Similar sites

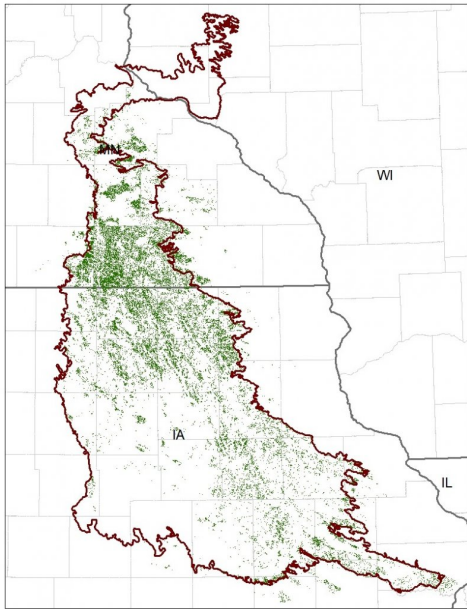
|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| R104XY011IA | <b>Sandy Upland Savanna</b><br>Sandy Upland Savannas are associated with sandy parent materials        |
| R104XY015IA | <b>Terrace Savanna</b><br>Terrace Savannas are located on low stream terraces subject to rare flooding |

Table 1. Dominant plant species

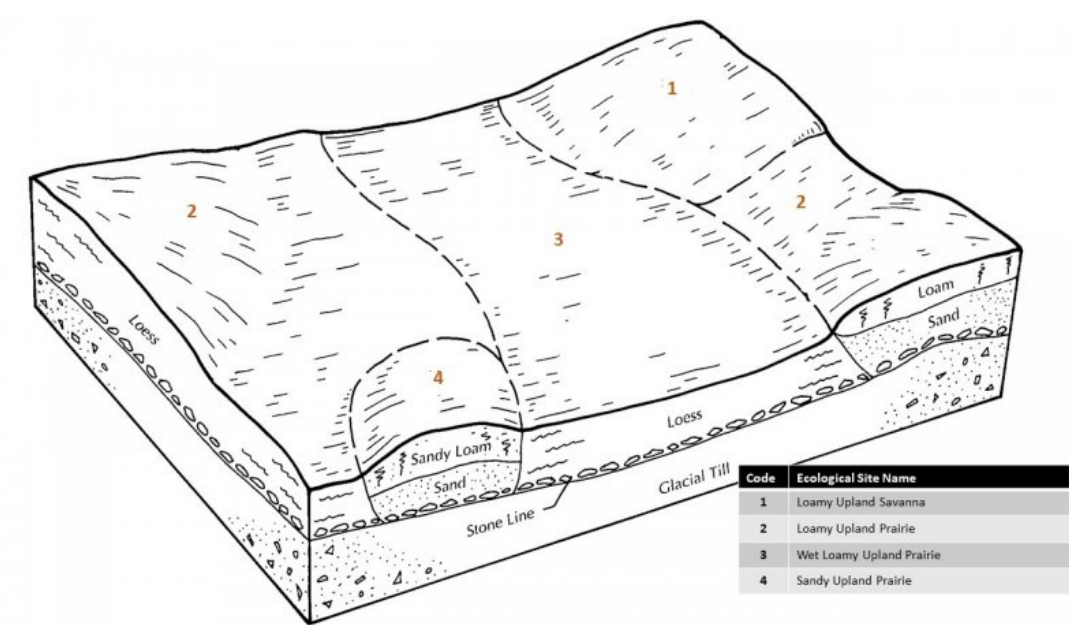
|            |   |
|------------|---|
| Tree       | (1) <i>Quercus macrocarpa</i>   |
| Shrub      | Not specified   |
| Herbaceous | (1) <i>Andropogon gerardii</i><br>(2) <i>Symphyotrichum ericoides</i> |

### Physiographic features

Loamy Upland Savannas occur on dissected till plains on uplands (Figure 2). They are situated on elevations ranging from approximately 400 to 2001 feet ASL. The site does not experience flooding, but rather generates runoff to adjacent, downslope ecological sites (Table 1).



**Figure 2. Figure 1. Location of Loamy Upland Savanna ecological site within MLRA 104.**



**Figure 3. Figure 2. Representative block diagram of Loamy Upland Savanna**

and associated ecological sites.

**Table 2. Representative physiographic features**

|                    |                                    |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| Slope shape across | (1) Convex<br>(2) Convex           |
| Landforms          | (1) Upland                         |
| Runoff class       | Low to medium                      |
| Elevation          | 122–610 m                          |
| Slope              | 2–14%                              |
| Water table depth  | 30–203 cm                          |
| Aspect             | Aspect is not a significant factor |

## Climatic features

The Eastern Iowa and Minnesota Till Prairies falls into the hot-summer humid continental climate (Dfa) and warm-summer humid continental climate (Dfb) Köppen-Geiger climate classifications (Peel et al. 2007). In winter, dry, cold air masses periodically shift south from Canada. As these air masses collide with humid air, snowfall and rainfall result. In summer, moist, warm air masses from the Gulf of Mexico migrate north, producing significant frontal or convective rains. Occasionally, hot, dry winds originating from the Desert Southwest will stagnate over the region, creating extended droughty periods in the summer from unusually high temperatures. Air masses from the Pacific Ocean can also spread into the region and dominate producing mild, dry weather in the autumn known as Indian Summers (NCDC 2006).

