

Ecological site R044AH036MT

Droughty Seeley, Swan, Flathead and Tobacco Valleys

Last updated: 9/07/2023
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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.

MLRA notes

Major Land Resource Area (MLRA): 044A–Northern Rocky Mountain Valleys

This ecological site currently resides in the Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) 44A Northern Rocky Mountain Valleys. The area of MLRA 44A is huge and is in the process of being restructured into a new MLRAs further divided into new Land Resource Units (LRU). A detailed description of MLRA 44A can be found at: https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/soils/ref/?cid=nrcs142p2_053624

LRU notes

This LRU includes the Flathead Valleys, with the predominant landscape as valleys with landforms including floodplains, stream terraces, outwash, lacustrine terraces, foothills, glacial moraines. The estimated acres are 1,412,271 and it is primarily private lands. Land use is development and agriculture. Climatically, this LRU has a cryic/frigid soil temperature regime and a xeric/udic soil moisture regime. It has a mean annual air temperature of 6, mean frost free days of 94 and mean annual precipitation of 590 and REAP of 58. Elevations range 751-1835m. Vegetation is predominantly Douglas Fir-Ponderosa Pine-Lodgepole Pine Forest and Woodland. Minor Engelmann Spruce-Subalpine Fir, open water, developed areas and agriculture. Trace Western Redcedar and Western Hemlock and Grand Fir. The geology is predominantly fluvial and bedform topography related to Cordilleran glaciation. Rock types are dominantly metasedimentary of the Belt Supergroup (Ravalli group) with some Tertiary sediments, eolian deposits, open water, Glacial lake deposits. The soils are dominantly very deep well developed soils formed in alluvium, lacustrine deposits, glacial outwash and till from metasedimentary parent materials. These tend to be well drained, neutral to moderately alkaline soils with both skeletal and non-skeletal sandy loam, loam and clay loam textures. Poorly drained soils are present as well but are generally confined to areas along riparian corridors. Volcanic ash influenced soils occur here as well, but tend to be limited to stable footslope positions marginal to the valley floor.

This is related to the EPA land classification framework of: Level 3 the Northern Rockies and includes numerous Level 4 including: Stillwater-Swan Wooded Valley, Tobacco Plains, Flathead Valley, a small part of the Western Canadian Rockies (Level 3 is Canadian Rockies) and a small part of the rattlesnake-Blackfoot-south Swan-Northern Garnet-Sapphire Mountains and the Foothill Potholes (both in the Middle Rockies Level 3 subdivision). This area is related predominantly to the USFS Provinces: Predominantly resides in the northern portion in M333Bc (Flathead River Valley), the middle portion in M333Cb (Canadian Rockies-Whitefish-Swan Mountains) and the southern portion in M332Bp (Avon-Nevada Valleys).

Classification relationships

NPS Plant Community Name:

Festuca campestris-*Festuca idahoensis*-*Geranium viscosissimum* Herbaceous Vegetation (CEGL005870)

Physiognomic Class Herbaceous Vegetation (V)

Physiognomic Subclass Perennial graminoid vegetation (V.A.)

Physiognomic Group Temperate or subpolar grassland (V.A.5.)

Physiognomic Subgroup Natural/Semi-natural temperate or subpolar grassland (V.A.5.N.)

Formation Medium-tall bunch temperate or subpolar grassland (V.A.5.N.d.)

Alliance *Festuca idahoensis* Herbaceous Alliance (A.1251)

Alliance (English name) Idaho Fescue Herbaceous Alliance

Association *Festuca campestris* - *Festuca idahoensis* - Geranium viscosissimum Herbaceous Vegetation

Association (English name) Prairie Fescue - Idaho Fescue - Sticky Geranium Herbaceous Vegetation

ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM(S): Northern Rocky Mountain Lower Montane, Foothill and Valley Grassland (CES306.040)

Festuca capestris-(*Festuca idahoensis*)-*Achnatherum richardsonii* Herbaceous Vegetation (CEGL005869)

Physiognomic Class Herbaceous Vegetation (V)

Physiognomic Subclass Perennial graminoid vegetation (V.A.)

Physiognomic Group Temperate or subpolar grassland (V.A.5.)

Physiognomic Subgroup Natural/Semi-natural temperate or subpolar grassland (V.A.5.N.)

Formation Medium-tall bunch temperate or subpolar grassland (V.A.5.N.d.)

Alliance *Festuca idahoensis* Herbaceous Alliance (A.1251)

Alliance (English name) Idaho Fescue Herbaceous Alliance

Association *Festuca campestris* - (*Festuca idahoensis*) - *Achnatherum richardsonii* Herbaceous Vegetation

Association (English name) Prairie Fescue - (Idaho Fescue) - Richardson's Needlegrass Herbaceous Vegetation

ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM(S): Northern Rocky Mountain Lower Montane, Foothill and Valley Grassland (CES306.040)

Ecological site concept

- Vegetation dominated by native, perennial, cool-season tufted bunch grasses
 - dominated by rough fescue (*Festuca campestris*) with bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*), and Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*) subdominant, with minor prairie Junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*) and needleand thread grass (*Hesperostipa comata*) and trace amounts of Columbia needlegrass (*Achnatherum nelsonii*) and Richardson's needlegrass (*Achnatherum nelsonii*)
- Site is found at low elevations, ranging from 800-1200 meters high, on very low to moderate slopes with predominantly south to southwest aspects
- Site is found on drumlin features and lateral or ground moraines in valleys. The positions on drumlins are generally summit crests. This ecological site can also occur on outwash benches, kame terraces and on side slopes on benches.
- Soils
 - moderately deep, deep or very deep
 - well drained; do not receive additional water
 - glacial till parent material
 - Surface not covered with >15% stones and/or boulders
 - Soil skeletal to within 20" of soil surface (averages > 35% rock fragments in the 10- 20" layer)
 - Soil loamy-skeletal or clayey-skeletal; not strongly or violently effervescent within surface mineral 4"
 - not saline or sodic

Associated sites

R044AH008MT	Pothole Seeley, Swan, Flathead and Tobacco Valleys The Droughty site resides on the larger landform in which the Pothole ecological site is found.
R044AH134MT	Shallow to Gravel Seeley, Swan, Flathead and Tobacco Valleys This Droughty site is associated with the even drier site conditions of the Shallow to Gravel site, which also has soils with much higher gravel content.
F044AH001MT	Montane Warm Dry Coniferous Seeley, Swan, Flathead and Tobacco Valleys This ecological site is associated with this forested ecological site on toeslope positions.
F044AH003MT	Montane Moderately Warm Dry Coniferous Seeley, Swan, Flathead and Tobacco Valleys This ecological site is associated with this forested ecological sites.
R044AH038MT	Droughty Steep Seeley, Swan, Flathead and Tobacco Valleys This ecological site is associated with this one that is on moderate to steeper slopes but similar dry site conditions.

R044AH032MT	Loamy Seeley, Swan, Flathead and Tobacco Valleys This Droughty ecological site can be associated on the same landscape type and position as the Loamy site which has moister site conditions and loamier soils.
R044AH040MT	Loamy Steep Seeley, Swan, Flathead and Tobacco Valleys This Droughty site is associated with this Loamy Steep site that resides on moderate to steep slopes and has loamier soils.

Similar sites

R044AH038MT	Droughty Steep Seeley, Swan, Flathead and Tobacco Valleys This associated site is found on adjacent steep slopes on warm, dry locations adjacent to the flatter droughty areas of this ecological site.
R044AH032MT	Loamy Seeley, Swan, Flathead and Tobacco Valleys This associated ecological site is found in slightly cooler, moister, loamy soil locations adjacent to the drier sites of this droughty ecological site.
R044AH134MT	Shallow to Gravel Seeley, Swan, Flathead and Tobacco Valleys This associated ecological site is found on much drier areas with shallow to gravels soil with drier site plant species present.

Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	Not specified
Herbaceous	(1) <i>Festuca campestris</i> (2) <i>Pseudoroegneria spicata</i>

Physiographic features

This ecological site is found at low elevations, ranging from 2624-3937 ft high, on very low to moderate slopes with predominantly south to southwest aspects on drumlin features and lateral or ground moraines in valleys. The positions on drumlins are generally summit crests. This ecological site can also occur on outwash benches, kame terraces and on side slopes on benches.



Figure 1. Landscape view of ecological site.



Figure 2. Landscape view of ecological site.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Valley > Drumlin (2) Valley > Lateral moraine (3) Valley > Ground moraine
Elevation	2,624–3,937 ft
Slope	1–14%
Aspect	SE, S, SW

Climatic features

The dissected northern Rocky Mountain Valleys are considered to have a maritime climate. Precipitation is fairly evenly distributed throughout the year with less than about 35% of the annual precipitation occurring during the growing season in Montana. Rainfall occurs as high-intensity, convective thunderstorms in the spring and fall. Most of the precipitation in the winter is snow or rain on fully or partially frozen ground. Average precipitation is 14-19 inches, and the frost-free period averages 60-110 days. The soil moisture regime is xeric and the soil temperature regime is frigid. The majority of precipitation comes early in the form of snow and spring rain. Summers are usually dry. The growing season is short and cool; primary growth typically occurs between May and July, and dominant plants are those that have adapted to these conditions. There is abundant moisture available during the cooler months and very little during the period of mid-to late summer drought conditions. For example, the months with higher precipitation averages were November to January and May to June throughout all the valleys of western Montana. Therefore, many native bunchgrasses and forbs are dormant in summer but photosynthetically active from autumn through spring.

