Ecological site R034BY227UT
Semidesert Shallow Loam (Black Sagebrush)

Last updated: 3/05/2022
Accessed: 10/12/2024

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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Date	04/19/2012
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Approval date	
Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on	Annual Production

Indicators

1. **Number and extent of rills:** Very few rills present. Some increase in rill development may occur on steeper slopes or on areas located below exposed bedrock, or other water shedding areas where increased runoff may occur. Rills should be < 1 inch deep, fairly short (< 10 feet) and somewhat widely spaced (8-10 feet)on slopes < 10%. On steeper slopes, rills will be 10 to 15+ feet long and spaced 6 to 8 feet apart. More active rill development may be observed following major thunderstorm or spring runoff events but should heal during the next growing season. The expression of rills may be less defined where coarse fragments (i.e., gravels and/or channers) dominate the soil surface.

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2. **Presence of water flow patterns:** A very few sinuous flow patterns wind around perennial plants and surface rock. Evidence of flow patterns is expected to increase somewhat with slopes greater than 10%. Water flow patterns are long (15-20 feet), narrow (< 1 foot wide), and spaced widely (10-20 yards) on gentle slopes (<15%) and more closely (<10 yards) on steeper slopes (>15%).

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3. **Number and height of erosional pedestals or terracettes:** Small pedestals (1/8 to 1/4 inch) may form at the base of plants that occur on the edge of water flow patterns, but should not show any exposed roots. Terracettes are fairly common, forming behind debris dams of small to medium sized litter (up to 1 inch in diameter) in water flow patterns. These debris dams may accumulate smaller litter (leaves, grass and forb stems) and sediment.

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4. **Bare ground from Ecological Site Description or other studies (rock, litter, lichen, moss, plant canopy are not bare ground):** 20–30%. (Soil surface is typically covered by 15 to 65% surface fragments). Most bare ground is

associated with water flow patterns, rills, and gullies. Poorly developed biological soil crusts that are interpreted as functioning as bare ground should be recorded as bare ground. Base ground spaces should not be greater than 2 to 3 feet and should mostly not be connected.

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5. **Number of gullies and erosion associated with gullies:** None on slopes < 10%. Rare on steeper slopes and on areas below exposed bedrock. There they do occur, their length often extends from the exposed bedrock to where the gully reaches a stream or other area where water and sediment accumulate. Gullies may show slightly more indication of erosion as slope increases, or as the site occurs adjacent to steep sites/watershed with concentrated flow patterns.

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6. **Extent of wind scoured, blowouts and/or depositional areas:** None to very slight. Perennial vegetation helps break the wind and reduces the potential for wind erosion. Coarse fragments on the soil surface help armor it and reduce the potential for wind erosion.

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7. **Amount of litter movement (describe size and distance expected to travel):** Most litter resides in place with minor redistribution caused by water movement. Minor litter removal may occur in flow channels with deposition occurring within 1 to 2 feet at points of obstruction. The majority of litter accumulates at the base of plants. Some grass leaves and small twigs (grass stems) may accumulate in soil depressions adjacent to plants. Woody stems are not likely to move. However, some litter movement is expected (up to 6 feet) with increases in slopes > 10% and/or increased runoff resulting from heavy thunderstorms.

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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 an erosion rating of 4 or 5 under the plant canopies, and a rating of 3 to 4 in the interspaces. The average should be a 4. Vegetation cover, litter, biological soil crusts and surface rock reduce erosion.

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9. **Soil surface structure and SOM content (include type of structure and A-horizon color and thickness):** (Splimo) Soil surface horizon is typically 0 to 3 inches deep. Texture is a very cobbly loam, structure is typically weak thin platy parting to moderate very fine sugangular blocky. Color is brown (7.5YR 6/4). A ochric epipedon ranges to a depth of 3 inches. 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:** Surface coarse fragments combined with perennial vegetation produce sufficient cover and spatial arrangement to intercept most raindrops and reduce raindrop splash erosion. Litter on soil surface and cryptogamic crusting, where present, also protect soil from splash erosion and encourages a higher rate of infiltration. Plant spatial distribution should slow runoff, allowing additional time for infiltration. Bare spaces are expected to be small and irregular in shape and are usually not connected. Vegetative structure is usually adequate to capture snow and ensure that snowmelt occurs in a controlled manner, allowing maximum time for infiltration, and reducing runoff and erosion in all but the most extreme storm events. When perennial grasses and shrubs decrease due to natural events (i.e., drought, insect damage, etc.) which reduce ground cover and increase bare ground, runoff is expected to increase and associated infiltration be reduced.

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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. Fractured conglomerate bedrock occurs at 15 to 19 inches.

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 (black sagebrush, winterfat) > Perennial bunchgrasses (Indian ricegrass. needle-and-thread) > Perennial forbs (scarlet globemallow).

    Sub-dominant: Non-sprouting shrubs (bud sagebrush, shadscale) > Perennial bunchgrasses (bottlebrush squirreltail)> Rhizomatous grasses (James galleta, blue grama) > Forbs (yellow milkvetch, cushion wild buckwheat) > Biological soil crusts.

    Other: Biological soil crust is variable in its expression where present on this site and is measured as a component of ground cover. Forbs can be expected to vary widely in their expression in the plant community based upon departures from average growing conditions.

    Additional: Natural disturbance regimes include fire, drought, and insects. Assumed fire cycle of 30 to 40+ years. Functional/structural groups may appropriately contain non-native species if their ecological function is the same as the native species in the reference state. Following a disturbance such as fire, drought, rodents or insects that remove woody vegetation, forbs and perennial grasses (herbaceous species) may dominate the community for a period of time. If a disturbance has not occurred for an extended period of time, woody species may continue to increase. These conditions would reflect natural functional community phases within the reference state.

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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 under average to above average growing conditions. There may be partial mortality on individual bunchgrasses and shrubs during drought periods and complete mortality of individual plants during severe drought periods. Slight decadence in the principle shrubs could occur near the end of the fire cycle or during periods of extended drought, or insect infestations. In general, a mix of age classes should be expected with some dead and decadent plants present.

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14. **Average percent litter cover (%) and depth (in):** Litter cover will be heavier around perennial plants. Most litter will be herbaceous and depths of 1/4 to 1/2 inch would be considered normal. Perennial vegetation should be well distributed on the site. Litter cover may increase to 25% on some years due to increased production of plants.

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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 350 - 400#/acre on an average year, but could range from 250 to 500#/acre during periods of prolonged drought or above average precipitation.

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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:** Few invasive species are capable of dominating this site. When invasion does occur, annual bromes such as cheatgrass, and various non-native annual forbs including alyssum and various mustard species are the most likely to invade.

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