The soil temperature regime of MLRA 104 is classified as mesic, where the mean annual soil temperature is between 46 and 59°F (USDA-NRCS 2006). Temperature and precipitation occur along a north-south gradient, where temperature and precipitation increase the further south one travels. The average freeze-free period of this ecological site is about 157 days, while the frost-free period is about 132 days (Table 2). The majority of the precipitation occurs as rainfall in the form of convective thunderstorms during the growing season. Average annual precipitation is approximately 34 inches, which includes rainfall plus the water equivalent from snowfall (Table 3). The average annual low and high temperatures are 36 and 56°F, respectively.

Climate data and analyses are derived from 30-year averages gathered from five National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) weather stations contained within the range of this ecological site (Table 4).

**Table 3. Representative climatic features**

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| Frost-free period (characteristic range) | 128-137 days |
|--|--------------|

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| Freeze-free period (characteristic range)  | 143-172 days |
| Precipitation total (characteristic range) | 864-889 mm   |
| Frost-free period (actual range)           | 127-139 days |
| Freeze-free period (actual range)          | 141-177 days |
| Precipitation total (actual range)         | 787-914 mm   |
| Frost-free period (average)                | 132 days     |
| Freeze-free period (average)               | 157 days     |
| Precipitation total (average)              | 864 mm       |

## Climate stations used

- (1) RED WING DAM 3 [USC00216822], Hager City, MN
- (2) AUSTIN WWT FAC [USC00210355], Austin, MN
- (3) CHARLES CITY [USC00131402], Charles City, IA
- (4) CEDAR RAPIDS MUNI AP [USW00014990], Swisher, IA
- (5) MANCHESTER #2 [USC00135086], Manchester, IA

## Influencing water features

Loamy Upland Savannas are not influenced by wetland or riparian water features. Precipitation is the main source of water for this ecological site. Infiltration is moderate to very slow (Hydrologic Groups B, C, and D), and surface runoff is low to medium. Surface runoff contributes some water to downslope ecological sites (Figure 5).

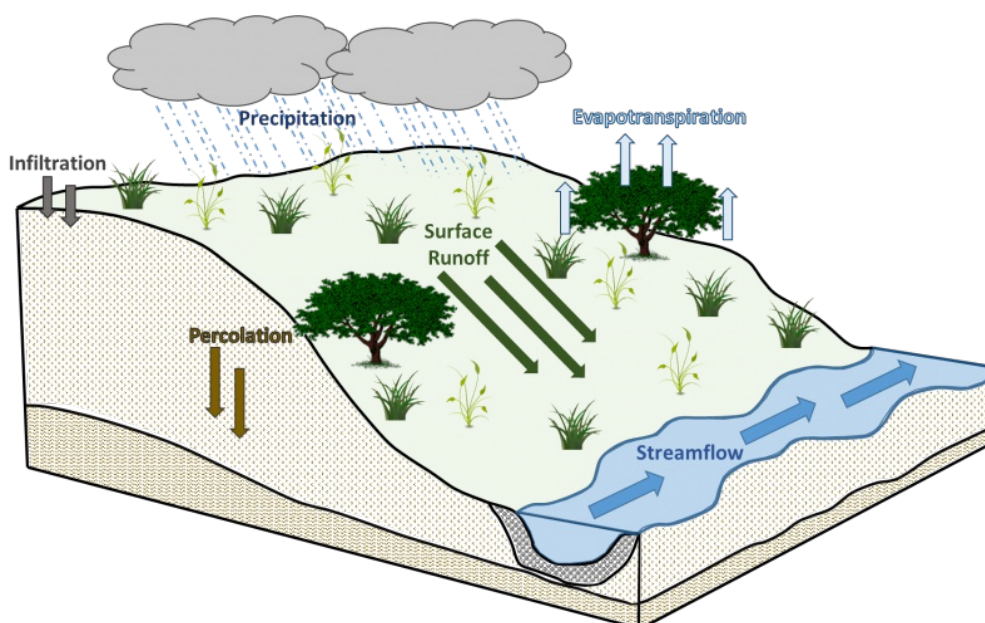


Figure 10. Figure 5. Hydrologic cycling in Loamy Upland Savanna ecological site.

Soil features

Soils of Loamy Upland Savannas are in the Mollisols and Alfisols orders, further classified as Typic Argiudolls, Aquollic Hapludalfs, Mollic Hapludalfs, Mollic Oxyaquic Hapludalfs, and Udollic Endoaqualfs with very slow infiltration and low to medium runoff potential. The soil series associated with this site includes Atterberry, Bassett, Billett, Donnan, Donnan variant, Dowagiac, Downs variant, Franklin, Kasson, Lourdes, Mantorville, Menomin, Newry, Oran, Racine, Riceville, Schley, Schley variant, Waubeek, and Waucoma. The parent material is loamy sediments, and the soils are somewhat poorly to well-drained. Soil pH classes are strongly acid to moderately alkaline. No rooting restrictions are noted for the soils of this ecological site (Table 5).