Mean Average Precipitation Range

- 14 to 19 inches

Mean Average Annual Temperature Range

- 33 to 58° F

Frost Free Days Range:

- 60 to 110 days

Table 3. Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (characteristic range)	61-90 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	111-132 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	16-21 in
Frost-free period (actual range)	23-94 days
Freeze-free period (actual range)	93-133 days
Precipitation total (actual range)	15-22 in

Frost-free period (average)	71 days
Freeze-free period (average)	119 days
Precipitation total (average)	18 in

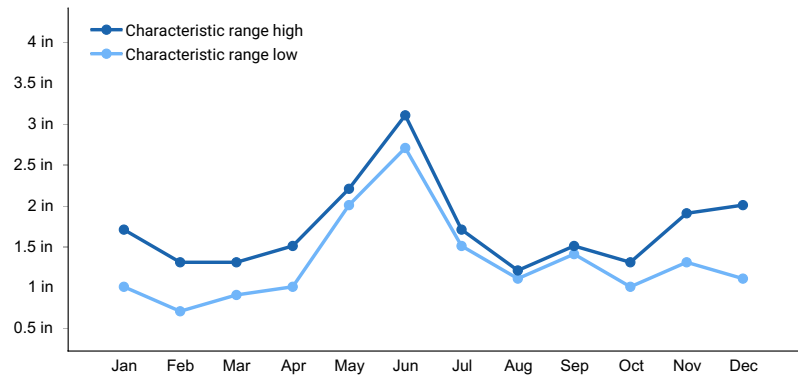


Figure 3. Monthly precipitation range

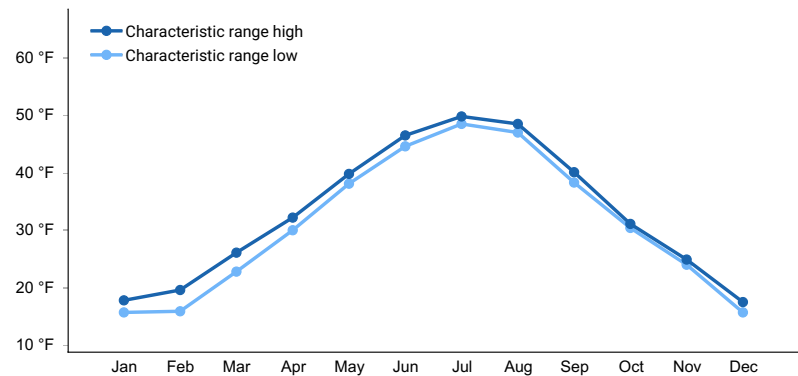


Figure 4. Monthly minimum temperature range

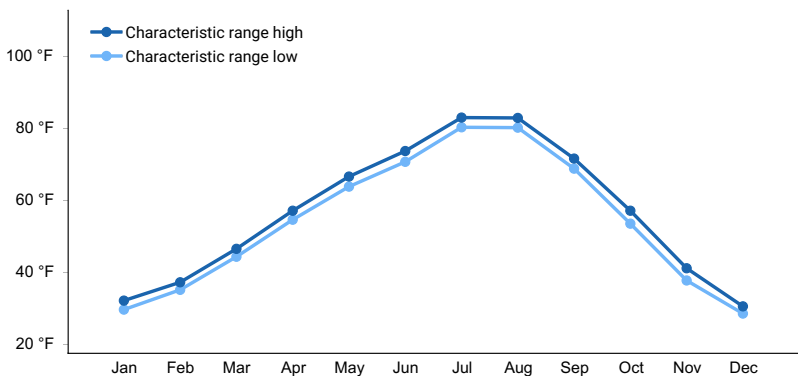


Figure 5. Monthly maximum temperature range

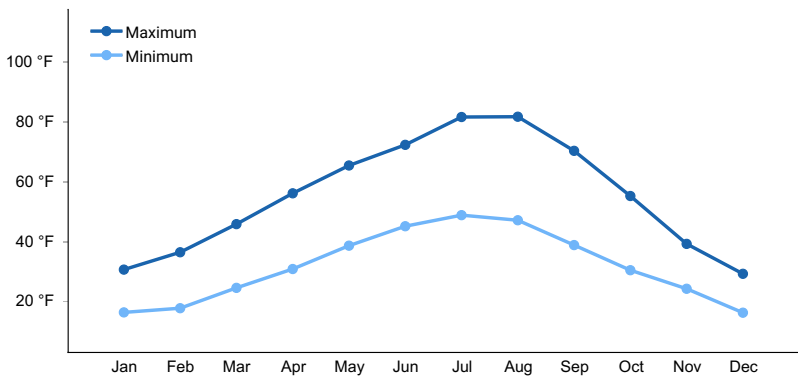


Figure 6. Monthly average minimum and maximum temperature

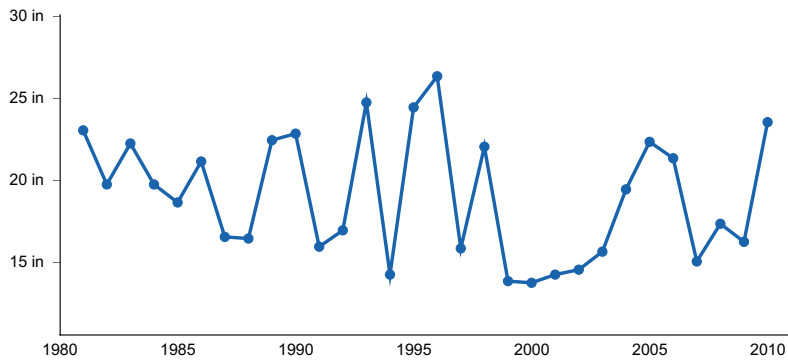


Figure 7. Annual precipitation pattern

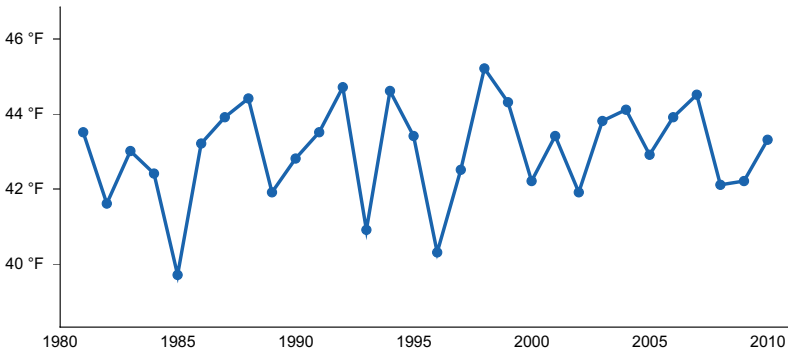


Figure 8. Annual average temperature pattern

Climate stations used

- (1) EUREKA RS [USC00242827], Eureka, MT
- (2) FORTINE 1 N [USC00243139], Eureka, MT
- (3) OLNEY [USC00246218], Whitefish, MT
- (4) WHITEFISH [USC00248902], Whitefish, MT
- (5) KALISPELL 9 NNE [USC00244560], Kalispell, MT
- (6) CRESTON [USC00242104], Kalispell, MT

Influencing water features

Soil features

This ecological site has very deep and well drained soils that are formed from glacial till parent materials. These soils typically have a gravelly loam surface texture and very gravelly to cobbly subsurface textures. These sites do not receive additional water nor have stones and/or boulders >15% of the surface area, slopes are less than 15%. They are loamy-skeletal and average more than 35% rock fragments by volume in the 10-20" layer. Classified as Calcic Argixerolls or Calcic Haploxerolls, these soils have an organic matter rich soil surface. In the subsurface they may have a thin zone of accumulated clay called an argillic horizon and a zone of calcium carbonate below that. The soils of the Droughty ecological site are typically not strongly or violently effervescent within the soil surface but will commonly have calcium carbonates at some depth within the soil profile. The abundance of rock fragments in the soil decreases the water-holding capacity of the ecological site although the lower slope gradient of these sites allows more water infiltration. Therefore, they can be productive areas- especially when irrigation management is fine-tuned to supply the root zone of the soil.

For more information on soil taxonomy, please follow this link:

http://http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/soils/survey/class/?cid=nrcs142p2_053580



Figure 9.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Till–metasedimentary rock
Surface texture	(1) Very gravelly loam
Drainage class	Well drained
Permeability class	Moderately slow to moderately rapid
Soil depth	60–100 in
Surface fragment cover <=3"	0–35%
Surface fragment cover >3"	0–15%
Available water capacity (1-4.9in)	Not specified
Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-20in)	Not specified
Electrical conductivity (0-1in)	Not specified
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-4in)	Not specified
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (6-8.4in)	Not specified

Ecological dynamics

► OVERVIEW ◀

The Droughty ecological site group is dominated by a mixture of native, perennial, cool-season tufted bunch grasses. This vegetation community is dominated by rough fescue (*Festuca campestris*) with bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*) and Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*) subdominant, and minor prairie Junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*) and needleand thread grass (*Hesperostipa comata*) and trace amounts of Columbia needlegrass (*Achnatherum nelsonii*) and Richardson’s needlegrass (*Achnatherum nelsonii*). Forb species occur frequently but in low cover, predominantly silky lupine (*Lupinus secicea*) and Erigeron species. Associated montane forbs include yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), blanketflower (*Gaillardia aristata*), timber milkvetch (*Astragalus miser*) and western stoneseed (*Lithospermum ruderales*) and the subshrub prairie sagewort (*Artemisia frigida*). Shrubs that occur incidentally and with very low cover occur, include Woods’ rose (*Rosa woodsii*) and common snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*). Conifer encroachment by ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) usually occurs along the edges of the prairie.

