

Ecological site R034BY112UT Desert Sand (Fourwing Saltbush)

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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:** None on slopes < 10%. Rare on slopes > 10%. A minor increase in rill development may be evident immediately following significant thunderstorm or snow melt events but, because of the sites coarse textured soils, they should begin to heal during the following growing season. The presence of rills may also be more apparent where run-on from adjacent upland sites or exposed bedrock concentrate flows. Any rill development present should be less than 1 inch deep, moderately short (< 5') and spaced 8 to 10 feet apart.
- Presence of water flow patterns:** A very few stable overland flow patterns may be present and wind around plant bases. They should show no evidence of current erosion or deposition. Flow patterns present are normally 10 to 15 feet long, follow natural contours, and are typically spaced at least 15 to 20 feet apart. A slight increase in flow activity may be observed immediately following significant weather events such as thunderstorms or spring run-off events.
- Number and height of erosional pedestals or terracettes:** None. There should be no evidence of pedestals or terracettes caused by accelerated water erosion. One to 2 inches of elevational mounding under four-wing saltbush and other shrub canopies, and within biological soil crusts, is normal for this site and is not caused by water erosion. There are no exposed roots around perennial grasses and shrubs.
- Bare ground from Ecological Site Description or other studies (rock, litter, lichen, moss, plant canopy are not bare ground):** Bare ground ranges from 40% - 45%. Bare ground openings should not be greater than 2 to 3 feet in diameter and should normally not be connected.

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5. **Number of gullies and erosion associated with gullies:** None at site level. Scattered landscape level gully channels, however, are a normal component of desert environments. Where landscape gullies are present, they should be stable, partially vegetated on their sides and bottoms, with no evidence of head-cutting. Some slight increase in disturbance may be evident following significant weather events or when gullies convey considerable runoff from higher elevation rocky or naturally eroding areas.
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6. **Extent of wind scoured, blowouts and/or depositional areas:** Some evidence of wind generated soil movement is normal. Moderate depositional mounding within perennial grass crowns, under four-wing saltbush and other shrub canopies, and within biological soil crusts is expected on this site. Wind caused blowouts, where present, are generally stable or are being stabilized with vegetation.
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7. **Amount of litter movement (describe size and distance expected to travel):** The majority of litter accumulates in place at the base of plants canopies. Slight movement of the finest material (< 1/8 inch) may move 1 to 2 feet in the direction of prevailing winds or down slope if being transported by water. Some minor accumulation is observed behind obstructions.
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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):** This site should have a soil stability rating of 3 or 4 under plant canopies, and a 2 to 3 in the interspaces. Average should be a 3. Surface textures are typically sands, and fine sands containing few coarse fragments.
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9. **Soil surface structure and SOM content (include type of structure and A-horizon color and thickness):**
(Crustown) Soil surface is typically 0 to 5 inches deep. Texture is a sand and structure is single grain. The A-horizon color is pale brown (10YR 6/3). Soils have an Ochric epipedon that extends 5 inches into the soil profile. The A horizon is normally deeper and better developed under plant canopies. Use the specific information for the soil you are assessing found in the published soil survey to supplement this description.
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10. **Effect of community phase composition (relative proportion of different functional groups) and spatial distribution on infiltration and runoff:** Healthy stands of perennial grasses and shrubs, as well as the presence of biological crusts, provide for good infiltration, help break raindrop impact, and reduce runoff from storm events. Bare spaces are expected to be fairly small (< 3 feet) should be irregular in shape and usually not connected. Vegetative structure is adequate to capture snow and allow snowmelt to occur in a controlled manner.
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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):** None. Unweathered sandstone bedrock occurs at 22 inches.
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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: Sprouting shrubs (four-wing saltbush, Torrey jointfir > Perennial bunchgrasses (Indian ricegrass, needle-and-thread) >> Perennial forbs (woolly plantain, scarlet globemallow).

Sub-dominant: Sprouting shrubs (winterfat, rubber rabbitbrush) > = Warm season grasses (James galleta, sand dropseed).

Other: A wide variety of other grasses and both perennial and annual forbs can be expected to occur in the plant community.

Additional: Moss and lichen communities will normally be found under plant canopies while the cyanobacteria may be found throughout the site. Functional/structural groups may appropriately contain non-native species if their ecological function is the same as the native species. Perennial and annual forbs can be expected to vary widely in their expression in the plant community based upon departures from average growing conditions.

13. **Amount of plant mortality and decadence (include which functional groups are expected to show mortality or decadence):** All age classes of perennial grasses should be present during years with average to above-average precipitation, there should be very little recent mortality or decadence apparent in either the shrubs or grasses. During severe (multi-year) drought or insect infestations up to 20% of the winterfat may die. There may be partial mortality of individual bunchgrasses and other shrubs during severe drought.

14. **Average percent litter cover (%) and depth (in):** Litter cover ranges from 15 to 20%. Depth should be 1 leaf thickness in the interspaces and from 1/2 - 3/4 inches under perennial plant canopies.

15. **Expected annual annual-production (this is TOTAL above-ground annual-production, not just forage annual-production):** Annual production in air-dry herbage should be approximately 450 to 500 pounds per acre on an average year. Production could vary from 250 to 800 pounds per acre during drought or above-average years.

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:** Russian thistle, annual bromes and halogeton are most likely to invade this site.

17. **Perennial plant reproductive capability:** All perennial plant species have the ability to reproduce in most years except drought years. There are no restrictions on either seed or vegetative reproduction. Some seedling recruitment of major species may be present during average or above average years.