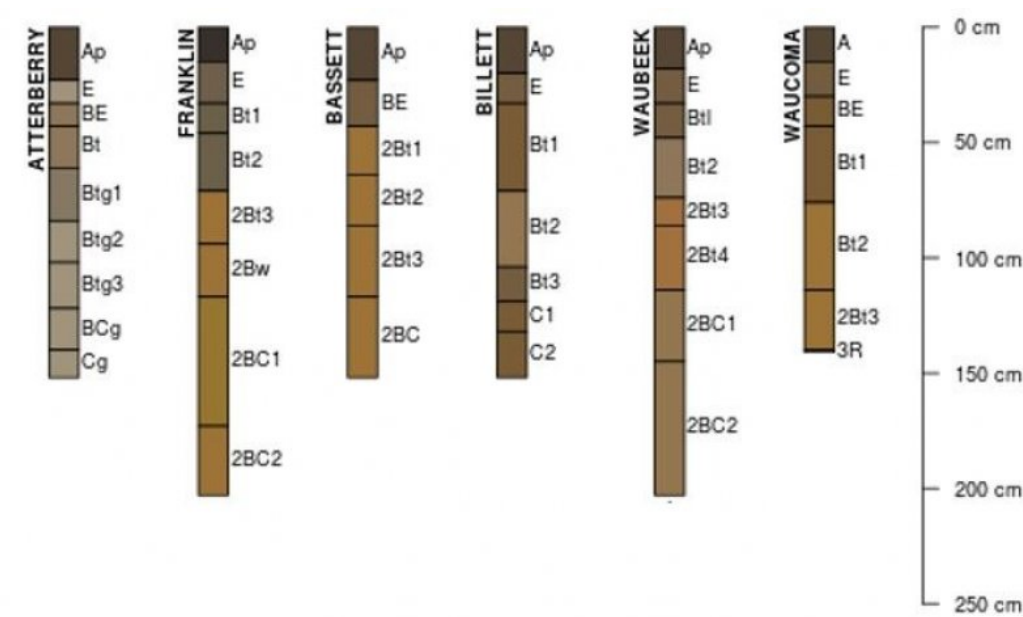


Figure 11. Figure 6. Profile sketches of soil series associated with Loamy Upland Savanna.

Table 4. Representative soil features

|                             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Family particle size        | (1) Fine-loamy<br>(2) Coarse-loamy      |
| Drainage class              | Somewhat poorly drained to well drained |
| Permeability class          | Slow to moderately slow                 |
| Depth to restrictive layer  | 203 cm                                  |
| Soil depth                  | 203 cm                                  |
| Surface fragment cover <=3" | 0–2%                                    |
| Surface fragment cover >3"  | 0–1%                                    |

Ecological dynamics

The information in this Ecological Site Description, including the state-and-transition model

(STM), 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 MLRA lies within the transition zone between the eastern deciduous forests and the tallgrass prairies. The heterogeneous topography of the area results in variable microclimates and fuel matrices that in turn support prairies, savannas, woodlands, and forests. Loamy Upland Savannas form an aspect of this vegetative continuum. This ecological site occurs on uplands on somewhat poorly to well-drained soils. Species characteristic of this ecological site consist of herbaceous vegetation interspersed with trees.

Fire is a critical disturbance factor that maintains Loamy Upland Savannas. Fire intensity typically consisted of periodic fires occurring every 1 to 5 years (LANDFIRE 2009). Ignition sources included summertime lightning strikes from convective storms and bimodal, human ignitions during the spring and fall seasons. Native Americans regularly set fires to improve sight lines for hunting, driving large game, improving grazing and browsing habitat, agricultural clearing, and enhancing vital ethnobotanical plants (Barrett 1980; White 1994).