This grassland is considered intermediate between the Pacific Northwest Bunchgrasses in the Columbia Basin and the Mixed Prairie of the Great Plains. Representative species of both of these vegetation communities occur. The rough fescue community is where the climate shifts from the Columbia Basin with lower summer but greater winter

precipitation to the Great Plains with higher summer but lower winter precipitation. Pothole sites can have highly productive grassland due to the soils and climate of the area.

The vegetation community associated with this ecological site is a mix of rough fescue, bluebunch wheatgrass and Idaho fescue. The latter two bunchgrasses are more drought tolerant than rough fescue, which is found on wetter sites. The rough fescue-bluebunch wheatgrass-Idaho fescue vegetation community can be encroached upon by woody shrubs and trees, particularly ponderosa pine. Periodic fire from a frequent fire regime, which occurs approximately every 9 to 30 years, curbs this woody encroachment. Furthermore, this drier vegetation community resides at a transition zone in which the low annual precipitation and periodic summer drought cause soils to seasonally dry out to a depth of 50 cm. This is too deep for the establishment of conifer trees, even the drought tolerant ponderosa pine. Generally, grasslands prevail over coniferous forests when precipitation is at or below 15 inches. Ponderosa pine has a competitive advantage over other coniferous species in its ability to rapidly elongate the root system in an environment of high moisture deficiency, but a period of low rainfall and high evapotranspiration during the hottest months prevents the establishment of full forests (Daubenmire, 1968).

The Droughty ecological site group keys out to and is described by the Mueggler classification system (1980) as the rough fescue/bluebunch wheatgrass/needle-and-thread phase habitat type which is dominated by rough fescue but with large quantities of bluebunch wheatgrass, Idaho fescue, needle and thread with diverse forbs including arrowleaf balsamroot, Wyoming besseya, stiff yellow indian paintbrush and nineleaf biscuitroot. This is a drier habitat type than the rough fescue-Idaho fescue type and more diverse in grass and forb species. This is the most productive community within the bluebunch types with average annual productivity ranging 890 to 1201 pounds per acre. Grasses dominate the total biomass (65-90%), followed by forbs (10-25%) and shrubs (5%). In reaction to overgrazing, rough fescue may decrease while prairie sagewort, rosy pussytoes, field chickweed, hairy false goldenaster increase.

► FIRE REGIME ◀

These grasslands are adapted to a frequent fire regime that inhibits the encroachment of woody shrubs and trees. Historically, the fires occur every 9 to 30 years; however, the exact historic frequency is difficult to determine. Fires were generally from lightning strikes during the hot mid-to-late summer months. The bunchgrasses and perennial forbs of this vegetation community are tolerant of fire, due to their ability to resprout from underground roots and tubers. In general, the bunchgrasses and native perennial forbs complete their life cycles by the onset of summer drought and enter a dormant state (also known as aestivation) which coincides with the fire season. These fires are less harmful because the plants are dormant. Fire is essential to this community as it prevents woody invasion and prevents the heavy accumulation of litter that suppresses biodiversity. Rough fescue is adapted to periodic burning by their growth form of dense, tufted bunch that insulates perennating buds located near the ground surface. It recovers from fire by tillering, sprouting from residual plants and from on-site and off-site wind-dispersed seed. Rough fescue is initially top-killed, but then recovers to pre-fire coverage usually in 2-3 years. There may be reductions in plant vigor following fires in the growing season more so than in dormant season burns. When fire suppression has occurred, rough fescue accumulates heavy litter within large diameter crowns. Survival may be severely inhibited as crowns tend to continue to burn long after the passage of the flame front. If a fire occurs during the growing season and there is heavy litter accumulation, the fire effects can be severe. Spring burns can reduce seed production in rough fescue although fall burns have no effect. Fall burns may have reduced fire effects from elevated soil moisture, but may increase the chance of wind or water erosion, leaving rough fescue more susceptible to frost damage. Fires are most damaging when native bunchgrasses are actively growing in late fall, winter and early spring.

► SPECIES DESCRIPTIONS OF DOMINANT GRASSES ◀

► ROUGH FESCUE ◀

Rough fescue is a native, cool-season, perennial bunchgrass that produces thick mats of persistent sheath, stem bases, culms that grow to 3.5 feet, and leaf tufts that grow to 16 inches in height (Cronquist, 1977). It has extensive fibrous roots to a depth of 4 feet, 73 percent of which are concentrated in the top 6 inches of soil (Coupland, 1953). Rough fescue regenerates from seed, tillers, and sometimes creeping rhizomes (Pavlick, 1984). It is well adapted to a short growing season by initiating growth following snowmelt, and completes growth before the onset of summer drought and can have fall regrowth. It is very productive and highly palatable to livestock and wildlife. Rough fescue is used by bighorn sheep, mule deer, elk, and bison (Lesica and Cooper, 1997). Rough fescue is highly palatable forage. It is prime winter forage: plants cure well on the stalk and retain high nutrient levels during

dormancy. It is resistant to moderate grazing, but heavy grazing can result in severely decreased root depth and biomass (Aiken, 1990). Grazing can cause a general decline in rough fescue coverage, and it is one of the first species to decline followed by an increase of Idaho fescue, other needlegrass species, prairie Junegrass, prairie junegrass and Parry's oatgrass (Mueggler, 1980). Rough fescue is considered resistant to human trampling due to its tough core, according to D. Cole of the USFS in his study of recreational human trampling effects on habitat types in western Montana. The majority of the loss of cover, a reduction of 50 percent, occurred in the first 400 passes. Thereafter, cover loss was stabilized from 400-800 passes. The community of rough fescue-timber oatgrass is considered very resistant to both light and heavy trampling (Cole, 1987).

Rough fescue is well adapted to periodic burning and resistant to light severity fire because of their dense, tufted habit. It sprouts from surviving residual plants and colonizes from off-site wind-dispersed seed. Fire may top-kill plants, but normal cover and production usually is attained in 2-3 years post-fire. Severe damage can occur by hot, mid-summer wildfires (Wright, 1982).

► BLUEBUNCH WHEATGRASS ◀

Bluebunch wheatgrass is a native, cool-season, perennial grass that is densely tufted and is among the most drought-resistant native bunchgrasses. It is capable of tightly regulating its water loss, which helps it survive under a range of moisture conditions. It thrives best in the 14-17 inch precipitation zone in the Intermountain West, but can be found as low as the 10 inch precipitation zone. It requires excellent drainage and mostly full sun. It is considered one of the most important forage grasses for both livestock and wildlife, although it is not necessarily the most highly preferred species. It is also nutritionally sufficient for some animals, but only for part of the year. It is moderately grazing tolerant only during its non-growing season and sensitive to defoliation during active growth. It is susceptible to competition from weedy invasives including diffuse and spotted knapweed, crested and desert wheatgrass. Bluebunch wheatgrass survives fires because its buds are protected by soil and/or plant foliage. It can be top-killed, which does not usually result in plant mortality. Burning stimulates flowering and seed setting. The timing of burning affects mortality in that more are killed in spring growing season and less in summer dormancy. Recovery post fire usually requires one to three years, with availability of soil moisture as an important factor determining time.

► IDAHO FESCUE ◀

Idaho fescue is a long-lived native perennial cool-season bunchgrass. It is densely tufted with fine leaves. The root system is strong and can extend 16 inches deep (Hanson, 1959). In well drained soils, the root biomass is greatest at depths of 2-4 cm. Reproduction is from seeds and tillers, although seed production is variable (Stubbendieck, 1992). Idaho fescue is found in wetter grasslands and is considered a climax species. It can survive fires of light severity, but usually is harmed by more severe fires (Smith, 1981). Rapid tillering of Idaho fescue occurs where root crowns are not suppressed and soil moisture is favorable. Plants may re-establish from seed after fire if the burn temperatures are low enough to allow for survival of seed in the soil. Idaho fescue can decrease with heavy grazing or severe fire and be succeeded by native and non-native increaser species including bluegrass and needlegrass grass species, sagebrush, lupine, phlox, and the invasive timothy (*Phleum pratense*) (Eckert, 1987). Idaho fescue is an important forage species for livestock (cattle, sheep, and horses) and wildlife species including elk and mule deer (Mueggler, 1980). It is particularly important in elk diets throughout the Rocky Mountain region. Furthermore, Hansen et al. (1995) found that Idaho fescue is good forage for cattle, horse, and sheep: it has high energy value and medium protein values in the fall and winter.

► PRAIRIE JUNEGRASS ◀

Prairie junegrass is a cool season perennial bunchgrass that is loosely-tufted, shallow-rooted and of small stature with long, mostly basal leaves. The leaves are drought resistant and persist under dry conditions. The roots are moderately long, 13-30 inches with the greatest root density in the upper 1.2 inches, and begin to decrease after 12 inches. Regeneration is from seed, which ripens late summer to fall and by sprouting from residual plants. It develops rapidly in early spring, flowers in Montana from May to July, and it avoids growth in driest summer months. Prairie junegrass occurs in numerous prairie and grassland habitats, at least in a small percentage. Preferred sites are cool, semi-arid or xeric infertile grasslands and rock outcrops with annual precipitation range from 16 to 21 inches. Livestock and several wildlife species utilize it as it provides good, early spring forage. Due to its scattered distribution, however, it is not a significant role in most wildlife species. Prairie junegrass sustains little to moderate damage from fire due to its small clump size and coarsely textured foliage and perennating buds near or below the soil surface which are insulated against fast moving fires. Damage is dependent on fire severity, physiological state of plant, soil moisture and season of burn. Survival strategy is through seed germination and residual plant survival.

