

Ecological site DX034A01X150 Sandy Green River Basin (Sy GRB)

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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.

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Approved by	Kirt Walstad
Approval date	
Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on	Annual Production

Indicators

- Number and extent of rills:** Should not occur. If present, will be at the upper end of the slope range for this site and will be short and widely spaced relative to slope distance.

- Presence of water flow patterns:** Water patterns are rare, but when they occur they are very small and not connected beyond 1 gap in the plant canopy.

- Number and height of erosional pedestals or terracettes:** Pedastalling is rare, but when they occur they are blunt and not active, less than 1 inch (2.5 cm) and typically found at the drip line of the shrub canopy. It is typical to find biological soil crusts at margins. Terracettes are not present.

- Bare ground from Ecological Site Description or other studies (rock, litter, lichen, moss, plant canopy are not bare ground):** Bare ground is typically <30%, but can be dependent on plant community phase within the reference state. Higher bare ground is expected directly following a sagebrush killing disturbance, but returns to <30% within 2 years post-disturbance. Canopy gaps comprise <20% of the ground surface, and are primarily in the 1-2 foot category (>70%). No canopy gaps >6 feet should be present.

5. **Number of gullies and erosion associated with gullies:** Active gullies should not be present.

6. **Extent of wind scoured, blowouts and/or depositional areas:** Minimal wind scour or deposition may be present with wind scour found in canopy gaps and deposition found on the leeward side of shrubs. It is only occasional and does not occur as repeating pattern across the landscape, but is localized to exposed topography.

7. **Amount of litter movement (describe size and distance expected to travel):** Herbaceous litter expected to move only in small amounts (to leeward side of shrubs) due to wind. Large woody debris from sagebrush will show no movement except for minimal debris damming after large rain or snowmelt events on slopes >6%.

8. **Soil surface (top few mm) resistance to erosion (stability values are averages - most sites will show a range of values):** Soil Stability Index ratings are highly variable. Values of 6 can occur when sample includes soil biological crusts, but often average less than 3 in plant interspaces. When consistent values of 6 are encountered, it is important to consider if the soil surface has degraded to an argillic subsurface layer (higher clay content will result in higher soil stability). An indicator of degraded soil surface is the appearance of "desert pavement" with higher rock fragment on a deflated soil surface and sagebrush located on islands of intact soil. Overall, the biotic component (plants and soil biological crusts) provide stability for this site.

9. **Soil surface structure and SOM content (include type of structure and A-horizon color and thickness):** Soil organic matter (SOM) <2% is common. Color and structure are poor indicators of SOM in Aridisols (dry, arid soils with thin surfaces and salt and/or clay close to the surface) because SOM potential is low. Typically soil surface consists of an A-horizon of 3-10 inches (7-25 cm) thick with weak to medium sub-angular blocky or sometimes granular or platy structure that is brown to grayish brown (i.e. 10YR 5/3 or 5/2) in color. Field indicators of departure from the reference condition include exposure of subsoil as evidenced by excessive pedestalling and/or surface disturbance.

10. **Effect of community phase composition (relative proportion of different functional groups) and spatial distribution on infiltration and runoff:** The reference state consists of 40-80% grasses, 5-10% forbs, and 5-50% shrubs composition by dry weight. The sagebrush canopy is evenly distributed with cover ranging from 5-35%. When sage canopy is at the high end, herbaceous understory diminishes in the plant interspaces, but desirable bunchgrasses can still be found in the interspaces of sage canopy as well as litter to reduce runoff potential. Infiltration is moderate to moderately rapid resulting in minimal runoff. Basal cover is typically less than 5% for this site and does very little to effect runoff on this site.

11. **Presence and thickness of compaction layer (usually none; describe soil profile features which may be mistaken for compaction on this site):** None. A coarse, dry subsurface will often refuse a probe, causing misidentification of a compaction layer. Most soil profiles must be described by hand dug holes.

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: Mid-size, cool season bunchgrasses=perennial shrubs>> cool season rhizomatous grasses=short, cool season bunchgrasses>>perennial forbs

Sub-dominant:

Other:

Additional:

13. **Amount of plant mortality and decadence (include which functional groups are expected to show mortality or decadence):** Minimal decadence can be observed and is typically associated with shrub component. It is common to find dead matter accumulated in bunchgrasses such as Indian ricegrass, but live plant matter quantity should exceed standing dead except for in times of severe drought. Sagebrush canopy will often have occasional dead branches, but it should not exceed 10% or be found on most plants.
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14. **Average percent litter cover (%) and depth (in):** Litter ranges from 5-35% of total canopy measurement with total litter (including beneath the plant canopy) 30-60% expected. Herbaceous litter depth is typically very shallow, approximately 1-2mm. Woody litter can be up to a couple inches in diameter (4-6cm), but is sporadically distributed.
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15. **Expected annual annual-production (this is TOTAL above-ground annual-production, not just forage annual-production):** English: 400-800 lb/ac (600 lb/ac average); Metric: 448-897 kg/ha (673 kg/ha average).
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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:** Bare ground greater than 50% is the most common indicator of a threshold being crossed. Greasewood commonly invades this site when adjacent to a Saline Lowland (drainage bottom). Annual weeds such as cheatgrass, halogeton, kochia, lambsquarter, flixweed, and Russian thistle are common invasive species in disturbed sites. Cheatgrass has the potential to change site dynamics in the future, but under current conditions it does not dominate the site or influence site dynamics except when the site has been severely disturbed.
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17. **Perennial plant reproductive capability:** All species are capable of reproducing, except in drought years. Thickspike wheatgrass and needleleaf sedge will commonly reproduce by underground rhizomes and not by seed production, especially in drought years.
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