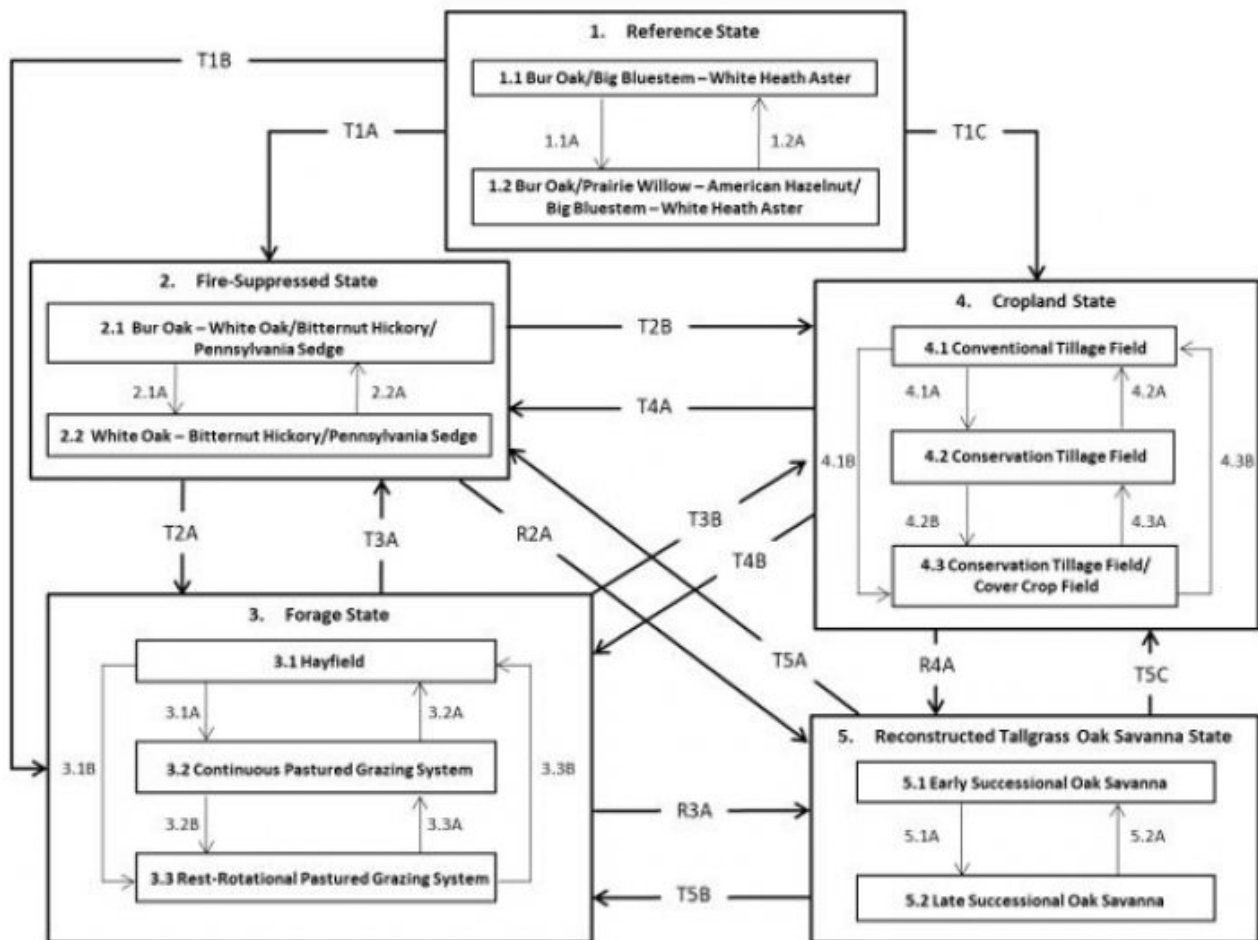
Drought and herbivory by native ungulates have also played a role in shaping this ecological site. The periodic episodes of reduced soil moisture in conjunction with the somewhat poorly to well-drained soils have favored the proliferation of plant species tolerant of such conditions. Drought can also slow the growth of plants and result in dieback of certain species. Bison (*Bos bison*) grazing, while present, served a more limited role in community composition and structure than lands further west. Prairie elk (*Cervus elaphus*) and white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) likely contributed to woody species reduction but are also considered to be of a lesser impact compared to the west (LANDFIRE 2009). When coupled with fire, periods of drought and herbivory can further delay the establishment of woody vegetation (Pyne et al. 1996).

Today, Loamy Upland Savannas are considered extirpated in the MLRA as a result of being type-converted to agricultural production land (NatureServe 2018). Lands that have not been put into production have had fire suppressed long enough to transition the site from an open savanna to a closed woodland or forest. A return to the historic plant community may not be possible following extensive land modification, but long-term conservation agriculture or savanna reconstruction can help to restore some biotic diversity and ecological function. The state-and-transition model that follows provides a detailed description of each state, community phase, pathway, and transition. This model is based on available experimental research, field observations, literature reviews, professional consensus, and interpretations.

## **State and transition model**



## R104XY007IA LOAMY UPLAND SAVANNA



| Code               | Process   |
|--------------------|---|
| 1.1A               | Extended fire return interval in excess of 5 years                                    |
| 1.2A               | Mixed or replacement fire   |
| T1A, T3A, T4A, T5A | Long-term fire suppression and/or land abandonment                                    |
| 2.1A               | Continued fire suppression (30+ years)  |
| 2.2A               | Single large disturbance event  |
| T1B, T2A, T4B, T5B | Cultural treatments are implemented to increase forage quality and yield              |
| 3.1A               | Mechanical harvesting is replaced with domestic livestock and continuous grazing      |
| 3.1B               | Mechanical harvesting is replaced with domestic livestock and rest-rotational grazing |
| 3.2A, 3.3B         | Domestic livestock grazing is replaced by mechanical harvesting                       |
| 3.2B               | Implementation of rest-rotational grazing   |
| 3.3A               | Implementation of continuous grazing  |
| T1C, T2B, T3B, T5C | Agricultural conversion via tillage, seeding, and non-selective herbicide             |
| 4.1A               | Less tillage, residue management  |
| 4.1B               | Less tillage, residue management, and implementation of cover cropping                |
| 4.2B               | Implementation of cover cropping  |
| 4.2A, 4.3B         | Intensive tillage, remove residue, and reinitiate monoculture row cropping            |
| 4.3A               | Remove cover cropping   |
| R2A, R3A, R4A      | Site preparation, non-native species control, and native seeding                      |
| 5.1A               | Invasive species control and implementation of disturbance regimes                    |
| 5.2A               | Drought or improper timing/use of management actions                                  |