► NEEDLE AND THREAD ◀

Needle and thread grass is a cool-season, native, perennial bunchgrass that is moderately to highly drought resistant and recovers well from drought. It has small and widely spaced bunches that are shallow to medium-rooted and produce numerous fibrous roots. It reproduces by seed, which are long-lived, and tillers. It is common on dry hills and plains and on stony and sandy soils with slightly high pH, low water holding capacity, low clay percentage and high bulk density. In Montana, it grows best in the 10-18 inch precipitation zone. It is generally considered early or mid-seral species. It begins growth in spring and becomes dormant during hot weather. It can be important to livestock and wildlife, in Montana cattle, mule deer and pronghorn, especially in early spring. In summer, the fruit has a sharp awn that may injure grazing animals. It is considered severely damaged by fire, depending on the severity of fire. After fire, needle and thread grass sprouts from the caudex, if heat has not been sufficient to kill the underground plant parts. It recovers in 2-10 years from fire.

► COLUMBIA NEEDLEGRASS ◄

Columbia needlegrass is a native, cool-season, perennial bunchgrass that grows in dense, leafy tufts and is long-lived and drought tolerant, with slow to moderate seedling growth rate and medium herbage volume, with deep and fibrous roots. Columbia needlegrass reproduces by seed and tillers. Columbia needlegrass has a sharp pointed callus (a hard projection at the base of a floret, spikelet, or inflorescence segment) which aids in dispersal but causes it to be avoided for forage, which promotes stand replenishment. In Montana, it is good forage for cattle, horses and mule deer. Columbia needlegrass prefers well-drained, fine-textured soils with clay loam to sandy loam surface texture and has low fertility requirements and good heat tolerance, can grow on shallows soils, moderately tolerant of salinity, and can grow on dry, rocky infertile sites. Columbia needlegrass grows on a wide variety of middle and upper elevation sites. Columbia needlegrass begins growth during the early spring is most seriously injured by midsummer fires and less by late spring or fall burns. It is among the least fire resistant bunchgrasses due to its densely tufted stems but because it has relatively few culms per clump, it ranges only slightly to moderately damaged by fire.

► RICHARDSON'S NEEDLEGRASS ◄

Richardson's needlegrass is a native perennial cool-season bunchgrass with fine stems. It is shallow-rooted and clay accumulation can restrict roots (Lackschewitz, 1991). Richardson's needlegrass becomes dormant following the depletion of surface soil moisture during the latter part of the growing season (Nimlos, 1968). It reproduces by seed and is wind- and animal-dispersed (Tyser, 1990). Richardson's needlegrass is considered a climax codominant species, meaning that while it is found in the climax community, it is usually co-dominant with rough fescue (Koterba, 1971). In general, perennial needlegrasses are among the least fire-resistant of the bunchgrasses, especially with midsummer burns: the accumulated dead culm and leaves makes them more susceptible to burning. Perennial needlegrasses often survive low-intensity fires as the heat is not transferred below the soil surface, only top-killing plants (Wright, 1965). Richardson's needlegrass is an important forage species for livestock and wildlife especially deer, bighorn sheep, and elk.

► EFFECTS OF LAND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES ON ECOLOGICAL DYNAMICS AND INVASIVE SPECIES ◄

The threats to rough fescue-bluebunch wheatgrass-Idaho fescue grasslands include habitat fragmentation, habitat degradation, improper livestock grazing, alteration of fire regime, and herbicide drift (Hill and Gray, 2004). First, habitat fragmentation is the creation of smaller of vegetation from larger ecosystems and is caused by development, roads, agriculture, and other human activities. Creating small patches of vegetation limit pollinators associated with plant species and genetic mobility of species with inbreeding depression and other genetic pressures associated with small population size. Secondly, habitat degradation is a decline in habitat that alters the structure, function, and composition of the habitat. Next, improper livestock grazing can cause changes to plant community through preferential grazing of certain species as well as changes to soil and hydrology function. A grazing induced change in vegetation community structure away from native bunchgrasses that have high canopy cover and lower bare soil cover can increase soil erosion. Trampling of vegetation by livestock can also reduce plant vigor. Livestock can introduce non-native species into the native community. Furthermore, variation in fire regimes from historical occurrence can cause vegetation community dynamics to change, particularly when fires occur in different season than was common under the historic frequency. Fire suppression can cause potentially devastating and severe fires due to litter accumulation after longer time between fires. Suppression can also allow for the encroachment of woody shrub and tree species. An increase in fire cycles can also be detrimental to bluebunch wheatgrass-Idaho fescue grasslands by reducing the post-fire recovery time and native plants may be vulnerable to competition from invasives. Additionally, fires that are out of season to historic fire cycles can cause higher mortality if occurring during the growing season. Lastly, herbicide drift from adjoining agricultural lands to rough fescue grasslands can negatively impact the vegetation community of bunchgrasses and perennial forbs with

lower vigor or mortality.

The invasion of weedy species is another concern for this ecological site group. Weedy species degrade native habitat by altering its structure, composition and function and often outcompete and displace native plant communities. Weedy invasions reduce canopy cover of large perennial plants and increase the cover of bare ground. Bare ground can increase soil erosion, which results in changes to soil structure and chemical composition. Weedy species can also change ecological processes of the native community such as productivity, soil water, nutrient dynamics, community successional patterns and disturbance cycles. Resistance and resilience of the native community are essential elements in predicting the success of the invasion. Invasion of weedy species into native vegetation communities requires an understanding of the processes and mechanisms by which an invasion occurs. There are two counter point theories as to how invasive species invade, namely the driver theory and the passenger model. The driver theory considers the invasive species to be driving native species decline while the passenger model sees the invading species as filling in empty niches left by habitat alteration (Didham, 2005). The passenger model suggests that disturbance is the cause and if stopped, invasion can be reversed. Potential mechanisms of invasion include theories such as novel weapons, enemy release, competitive superiority, and environmental engineering. First, novel weapons include biological weapons or associations with micro-organisms that allow the invader species to either access new resources or steal them from indigenous plants (Tannas, 2011). Specifically, arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi may provide a substantial competitive advantage to spotted knapweed by carbon parasitism (Carey, 2004). In these cases, the invader uses these weapons to drive the invasion process. Secondly, enemy release describes the concept that once invader species are released from their native predator species within their original community, they are more aggressive in their new community (Blumenthal 2006, Callaway and Aschelhoug 2000). The invader species may have characteristics that allow it to be more competitive than resident plant species such as grazing resistance, adaption to a harsh environment or another competitive ability (Tannas, 2011). Third, invasive species may engineer the environment to their advantage through resource competition. Mechanisms include modifying light interception, increasing water uptake efficiency, changing the soil water holding capacity, and altering nutrient uptake and cycling (D'Antonio and Vitousek, 1992). The final outcome of invasion is establishment of the invading species which occurs as either dominance, coexistence, or exclusion from the indigenous plant community (Seabloom, 2003). D'Antonio and Vitousek (1992) stated grass invasions are of particular concern because they are actively moved by humans, exotic grasses compete effectively with native species, invasives may change nutrient cycling, modify regional microclimates and they may alter fire dynamics.

► INVASIVE SPECIES DESCRIPTIONS ◄

Scientific literature on invasions by Kentucky bluegrass, spotted knapweed, leafy spurge, and sulphur cinquefoil into rough fescue grasslands in Canada and Montana will be reviewed. Species in bold are on the Montana State listed Noxious Weeds List (Montana Department of Agriculture, 2003): spotted knapweed (*Centaurea stoebe*), leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula*), and Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*).

► KENTUCKY BLUEGRASS ◄

Kentucky bluegrass invasion into rough fescue grasslands can take multiple pathways. Heavy grazing of rough fescue which reduces litter amount combined with timing of defoliation, winter versus growing season and abiotic factors like seasonal variation in soil moisture content can make native grasslands less resistant to invasion (Douwes, 2012, Tannas, 2012). Resilience of the native grassland is dependent on vigor and density of rough fescue and restoration establishment is more successful with cuttings and plugs than seedings (Tannas, 2011). However, seeding rough fescue as a monoculture can be effective (Sherritt, 2012). A study of grazing effects on rough fescue at Stavely grassland found that heavy grazing pressure by cattle led to more resistance to grazing, but at the cost of increased shallow rooted species and less overall production (Dormaar, 1990). In a study of seasonal biomass changes, Willms (1996) found that vegetation community composition shifted from one dominated by rough fescue to one dominated by parry oatgrass-Kentucky bluegrass in moderately grazed pastures and to Kentucky bluegrass-sedge species in heavily grazed pastures. This is due to the ability of Kentucky bluegrass to tolerate grazing and affinity to increase in abundance after heavy grazing. Therefore, Kentucky bluegrass resides in historically grazed areas. The rough fescue dominated community had the greatest forage value compared to communities resulting from moderate and severe grazing (Willms, 1996). In a similar study, more than 20 years of reduced stocking rates were required to enable recovery (Willms, 1985). Soils associated with heavy grazing tend to resemble soils more characteristic of a drier climate due to a thinner Ah horizon, reduced organic matter and soil moisture, and increased soil temperature (Johnston, 1962 and 1971). Heavy grazing has also been shown to reduce soil fertility and water holding capacity (Dormaar, 1998), and nutrient cycling may differ between grazed and ungrazed rough fescue grasslands (Willms, 1988). At a watershed scale, heavy grazing may lead to larger summer storm and spring snow melt runoff compared to watersheds with less grazing (Chanasyk, 2002). However, the quantity and quality of surface runoff from these watersheds shows that grazing likely poses

little risk of nutrient contamination to adjacent streams (Mapfumo, 2002).