### State 1 Reference State

The reference plant community is categorized as a mesic oak savanna, dominated by

herbaceous vegetation and scattered trees. The two community phases within the reference state are dependent on periodic fires. Surface fires are the dominant fire regime, comprising approximately 96 percent of all fires and occurring every five years. Mixed and replacement fires comprise the remaining 4 percent, occurring approximately every 3 and 1 years, respectively (LANDFIRE 2009). Fire intensity and return intervals alter species composition, cover, and extent, while regular fire intervals keep woody species from encroaching. Episodic droughts and storm damage have more localized impacts in the reference phases, but do contribute to overall species composition, diversity, cover, and productivity.

## **Community 1.1**

### **Bur Oak/Big Bluestem – White Heath Aster**

Sites in this reference community phase are dominated by a mix of grasses and forbs with scattered trees. Bur oak is the dominant tree on the site, but white oak (*Quercus alba* L.) may also be present. The tree layer comprises no more than 20 percent cover and trees size class is medium (9 to 21-inch DBH). Vegetative cover is continuous (up to 100 percent) and plants can reach heights up to 3 feet tall (LANDFIRE 2009). Big bluestem, Indiangrass, little bluestem, and prairie dropseed and are common monocots.

Characteristic forbs can include white heath aster, prairie phlox (*Phlox pilosa* L.), Canada goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis* L.), and smooth blue aster (*Symphyotrichum laeve* (L.) Á. Löve & D. Löve) (DeLong and Hooper 1996; MDNR 2005). Surface fires every 5 years will maintain this class, but an extended fire return interval will shift the community to phase 1.2 (LANDFIRE 2009).

## **Community 1.2**

### **Bur Oak/Prairie Willow – American Hazelnut/Big Bluestem – White Heath Aster**

This reference community phase represents a successional shift as a result of an extended fire return interval. This fire-free period allows woody shrubs to establish, including prairie willow (*Salix humilis* Marshall), American hazelnut (*Corylus americana* Walter), and leadplant (*Amorpha canescens* Pursh). Tree cover increases to as much as 60 percent, and tree size class moves from medium to large (21 to 33-inch DBH). Surface fires every 5 years will maintain this class, but mixed or replacement fires will shift the community back to phase 1.1 (LANDFIRE 2009).

## **Pathway 1.1A**

### **Community 1.1 to 1.2**

Extended fire return interval in excess of 5 years.

## **Pathway 1.2A**

### **Community 1.2 to 1.1**

Mixed or replacement fire.

## **State 2**

### **Fire-suppressed State**

Fire suppression can transition the reference plant community from an open savanna to a closed canopy forest. As the natural fire regime is removed from the landscape, encroachment and dominance by shade-tolerant, fire-intolerant species ensues (Asbjornsen et al. 2005). This results in a positive feedback loop of mesophication whereby plant community succession continuously creates cool, damp shaded conditions that perpetuate a closed canopy ecosystem (Nowacki and Abrams 2008). Succession to this closed canopy state can occur in as little as 25 years from the last fire (LANDFIRE 2009).

### **Community 2.1**

#### **Bur Oak – White Oak/Bitternut Hickory/Pennsylvania Sedge**

This community represents the early stages of long-term fire suppression. The lack of fire allows the tree canopy to close (60 to 80 percent cover) and stem density to increase. Bur oak and white oak are the dominant trees, and bitternut hickory (*Carya cordiformis* (Wangenh.) K. Koch) begins to form a scattered subcanopy (LANDFIRE 2009). The sun-loving herbaceous layer is slowly replaced by more shade-tolerant species. Rare surface fires that escape suppression efforts will maintain this phase, but a complete lack of fire for 30 years will shift the community to phase 2.2 (LANDFIRE 2009).

### **Community 2.2**

#### **White Oak – Bitternut Hickory/Pennsylvania Sedge**

Sites falling into this community phase have transitioned into a closed canopy oak-hickory forest. Mature bur and white oaks are still present, but seedlings and saplings are generally absent as they do not establish well under the continuous canopies (Tirmenstein 1991; Gucker 2011). As fire suppression has continued, bitternut hickory saplings have matured and now become co-dominant with the oaks (Colandonato 1992; LANDFIRE 2009). A single, large disturbance event – such as a windstorm – can create open pockets that allow the community to temporarily shift back to phase 2.1.

### **Pathway 2.1A**

#### **Community 2.1 to 2.2**

Continued fire suppression (+30 years).

### **Pathway 2.2A**

#### **Community 2.2 to 2.1**

Single large disturbance event.

## **State 3**

### **Forage State**

The forage state occurs when the reference state is converted to a farming operation that emphasizes domestic livestock production known as grassland agriculture. Fire suppression, periodic cultural treatments (e.g., clipping, drainage, soil amendment applications, planting new species and/or cultivars, mechanical harvesting) and grazing by domesticated livestock transition and maintain this state (USDA-NRCS 2003). Early settlers seeded non-native species, such as smooth brome (*Bromus inermis* Leyss.) and Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis* L.), to help extend the grazing season (Smith 1998). Over time, as lands were continuously harvested or grazed by herds of cattle, the non-native species were able to spread and expand across the landscape, reducing the native species diversity and ecological function.

### **Community 3.1**

#### **Hayfield**

Sites in this community phase consist of forage plants that are planted and mechanically harvested. Mechanical harvesting removes much of the aboveground biomass and nutrients that feed the soil microorganisms (Franzluebbers et al. 2000; USDA-NRCS 2003). As a result, soil biology is reduced leading to decreases in nutrient uptake by plants, soil organic matter, and soil aggregation. Frequent biomass removal can also reduce the site's carbon sequestration capacity (Skinner 2008).

### **Community 3.2**

#### **Continuous Pastured Grazing**

This community phase is characterized by continuous grazing where domestic livestock graze a pasture for the entire season. Depending on stocking density, this can result in lower forage quality and productivity, weed invasions, and uneven pasture use. Continuous grazing can also increase the amount of bare ground and erosion and reduce soil organic matter, cation exchange capacity, water-holding capacity, and nutrient availability and retention (Bharati et al. 2002; Leake et al. 2004; Teague et al. 2011). Smooth brome, Kentucky bluegrass, and white clover (*Trifolium repens* L.) are common pasture species used in this phase. Their tolerance to continuous grazing has allowed these species to dominate, sometimes completely excluding the native vegetation.

### **Community 3.3**

#### **Periodic-rest Pastured Grazing**

This community phase is characterized by periodic-rest grazing where the pasture has been subdivided into several smaller paddocks. Subdividing the pasture in this way allows

livestock to utilize one or a few paddocks, while the remaining area is rested allowing plants to restore vigor and energy reserves, deepen root systems, develop seeds, as well as allow seedling establishment (Undersander et al. 2002; USDA-NRCS 2003). Periodic-rest pastured grazing include deferred periods, rest periods, and periods of high intensity – low frequency, and short duration methods. Vegetation is generally more diverse and can include orchardgrass (*Dactylis glomerata* L.), timothy (*Phleum pratense* L.), red clover (*Trifolium pratense* L.), and alfalfa (*Medicago sativa* L.). The addition of native prairie species can further bolster plant diversity and, in turn, soil function. This community phase promotes numerous ecosystem benefits including increasing biodiversity, preventing soil erosion, maintaining and enhancing soil quality, sequestering atmospheric carbon, and improving water yield and quality (USDA-NRCS 2003).

### **Pathway 3.1A**

#### **Community 3.1 to 3.2**

Mechanical harvesting is replaced with domestic livestock utilizing continuous grazing.

### **Pathway 3.1B**

#### **Community 3.1 to 3.3**

Mechanical harvesting is replaced with domestic livestock utilizing periodic-rest grazing.

### **Pathway 3.2A**

#### **Community 3.2 to 3.1**

Domestic livestock are removed, and mechanical harvesting is implemented.

### **Pathway 3.2B**

#### **Community 3.2 to 3.3**

Periodic-rest grazing replaces continuous grazing.

### **Pathway 3.3B**

#### **Community 3.3 to 3.1**

Domestic livestock are removed, and mechanical harvesting is implemented.

### **Pathway 3.3A**

#### **Community 3.3 to 3.2**

Continuous grazing replaces periodic-rest grazing.

## **State 4**

### **Cropland State**

The continuous use of tillage, row-crop planting, and chemicals (i.e., herbicides, fertilizers, etc.) has effectively eliminated the reference community and many of its natural ecological functions in favor of crop production. Corn and soybeans are the dominant crops for the site, and oats (*Avena L.*) and alfalfa (*Medicago sativa L.*) may be rotated periodically. These areas are likely to remain in crop production for the foreseeable future.

## **Community 4.1**

### **Conventional Tillage Field**

Sites in this community phase typically consist of monoculture row-cropping maintained by conventional tillage practices. They are cropped in either continuous corn or alternating periods of corn and soybean crops. The frequent use of deep tillage, low crop diversity, and bare soil conditions during the non-growing season negatively impacts soil health. Under these practices, soil aggregation is reduced or destroyed, soil organic matter is reduced, erosion and runoff are increased, and infiltration is decreased, which can ultimately lead to undesirable changes in the hydrology of the watershed (Tomer et al. 2005).