A study on the effects of grazing on germinable seeds found that soil disturbance in a fescue grassland is more likely to lead to a vegetation community dominated by annual broad-leaved plants than a rough fescue dominated grassland (Willms, 1995). Moreover, skim grazing (light, once-over-spring defoliation) by cattle was not conducive to rough fescue conservation (Moisey, 2005). Rough fescue will tolerate light winter-early spring elk grazing but not heavy grazing (Thrift, 2013). For instance, a rough fescue grassland in Rumsey Block, Alberta Canada exposed to moderate grazing resulted in an increase in shortbristle needle and thread, while heavy grazing disturbance crossed a threshold requiring complete eradication of species and reseeding (Desserd, 2014). A study of the effects of human caused disturbance in rough fescue grasslands in Manitoba Canada found that the vegetative response depends on invasive species introduction history (Gifford, 2013). Kentucky bluegrass tolerates grazing and can increase in abundance after heavy grazing. Therefore, Kentucky bluegrass resides in historically grazed areas.

► SPOTTED KNAPWEED ◄

The noxious weed spotted knapweed has been found to strongly reduce the overall biomass and reproduction of native Idaho fescue grasslands. Certain insect biocontrol agents have had little effect on spotted knapweed, while a native fungal pathogen has been shown to be effective in a common garden experiment in Missoula, Montana (Ridenour, 2003). Spotted knapweed may use potent plant toxins, such as catechin, to facilitate grassland invasions (Perry, 2005). Catechin resistance has been shown to increase with increasing seed weight for eight species identified as catechin resistant: Mountain brome, curlycup gumweed, needle and thread grass, basin wildrye, cicer milkvetch, boreal sweetvetch, common blanketflower, and alfalfa. Perry (2005) further found that residual soil catechin may interfere with the reestablishment of native grassland species even after spotted knapweed populations were controlled. Steinger (1992) studied the effects of two biological control insects, a moth and a weevil, on spotted knapweed. Furthermore, they tested if differences in nitrogen levels and grass competition affected the outcome of herbivory. Spotted knapweed responded to the root herbivory by compensatory root growth and therefore lower shoot growth. This was especially prevalent in low nitrogen levels with herbivory by the weevil in which shoot growth was reduced 60%. The weevil caused changes in the shoot to root allocation of spotted knapweed in response to its herbivory, shoots decreased but not roots, as well as more nitrogen concentration in roots than in shoots. Compensatory allocation to roots with herbivory was observed. Competition with grass resulted in lower shoot and root growth and smaller leaves. This competition was more detrimental to plant growth than herbivory or nutrient supply. Lower nitrogen affected spotted knapweed's ability to compensate for root herbivory with additional root growth. There was greater reduction in spotted knapweed with herbivory and reduced nitrogen availability. Root herbivory greatly affected the physiology of spotted knapweed with greater allocation of nitrogen and energy to the roots and less to shoots.

► LEAFY SPURGE ◄

Leafy spurge has a number of traits that make it an especially effective invader. For one, leafy spurge has an extensive rhizomatous root system that can reach depths up to 30 feet in order to access water not available to many native plants. Furthermore, leafy spurge has potential allelopathic properties and most of its tissues contain a sticky latex which seals wounds and deters against insect attacks. Patches of leafy spurge that have been treated with herbicide application and mechanical removal have shown higher bare ground area, significantly lower soil arthropod densities and lower plant species richness and cover (Pritekel, 2006). Jordan (2008) found that invasive plants, such as leafy spurge are capable of modifying soil microbiota to facilitate further invasion by conspecifics and other invasive species. These alterations to soil biota have the potential to impede restoration of native communities after removal of an invasive species, and successional management may require repeated treatments to achieve a desired outcome.

Use of biological control agents on leafy spurge have been successful in Montana although the recovery of the native vegetation community has been mixed. Lesica (2004) found in a study of black fleas controlling leafy spurge that the response of the weed and the native vegetation community depended on abiotic factors and previous herbicide use. In all areas, the black fleas resulted in a decrease of aboveground leafy spurge biomass, with variations in the size of reduction areas and the proportion of vegetative to flowering stems. Areas with poorer soils had greater reductions than areas with healthier soils. When areas with healthy soils and previous herbicide use were treated with black fleas, produced less leafy spurge flowering stems and the recovery of species diversity slowed compared to control areas. The opposite effect was found in areas with poor soils and no previous herbicide use, with more flowering stems produced by leafy spurge and an increase in species diversity as compared to control plots. Butler (2006) found that the release of black flea beetles significantly reduced the foliar cover of leafy spurge in a study in northwestern Dakota and southeastern Montana. Grass and grass-like plant cover increased but forb cover did not reach the non-invaded levels. In another study in southeastern Montana, Butler (2010) found that the native vegetation did not recover to the extent assumed possible. While leafy spurge foliar cover was

significantly reduced with the use of the black flea beetle, non-native *Poa* species became dominant while the native species did not recover completely. Butler (2010) also found that black flea beetles released in western Montana resulted in reductions of leafy spurge, but the native vegetation community did not regain its diversity compared to areas that were non-infested. The infestations of leafy spurge had been significantly reduced but Kentucky bluegrass replaced leafy spurge in dominance. Functional groups that were able to persist during the leafy spurge invasion continued to be present after it was reduced. This has been theorized by Carson (2008) as the associated species factor, which seeks to explain why native vegetation does not fully recover after invasive species have been controlled. The co-occurring non-native species, such as Kentucky bluegrass, quickly invade the area previously occupied by the initial invasive weed species.

Butler (2006) found that in southwestern Montana, released black and brown flea beetles differed in their ability to quickly establish and reach their maximum population size within two years. The black flea beetles outcompeted the brown flea beetles. The cover of leafy spurge was significantly reduced. Concomitant with the reduction in leafy spurge, grass and grass-like species increased cover while forb species did not reach the non-infested area cover. Livestock tend to avoid high stem density leafy spurge infestations. Therefore, once stem densities were reduced, livestock grazed the area and remaining grass species, which caused a slight decline in cover. Forb cover did not achieve non-infested area covers even after leafy spurge cover was reduced. Leafy spurge has a strong filtering effect on the resident vegetation community and forbs are more heavily impacted than graminoid species. Butler (2004) evaluated vegetation communities in Theodore Roosevelt National Park in southwestern North Dakota and found that species richness on infested plots were significantly lower than on control plots throughout the eleven vegetation communities sampled.

Carson (2008) described factors that could cause a biological control agent released onto infestations to fail to recover the native vegetation community as direct effects of the invasive plant, namely: native source limitations, novel weapons, static competitive hierarchy; or indirect effects of the invasive plant such as: trophic shifts and invasive engineering. Native source limitations refer to the inability of the native species to effectively reproduce to outcompete the invasive species. For example, numerous invasive species produce large quantities of seed, and store long-term seedbanks in the soil by creating monocultures. Novel weapons are generally plant toxins secreted by some invasive species that facilitate invasion and persistence to the detriment of the native vegetation and its soil microbial community. Static competitive hierarchy refers to an invasive species that is a superior competitor for resources compared to native species. In the indirect effects factor of trophic shifts, the invasive plant changes the food web relationships within an ecosystem to the disadvantage of the native community. Trophic levels include predators, parasitoids, mutualists, pathogens and herbivores. The relationship between soil microbiota and plants is host specific, therefore a monoculture of an invasive species can change the soil microbiota even after it has been reduced aboveground. This change in microbiota can make it difficult for native species to re-establish in the area. As well, a dominant invasive species may become preferential food for native pollinators, thereby lowering their use of native species. Likewise, an invasive species may change the pollinator species composition. Lastly, invasive species can "engineer the environment. In invasive engineering theory, the invasive species change the physical environment to such a degree that the native species cannot recover even after reduction of the invasive species. This can occur in wetlands in which the invasive species have changed the hydrology. Therefore, a manipulation of the hydrology must occur as well as the reduction or elimination of the invasive species for the native community to recover.

► SULPHUR CINQUEFOIL ◀

Sulphur cinquefoil (*Potentilla recta*) has highly adaptive and is found in numerous forested and non-forested vegetation communities in Montana. Sulphur cinquefoil flourishes in Montana's semiarid climate in areas similar to those inhabited by spotted knapweed. Sulphur cinquefoil is native to southeastern Europe and southwestern Asia. It is a perennial forb with a short stem attached to a woody taproot. It is non-rhizomatous and does not form monospecific stands; however, it can be dense. Sulphur cinquefoil reproduces by seed and by sprouting from a caudex. Cross pollination by wind or insects is the most common means of fertilization but some seeds are produced by self-pollination. Sulphur cinquefoil is most common in disturbed areas but can invade relatively undisturbed sites and is generally more abundant on drier sites with less total grass cover. Sulphur cinquefoil is also intolerant of complete shade. Sulphur cinquefoil likely resprouts following fire and establishes from on-site or off-site seed. Survival of plant parts depends on depth of burial and fire severity as perennating buds in the caudex can survive fire if not exposed to lethal temperatures. Fall or spring fire did not have a long term impact on sulphur cinquefoil at Dancing Prairie in northwestern Montana. Although it did not result in mortality of large plants, fire did reduce the density of small plants immediately after burning for one year and enhanced germination. However, the seedling survival depended on sufficient moisture. The Dancing Prairie is dominated by C3 plants and dormant season and late fall burns are more likely to harm nonnative, invasive plant populations without damaging native species, while late-spring and early-fall burns are more detrimental to native species.