## **Community 4.2**

### **Conservation Tillage Field**

This community phase is characterized by periodically alternating crops and utilizing various conservation tillage methods to promote soil health and reduce erosion. Conservation tillage methods include strip-till, ridge-till, vertical-till, or no-till planting operations. Strip-till keeps seedbed preparation to narrow bands less than one-third the width of the row where crop residue and soil consolidation are left undisturbed in-between seedbed areas. Strip-till planting may be completed in the fall and nutrient application either occurs simultaneously or at the time of planting. Ridge-till uses specialized equipment to create ridges in the seedbed and vegetative residue is left on the surface in between the ridges. Weeds are controlled with herbicides and/or cultivation, seedbed ridges are rebuilt during cultivation, and soils are left undisturbed from harvest to planting. Vertical-till operations employ machinery that lightly tills the soil and cuts up crop residue, mixing some of the residue into the top few inches of the soil while leaving a large portion on the surface. No-till management is the most conservative, disturbing soils only at the time of planting and fertilizer application. Compared to conventional tillage operations, conservation tillage methods can improve soil ecosystem function by reducing soil erosion, increasing organic matter and water availability, improving water quality, and reducing soil compaction.

## **Community 4.3**

### **Conservation Tillage Field/Alternative Crop Field**

This community phase applies conservation tillage methods as described above as well as adds cover crop practices. Cover crops typically include nitrogen-fixing species (e.g.,

legumes), small grains (e.g., rye, wheat, oats), or forage covers (e.g., turnips, radishes, rapeseed). The addition of cover crops not only adds plant diversity but also promotes soil health by reducing soil erosion, limiting nitrogen leaching, suppressing weeds, increasing soil organic matter, and improving the overall soil ecosystem. In the case of small grain cover crops, surface cover and water infiltration are increased, while forage covers can be used to graze livestock or support local wildlife. Of the three community phases for this state, this phase promotes the greatest soil sustainability and improves ecological functioning within a row crop operation.

### **Pathway 4.1A**

#### **Community 4.1 to 4.2**

Tillage operations are greatly reduced, alternating crops occurs on a regular interval, and crop residue remains on the soil surface.

### **Pathway 4.1B**

#### **Community 4.1 to 4.3**

Tillage operations are greatly reduced or eliminated, alternating crops occurs on a regular interval, crop residue remains on the soil surface, and cover crops are planted following crop harvest.

### **Pathway 4.2A**

#### **Community 4.2 to 4.1**

Intensive tillage is utilized, and monoculture row-cropping is established.

### **Pathway 4.2B**

#### **Community 4.2 to 4.3**

Cover crops are implemented to minimize soil erosion.

### **Pathway 4.3B**

#### **Community 4.3 to 4.1**

Intensive tillage is utilized, cover crops practices are abandoned, monoculture row-cropping is established on a more-or-less continuous basis is reduced or eliminated.

### **Pathway 4.3A**

#### **Community 4.3 to 4.2**

Cover crop practices are abandoned.

## **State 5**

## **Reconstructed Oak Savanna State**

Savanna reconstructions have become an important tool for repairing natural ecological functions and providing habitat protection for numerous grassland dependent species. Because the historic plant and soil biota communities of the tallgrass prairie were highly diverse with complex interrelationships, historic savanna replication cannot be guaranteed on landscapes that have been so extensively manipulated for extended timeframes (Kardol and Wardle 2010; Fierer et al. 2013). Therefore, ecological restoration should aim to aid the recovery of degraded, damaged, or destroyed ecosystems. A successful restoration will have the ability to structurally and functionally sustain itself, demonstrate resilience to the natural ranges of stress and disturbance, and create and maintain positive biotic and abiotic interactions (SER 2002). The reconstructed savanna state is the result of a long-term commitment involving a multi-step, adaptive management process. Bur oak plantings or selective tree thinning of non-oak species will be required in order to reproduce the overstory canopy (Asbjornsen et al. 2005). Diverse, species-rich seed mixes may be important to utilize as they allow the site to undergo successional stages that exhibit changing composition and dominance over time (Smith et al. 2010). On-going management via prescribed fire and/or light grazing will help the site progress from an early successional community dominated by annuals and some weeds to a later seral stage composed of native perennial grasses, forbs, shrubs, and eventually mature bur oaks. Establishing a prescribed fire regime that mimics natural disturbance patterns can increase native species cover and diversity while reducing cover of non-native forbs and grasses. Light grazing alone can help promote species richness, while grazing accompanied with fire can control the encroachment of undesirable woody vegetation (Brudvig et al. 2007).