► STATE 1 SECTION ◀

State Number: 1

State Name: Taller Bunchgrass State

State Narrative:

This state is characterized by cool-season bunchgrasses and is represented by two communities that differ mainly in the percent composition rough fescue and Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*) and bluebunch wheatgrass. Shrubs and forbs are a minor component in this state.

Community Phase 1.1

Community Phase Name: Reference Plant Community–Taller Bunchgrass Community

Community Phase Narrative:

The Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) is dominated by rough fescue with Idaho fescue and bluebunch wheatgrass subdominant, and minor amounts of needle and thread grass, prairie junegrass and Idaho fescue, with a minor component of forbs and low-growing shrubs. Rough fescue and bluebunch wheatgrass are typically the dominant producers in the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1), while Idaho fescue is subdominant. Forb species occur frequently but in low cover, predominantly silky lupine (*Lupinus sericeus*) and erigeron species. Associated montane forbs include common yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), blanketflower (*Gaillardia aristata*), timber milkvetch (*Astragalus miser*), twin arnica (*Arnica sororia*), pointedtip mariposa lily (*Calochortus apiculatus*), stiff yellow Indian paintbrush (*Castilleja lutescens*), western stonecrop (*Lithospermum ruderale*); and the subshrubs rosy pussytoes (*Antennaria rosea*) and prairie sagebrush (*Artemisia frigida*). Other forbs that occur incidentally include: hairy false goldenaster (*Heterotheca villosa*), northern bedstraw (*Galium boreale*), old man's whiskers (*Geum triflorum*), largeflower triteleia (*Triteleia grandiflora*), and bluebell bellflower (*Campanula rotundifolia*). Shrubs that occur incidentally and with very low cover occur, include Woods' rose (*Rosa woodsii*) and common snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*). This is generally a productive site, with both rough fescue and bluebunch wheatgrass as main producers. Total production is high, averaging 1000-2700 pounds per acre and generally has grass as 85% of the composition, 10% forbs and 5% shrubs. Specifically, at Tobacco Valley Montana, on 5 sample sites, grass species had 73% of production, forbs 27%. Bluebunch wheatgrass dominated with 41% composition, rough fescue had 17% and all other grass species had less than 10%. This is thought to be atypical as rough fescue usually has high species composition. At only one site did rough fescue dominate compared to bluebunch wheatgrass.

This community generally occurs where proper grazing management practices have been implemented over a long period, which provides adequate growing-season deferment to allow establishment of taller grass propagules and recovery of vigor in stressed plants. This community is generally resistant to change with proper grazing management and near normal precipitation. However, rough fescue and bluebunch wheatgrass lack resistance to grazing during the spring growing season. Subdominant species, such as Idaho fescue and needleandthread, tolerate higher grazing pressure and may increase in cover under prolonged drought conditions. This increase drives the community shift to the Mixed Bunchgrass Plant Community (1.2). It is also moderately resilient, as it will return to dynamic equilibrium (1.2A) following a relatively short period of stress, such as drought or short-term overgrazing, provided the return of favorable or normal growing conditions occurs along with implementation of proper grazing management. This equilibrium will occur if canopy cover did not fall below 50%, and rough fescue did not fall below 10% of species composition.

Rough fescue and bluebunch wheatgrass lack resistance to grazing during the critical growing period of spring. These bunchgrass species may decline in vigor and production if grazing in the spring more than one year in three (Mengli et al. 2005, McLean and Wikeem 1985, Wilson et al 1960).

Periodic fire increases the resilience of the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) by reducing competition and canopy cover of less fire-tolerant species. Fire also removes decedent herbaceous material, particularly from taller bunchgrasses, which promotes increased vigor and seedling establishment. Timing and intensity of a fire are critical components that can have varying positive or negative effects on this plant community. Fire does increase risk of invasion from invasive species, most notably cheatgrass. At least two growing seasons of rest are recommended to allow for plants to recover after fire.

Increaser species on this site are generally endemic species released by disturbance. These subdominant species of grasses, forbs, and shrubs are more tolerant to grazing pressure than rough fescue and bluebunch wheatgrass. Improper grazing management can reduce plant vigor of rough fescue, which can lead to reduced plant size or plant

death. Species with higher grazing tolerance will increase in production as they use resources made available by the decrease in rough fescue. Improper grazing management can also lead to degraded soil properties through compaction, erosion, decrease in organic matter, and increase in exposure because of reduction in litter cover. Idaho fescue is not only more tolerant to higher grazing pressure but can also grow on less fertile soils than rough fescue (USDA/NRCS 2007).

Under improper grazing management, the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) shifts to the Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2). If overgrazing continues, invasive grass and forb species can move into the plant community and the site can transition to the Invaded State (3).

While the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) is resilient to degradation under proper management, the community remains at risk of invasion by aggressive non-native species because of the ability of spotted knapweed, leafy spurge, and cheatgrass to invade healthy rangelands and the widespread presence of propagules. Healthy plant communities are most resilient to invasives although many examples exist of well-managed areas that have been invaded by spotted knapweed. Due to the ability of spotted knapweed and other aggressive species to invade any community, all communities, including the Reference Plant Community (1.1) are “at risk communities” to cross the threshold to the Invaded State (3).

Invasives impact plant communities even if the site does not yet have critical populations of invasives. Almost all reference sites had at least trace amounts of spotted knapweed and/or cheatgrass. It is believed that most sites with only trace amounts have been chemically treated for invasives at some point. These treatments would have impacted other broad-leaved species (forbs and shrubs). It is likely that this site had more potential for forb and shrub production than found on current reference sites.

Rock cover on the soil surface is minimal and does impact productivity of this site. Plant basal cover is expected to be about 20 to 30%, and bare ground is expected to be < 10%. The soils of this site have high soil stability values. There should be no signs of current erosion occurring on the site.

Community Phase Number: 1.2

Community Phase Name: Mixed Bunchgrass Community

Community Phase Narrative:

Idaho fescue tolerates grazing pressure better than rough fescue. Therefore, it increases in species composition when more palatable and less grazing tolerant plants decrease because of improper grazing management. Idaho fescue and rough fescue share dominance in the Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2). Bluebunch wheatgrass is subdominant. Other subdominant grass species that are more tolerant to grazing are likely to increase include Sandberg bluegrass (*Poa secunda*) needleandthread (*Hesperostipa comata*), prairie junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*) and Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*). Some increaser forbs species may include silky lupine (*Lupinus sericeus*), field chickweed (*Cerastium arvense*), ballhead sandwort (*Arenaria congesta*), northern bedstraw (*Galium boreale*) and pussytoes (*Antennaria* spp.). Fringed sagewort, Woods' rose (*Rosa woodsii*) and common snowberry (*Symphoricarpus albus*) are shrubs that also increase under prolonged drought or heavy grazing.

Heavy continuous grazing will reduce plant cover, litter, and mulch. Bare ground will increase and expose the soil to erosion. Litter and mulch will move off-site as plant cover declines. As long as the canopy cover remains > 50% and production of rough fescue is > 10% of total biomass production, the site can return to the Taller Bunchgrass Community (Pathway 1.2A) under proper grazing management and favorable growing conditions.

Idaho fescue will continue to increase in dominance until it makes up 80% or more of species composition. Once rough fescue has been reduced on the site to < 10% and canopy cover decreased to below 50%, it may be difficult for the site to recover to the Reference Plant Community (1.1). The risk of soil erosion increases when canopy cover decreases to below 50%. As soil properties degrade, there will be loss of organic matter, reduced litter, compaction, and reduced soil fertility. Degraded soil properties increase the difficulty of reestablishing bluebunch wheatgrass plants and returning to the Reference Plant Community (1.1).

The Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) is the “At-Risk” Plant Community for this ecological site. When overgrazing continues, increaser species such as Idaho fescue, needleandthread and native forb species will become more dominant and this triggers the change to the Altered Bunchgrass State (2) or the Invaded State (3). Until the Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) crosses the threshold into the Idaho Fescue Community (2.1) or the Invaded Community (3.1), this community can be managed toward the Rough Fescue Community (1.1) using prescribed grazing and strategic weed control. It may take several years to achieve this recovery depending on growing conditions, vigor of remnant rough fescue plants, and aggressiveness of weed treatments.

Community Phase Pathway 1.1A

Rough fescue loses vigor when overgrazed. When vigor declines enough for plants to die or become smaller, species with higher grazing tolerance (most often Idaho fescue) increase in vigor and production as they use the resources previously used by rough fescue and bluebunch wheatgrass. Decrease of species composition by weight of rough fescue to < 50% indicates that the plant community has shifted to the Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2). The driver for community pathway 1.1A is improper grazing management. This shift is triggered by the loss of vigor of rough fescue.

Community Phase Pathway 1.2A

The Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) will return to the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) with proper grazing management that provide sufficient critical growing season deferment in combination with proper grazing intensity. Favorable moisture conditions will facilitate or accelerate this transition. The driver for this community shift (1.2A) is the increase in vigor of rough fescue to the point that it represents more than 50% of species composition. The trigger for this shift is the change in grazing management that favors rough fescue.

Transition T1A

The Taller Bunchgrass State (1) transitions to the Altered Bunchgrass State (2) if plant canopy cover declines to less than 50% and rough fescue decreases to below 10% by dry weight. The trigger for this transition is the loss of taller bunchgrasses, which creates open spots of bare soil. Soil erosion is accompanied by decreased soil fertility driving the transitions to the Altered Bunchgrass State. There are several other key factors signaling the approach of transition T1A: increases in soil physical crusting, decreases in cover of cryptogamic crusts, decreases in soil surface aggregate stability and/or evidence of erosion, including water flow patterns, development of plant pedestals, and litter movement. The driver for this transition is improper grazing management and/or long-term drought leading to a decrease in rough fescue composition to <10%.

Transition T1B

Regardless of grazing management, without some form of weed management (chemical, mechanical, or biological control), the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) can transition to the Invaded State (3) if aggressive invasive species, such as spotted knapweed and cheatgrass are introduced, even if the herbaceous component of the Reference Plant Community (1.1) is thriving. Long-term stress conditions for native species (e.g., overgrazing, drought, and fire) accelerate the process. If populations of invasive species reach critical levels, the site transitions to the Invaded State. The driver for this transition is the presence of aggressive invasive species.

Restoration Pathway R2A

The Altered Bunchgrass State (2) has lost soil or vegetation attributes to the point that recovery to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) will require reclamation efforts, such as soil rebuilding, intensive mechanical treatments, and/or revegetation. The drivers for this restoration pathway are reclamation efforts and proper grazing management. The trigger is restoration efforts.

Restoration Pathway R3A

Restoration of the Invaded State (3) to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) requires substantial energy input. The drivers for this restoration pathway are removal of invasive species, restoration of native bunchgrass species, ongoing management of invasives, and proper grazing management. Without maintenance, invasive species are likely to return (probably rapidly) because of the presence of propagules in the soil and an increase in soil disturbance. The drivers for this reclamation pathway are treatments to reduce or remove invasive/noxious species in combination with favorable growing conditions.

► STATE 2 SECTION ◄

State Number: 2

State Name: Altered Bunchgrass State

State Narrative:

This state is characterized by having < 10% rough fescue and < 50% canopy cover. State 2 is represented by two communities that differ in the percent composition of Idaho fescue, production, and soil degradation. Production in this state is considerably lower than in the Taller Bunchgrass State (1). Some native plants tend to increase under prolonged drought and/or heavy grazing practices. A few of these species include Idaho fescue, needleandthread, Sandberg bluegrass, silky lupine, field chickweed, ballhead sandwort, common snowberry, Wood's rose and fringed

sagewort.

Community Phase 2.1

Community Phase Name: Idaho Fescue Community

Community Phase Narrative:

Long-term grazing mismanagement with continuous growing-season pressure will reduce total productivity of the site and lead to an increase of bare ground. Once plant cover is reduced, the site is more susceptible to erosion and degradation of soil properties. Soil erosion or reduced soil fertility will create reduced plant production. This soil erosion or loss of soil fertility indicates the transition to the Altered Bunchgrass State (2) because it creates a threshold that requires input of energy to return to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1). The transition to Idaho Fescue Community (2.1) may be exacerbated by extended drought conditions.

Idaho fescue dominates the Idaho Fescue Community (2.1). Rough fescue makes up < 10% of species composition by dry weight and the remaining rough fescue plants tend to be scattered and low in vigor. Increaser and invader species will become more common and will create more competition for rough fescue in the community. This competition makes it difficult for rough fescue to increase with simply a change in grazing management alone. Therefore, an input of energy will be required for the community to return to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1). Proper grazing management over a longer period is a successful strategy to increase cover and production of rough fescue and bluebunch wheatgrass. Canopy cover decreases compared to the Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) to < 50%. Wind and water erosion may be eroding soil from the plant interspaces. Soil fertility is reduced, soil compaction is increased, and resistance to soil surface erosion has declined compared to the Taller Bunchgrass State.

This community has crossed a threshold compared to the Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) because of soil erosion, loss of soil fertility, or degradation of soil properties which causes a critical shift in the ecology of the site. The affects of soil erosion can alter the hydrology, soil chemistry, soil microorganisms, and soil physics to the point where intensive restoration is required to restore the site to another state or community. Simply changing grazing management cannot create sufficient change to restore the site within a reasonable time frame. Restoration will require a considerable input of energy to move the site back to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1). This state has lost soil or vegetation attributes to the point that recovery to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) will require reclamation efforts, i.e., soil rebuilding, intensive mechanical treatments, and/or reseeding.

The transition to this community could occur because of overgrazing (often because of failure to adjust stocking rates in response to declining forage production because of increased dominance of unpalatable invasive species), long-term lack of fire, warming climate, or extensive drought. If heavy grazing continues, plant cover, litter, and mulch will further decrease and bare ground will further increase, exposing the soil to accelerated erosion. Litter and mulch will move off-site as plant cover declines. The Idaho Fescue Community will then shift to a Sparsely Vegetated Community (2.2). Introduction or expansion of invasive species will further drive the plant community to the Invaded State (3).

Community Phase 2.2

Community Phase Name: Sparsely Vegetated Community

Community Phase Narrative:

Very sparse plant cover and soil surface erosion characterize this community. Grass and forb cover may be very sparse or clumped (canopy cover < 25%). Weeds, annual species, or shortgrass species dominate the plant community. Mid-stature perennial bunchgrass species (e.g., Idaho fescue) may exist, but only in patches.

In this community phase there may be a significant amount of bare ground, and large gaps may occur between plants. Potential exists for soils to erode to the point that irreversible damage may occur. If further soil erosion occurs, there will be a critical negative shift in the ecological processes of this site. Soil erosion combined with lack of organic matter deposition because of sparse vegetation creates changes to the hydrology, soil chemistry, soil microorganisms, and soil physics to the point where intensive restoration is required to restore the site to another state or community. Simply changing management (i.e., improving grazing management) cannot create sufficient change to restore the site within a reasonable period.

This plant community may be in a terminal state that will not return to the reference state because of degraded soil properties and loss of higher successional native plant species.

Community Phase Pathway 2.1A

With continued overgrazing, bunchgrasses and perennial forbs can decrease in the Idaho Fescue Community (2.1) site. Loss of larger bunchgrasses and rhizomatous grasses will increase bare soil and allow increased soil erosion. This shift is frequently accompanied by decreased soil fertility and diminished soil properties. Decreased plant vigor drives this shift. This shift is triggered by continued overgrazing or extended drought in an Idaho Fescue Community

(2.1) with poor vigor. Lack of mid-stature bunchgrasses and low production indicates a community shift to the Sparsely Vegetated Community (2.2).

Community Phase Pathway 2.2A

If a Sparsely Vegetated Community (2.2) is properly managed for several years and growing conditions are favorable, annual production of perennial bunchgrasses and rhizomatous grasses may increase over time and the site may shift back to the Idaho Fescue Community (2.1). The driver for this shift is increased vigor of bunchgrasses and rhizomatous grasses. The trigger is improved grazing management and growing conditions over a long period

Transition T2A

Invasive species can occupy the Altered Bunchgrass State (2) and drive it to the Invaded State (3). The Altered Bunchgrass State is at risk of this transition occurring if invasive propagules are present. The driver for this transition is the presence of critical population levels (> 25%) of invasive species. The trigger is the presence of propagules of invasive species.

Restoration Pathway R2A

The Altered Bunchgrass State (2) has lost soil or vegetation attributes to the point that recovery to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) will require reclamation efforts, such as soil rebuilding, intensive mechanical treatments, and/or revegetation. The drivers for this restoration pathway are reclamation efforts and proper grazing management. The trigger is restoration efforts.

Restoration Pathway R3B

If invasive species are removed without sufficient remnant populations of reference community species (particularly rough fescue), a site in the Invaded State (3) is likely to return to the Altered Bunchgrass State (2) instead of the Taller Bunchgrass State (1). The driver for the reclamation pathway is weed management without reseeding. The trigger is invasive species control.

► STATE 3 SECTION ◀

State Number: 3

State Name: Invaded State

State Narrative:

The single community described below characterizes this state.

Community Phase 3.1

Community Phase Name: Invaded Community

Community Phase Narrative:

The Invaded State (3) is characterized by > 25% of invasive species: spotted knapweed, leafy spurge, sulphur cinquefoil, and cheatgrass are the dominant invasive species in MLRA 44A. Introduced exotic plant species have been identified as one of the greatest threats to the integrity and productivity of native rangeland ecosystems and conservation of indigenous biodiversity (DiTomaso 2000; Mack et al. 2000). In addition to environmental consequences, damages caused and costs incurred to control invasive plants are several billion dollars each year in the United States (Pimentel et al. 2000).

The potential for altered ecosystem structure and function is high in the Invaded State (3) and can occur in many ways. The increase in invasive species, especially noxious weeds, can lead to reduction of the native bunchgrasses and an increase in the proportion of bare ground, which often results in reduced infiltration rates and increased surface runoff and erosion. Invasion by cheatgrass reduces above and below ground biomass (Ogle et al. 2003), increases plant litter, changes plant community canopy architecture (Belnap and Phillips 2001), reduces soil biota richness and abundance, reduces plant community richness (Belnap et al. 2005), increases wildfire frequency (Whisenant 1990), and potentially facilitates invasion by other noxious or invasive plants. Dense populations of invasive species can cause soil loss to increase because of lack of surface cover (Lacey et al. 1989).

Early in the invasion process there is a lag phase where invasive plant populations remain small and localized before expanding exponentially (Hobbs and Humphries 1995). Based on research conducted in noxious weed-invaded plant communities in Montana, it is reasonable to estimate that 25% dry weight composition of invasive plant species is the point in the invasion process where spread and abundance is increasing exponentially and where a plant community has crossed a threshold (Masters and Sheley 2001). For aggressive invasive species (i.e., spotted knapweed), this threshold could be < 10%.