### **Community 5.1**

#### **Early Successional Reconstructed Oak Savanna**

This community phase represents early community assembly and is highly dependent on the timing and priority of planting and/or tree thinning operations and the herbaceous seed mix utilized. If bur oak planting is needed, acorns should be planted shortly after harvest as acorns germinate shortly after seedfall and require no cold stratification. Browse protection may need to be installed to protect newly established seedlings from animal predation (Gucker 2011). If selective tree removal is needed, canopy reduction should encompass between 16 to 45 percent of the undesirable species in a single year (Asbjornsen et al. 2005). The seed mix should look to include a diverse mix of native cool-season and warm-season annual and perennial grasses and forbs typical of the reference state. Native, cool-season annuals can help to provide litter that promotes cool, moist soil conditions to the benefit of the other species in the seed mix. The first season following site preparation and seeding will typically result in annuals and other volunteer species forming a majority of the vegetative cover. Control of non-native species, particularly perennial species, is crucial at this point in order to ensure they do not establish before the native vegetation (Martin and Wilsey 2012). After the first season, native warm-season grasses should begin to become more prominent on the landscape and over time close



the canopy.

## **Community 5.2**

### **Late Successional Reconstructed Oak Savanna**

Appropriately timed disturbance regimes (e.g., prescribed fire) applied to the early successional community phase can help increase the beta diversity, pushing the site into a late successional community phase over time. While oak savanna communities are dominated by grasses, these species can suppress forb establishment and reduce overall diversity and ecological functioning (Martin and Wilsey 2006; Williams et al. 2007). Reducing accumulated plant litter from such tallgrasses as big bluestem and Indiangrass allows more light and nutrients to become available for forb recruitment, allowing for greater ecosystem complexity (Wilsey 2008). Prescribed fire should be used on a cycle no less than every five years in order to allow the oaks to establish and mature (Gucker 2011).

## **Pathway 5.1A**

### **Community 5.1 to 5.2**

Selective herbicides are used to control non-native species, and prescribed fire and/or light grazing help to increase the native species diversity and control non-oak woody vegetation.

## **Pathway 5.2B**

### **Community 5.2 to 5.1**

Reconstruction experiences a decrease in native species diversity from drought or improper timing of management actions (e.g., reduced fire frequency, use of non-selective herbicides).

## **Transition T1A**

### **State 1 to 2**

Long-term fire suppression transitions the site to the fire-suppressed state (2).

## **Transition T1B**

### **State 1 to 3**

Cultural treatments to enhance forage quality and yield transitions the site to the forage state (3).

## **Transition T1C**

### **State 1 to 4**

Tillage, seeding of agricultural crops, and non-selective herbicide transition the site to the cropland state (4).

### **Transition T2A** **State 2 to 3**

Cultural treatments to enhance forage quality and yield transitions the site to the forage state (3).

### **Transition T2B** **State 2 to 4**

Tillage, seeding of agricultural crops, and non-selective herbicide transition this site to the cropland state (4).

### **Restoration pathway R2A** **State 2 to 5**

Site preparation, invasive species control, and seeding native species transition this site to the reconstructed oak savanna state (5).

### **Transition T3A** **State 3 to 2**

Land abandonment transitions the site to the fire-suppressed state (2).

### **Transition T3B** **State 3 to 4**

Tillage, seeding of agricultural crops, and non-selective herbicide transition this site to the cropland state (4).

### **Restoration pathway R3A** **State 3 to 5**

Site preparation, tree planting, invasive species control, and seeding native species transition this site to the reconstructed oak savanna state (5).

### **Transition T4A** **State 4 to 2**

Land abandonment transitions the site to the fire-suppressed state (2).

## **Restoration pathway T4B**

### **State 4 to 3**

Cultural treatments to enhance forage quality and yield transitions the site to the forage state (3).

## **Restoration pathway R4A**

### **State 4 to 5**

Site preparation, tree planting, invasive species control, and seeding native species transition this site to the reconstructed oak savanna state (5).

## **Transition T5A**

### **State 5 to 2**

Fire suppression and removal of active management transitions this site to the fire-suppressed state (2).

## **Transition T5B**

### **State 5 to 3**

Cultural treatments to enhance forage quality and yield transition the site to the forage state (3).

## **Transition T5C**

### **State 5 to 4**

Tillage, seeding of agricultural crops, and non-selective herbicide transition this site to the cropland state (4).

## **Additional community tables**

### **Inventory data references**

Tier 3 Sampling Plots used to develop the reference state, community phases 1.1 and 1.2:

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Iowa Franklin Beeds Lake State Park – Iowa Department of Natural Resources 481345  
4735330

Iowa Howard Crossman Prairie Preserve – The Nature Conservancy 542477 4806546

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## **Approval**

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## **Rangeland health reference sheet**

Interpreting Indicators of Rangeland Health is a qualitative assessment protocol used to determine ecosystem condition based on benchmark characteristics described in the Reference Sheet. A suite of 17 (or more) indicators are typically considered in an assessment. The ecological site(s) representative of an assessment location must be known prior to applying the protocol and must be verified based on soils and climate. Current plant community cannot be used to identify the ecological site.



|   |                   |
|---|-------------------|
| Author(s)/participant(s)                    |                   |
| Contact for lead author                     |                   |
| Date  | 05/21/2025        |
| Approved by                                 | Chris Tecklenburg |
| Approval date                               |                   |
| Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on | Annual Production |

## Indicators

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

---

**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:

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17. Perennial plant reproductive capability:

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