Once invasive species dominate the site, either in species composition by weight or in their impact on the

community, the threshold has been crossed to the Invaded State (3). Once invasive species such as spotted knapweed, cheatgrass, and leafy spurge become established, they are very difficult to eradicate. Therefore, considerable effort should be placed in preventing plant communities from crossing a threshold to the Invaded State (3) through early detection and proper management. Preventing new invasions is by far the most cost-effective control strategy and typically places an emphasis on education. Control measures used on the noxious plant species impacting this ecological site include chemical, biological, and cultural control methods. The best success has been found with an integrated weed management strategy that incorporates one or several of these options along with education and prevention efforts (DiTomaso 2000).

Production in the invaded community may vary greatly. A site dominated by spotted knapweed, where soil fertility and chemistry remain near potential, may have production near that of the reference community. A site with degraded soils and infestation of cheatgrass may produce only 10-20% of the reference community.

Restoration Pathway R3A

Restoration of the Invaded State (3) to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) requires substantial energy input. The drivers for this restoration pathway are removal of invasive species, restoration of native bunchgrass species, ongoing management of invasives, and proper grazing management. Without maintenance, invasive species are likely to return (probably rapidly) because of the presence of propagules in the soil and increases in soil disturbance. The drivers for this reclamation pathway are treatments to reduce or remove invasive/noxious species in combination with favorable growing conditions.

Restoration Pathway R3B

If invasive species are removed without sufficient remnant populations of reference community species (particularly rough fescue), a site in the Invaded State (3) is likely to return to the Altered Bunchgrass State (2) instead of the Taller Bunchgrass State (1). The driver for the reclamation pathway is weed management without reseeding. The trigger is invasive species control.

State and transition model



State 1
REFERENCE STATE - Taller bunchgrass state



Figure 10. Droughty ecological site with a mixture of grasses including needle and thread, rough fescue, bluebunch wheatgrass, prairie junegrass and the forb Erigeron species.



Figure 11. Droughty ecological site with a mixture of Idaho fescue, bluebunch wheatgrass and prairie junegrass with some weedy species.



Figure 12. Late season view of the Droughty ecological site with a mixture of perennial bunchgrasses and common snowberry with a higher cover of weedy cheatgrass.

This state is characterized by cool-season bunchgrasses and is represented by two communities that differ mainly in the percent composition rough fescue and Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*) and bluebunch wheatgrass. Shrubs and forbs are a minor component in this state.

Community 1.1

Reference Community - 1.1A

Rough fescue 30-70% Idaho fescue and Bluebunch wheatgrass subdominant Rough fescue (*Festuca campestris*)-bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*)/(Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*)-prairie junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*)-needle and thread(*Hesperostipa comata*)/silky lupine (*Lupinus sericea*)-erigeron species. Production: 2050#/acre, 1000-2700 pounds per acre and generally has grass as 85% of the composition, 10% forbs and 5% shrubs. FOLIAR AVERAGE COVER: Species Scientific Common Foliar Cover % Basal Cover % PSSP6
Pseudoroegneria spicata bluebunch wheatgrass 50.4 6.0 FEID *Festuca idahoensis* Idaho fescue 18.0 1.0 POPR
Poa pratensis Kentucky bluegrass 14.8 0.0 KOMA *Koeleria macrantha* prairie Junegrass 7.0 0.4 LUSE4 *Lupinus sericea* silvery lupine 5.8 0.0 HECO26 *Hesperostipa comata* needle and thread 5.0 0.2 FECA4 *Festuca campestris* rough fescue 3.6 0.2 BRTE *Bromus tectorum* cheatgrass 3.2 0.0 PHPR3 *Phleum pratense* timothy 1.6 0.0 ACNE9
Achnatherum nelsonii Columbia needlegrass 1.0 0.0 ROWO *Rosa woodsii* . Woods' rose 0.8 0.0 ASTRA
Astragalus. milkvetch 0.6 0.0 BRAR5 *Bromus arvensis* field brome 0.6 0.0 GAAR *Gaillardia aristata* blanketflower 0.6 0.0 ACMI2 *Achillea millefolium* common yarrow 0.4 0.0 ERUM *Eriogonum umbellatum* . sulphur-flower
buckwheat 0.4 0.0 GETR *Geum triflorum* old man's whiskers 0.4 0.0 NAVI4 *Nassella viridula* green needlegrass 0.4 0.0 PECO6 *Penstemon confertus* yellow penstemon 0.4 0.0 THIN6 *Thinopyrum intermedium* intermediate
wheatgrass 0.4 0.0 ALLIU *Allium onion* 0.2 0.0 ANRO2 *Antennaria rosea* rosy pussytoes 0.2 0.0 ARFR4 *Artemisia frigida* . prairie sagewort 0.2 0.0 ARSO2 *Arnica sororia* twin arnica 0.2 0.0 ASLO4 *Astragalus lotiflorus* . lotus
milkvetch 0.2 0.0 CRIN4 *Crepis intermedia* limestone hawksbeard 0.2 0.0 DAIN *Danthonia intermedia* timber
oatgrass 0.2 0.0 ERIGE2 *Erigeron*. fleabane 0.2 0.0 LIRU4 *Lithospermum ruderales* western stoneseed 0.2 0.0

PEDIC Pedicularis lousewort 0.2 0.0 TRDU *Tragopogon dubius* . yellow salsify 0.2 0.0 CANOPY COVER
 AVERAGE: SPECIES FREQUENCY/AVG CANOPY COVER ACMI2 5 1.6 ANRO2 2 0.1 ARFR4 3 1.7 ARSO2 2
 0.1 ASMI9 1 0.1 BRTE 5 10.0 CAAP 1 0.1 CALU14 2 0.6 CARO2 1 0.1 CHVI8 1 7.0 COUM 1 1.0 ERFI2 1 0.1
 ERIGE2 2 8.0 FECA4 4 12.0 FEID 2 7.5 GAAR 3 0.7 GABO2 1 0.1 HEVI4 1 0.1 HYSCS2 1 0.1 KOMA 5 6.0 LERE7
 1 2.0 LIRU4 1 0.1 LOMAT 1 1.0 LOTR2 1 0.1 LUAR3 2 5.1 LUPIN 3 1.0 BRASS2 1 0.1 PECO6 1 1.0 POBU 1 2.0
 POGR9 1 0.1 POPR 4 7.5 PRVI 1 1.0 PSSP6 5 19.8 ARENA 1 2.0 SYAL 2 1.6 TAOF 1 0.1 TRDU 3 0.4 VICIA 2
 0.1 ROWO 1 1.0 ACNEN 1 5.0 PHHO 1 0.1 CEST8 2 2.6 BRAR5 2 11.0 HECO26 4 11.8 ASLO4 1 3.0 BRIN2 1 2.0
 LIPE2 1 5.0

Dominant plant species

- rough fescue (*Festuca campestris*), grass
- Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*), grass

Table 5. Annual production by plant type

Plant Type	Low (Lb/Acre)	Representative Value (Lb/Acre)	High (Lb/Acre)
Grass/Grasslike	900	1800	2300
Forb	100	200	270
Shrub/Vine	50	100	135
Tree	0	0	0
Total	1050	2100	2705

Community 1.2

Community Phase 1.2 - Mixed Bunchgrass Community

Idaho fescue and rough fescue share dominance Rough fescue 10-30% Increase in unpalatable forb species

Pathway 1.1A

Community 1.1 to 1.2

1.1A Improper Grazing Management, Soil Erosion

Pathway 1.2A

Community 1.2 to 1.1

1.2A Proper Grazing Management

State 2

State 2 - Altered Bunchgrass State

This state is characterized by having < 10% rough fescue and < 50% canopy cover. State 2 is represented by two communities that differ in the percent composition of Idaho fescue, production, and soil degradation. Production in this state is considerably lower than in the Taller Bunchgrass State (1). Some native plants tend to increase under prolonged drought and/or heavy grazing practices. A few of these species include Idaho fescue, needleandthread, Sandberg bluegrass, silky lupine, field chickweed, ballhead sandwort, common snowberry, Wood’s rose and fringed sagewort.

Community 2.1

Idaho Fescue Community

Idaho fescue dominant Rough fescue <1%

Community 2.2

Sparsely Vegetated Community

Degraded soil properties Short grass and annual forb species dominant

Pathway 2.1A

Community 2.1 to 2.2

2.1A Improper Grazing Management, Soil Erosion

Pathway 2.2A

Community 2.2 to 2.1

2.2A Proper Grazing Management

State 3

State 3 - Invaded State

The Invaded State (3) is characterized by > 25% of invasive species: spotted knapweed, leafy spurge, sulphur cinquefoil, and/or cheatgrass are the dominant invasive species in MLRA 44A. Introduced exotic plant species have been identified as one of the greatest threats to the integrity and productivity of native rangeland ecosystems and conservation of indigenous biodiversity (DiTomaso 2000; Mack et al. 2000). In addition to environmental consequences, damages caused and costs incurred to control invasive plants are several billion dollars each year in the United States (Pimentel et al. 2000).

Community 3.1

Invaded Community

Invasive species >25%, including spotted knapweed, cheatgrass and other weedy species

Transition T1A

State 1 to 2

T1A Overgrazing, Soil Erosion

Transition T1B

State 1 to 3

T1B Introduction of Weedy Propagules, Overgrazing

Restoration pathway R2A

State 2 to 1

R2A Range Seeding, Proper Grazing Management

Transition T2A

State 2 to 3

T2A Introduction of Weedy Propagules, Fire

Restoration pathway R3A

State 3 to 1

R3A Weed Management, Proper Grazing Management, Range Seeding

Restoration pathway R3B

State 3 to 2

R3B Weed Management

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	Cool Season Bunchgrasses			750–2025	
	rough fescue	FECA4	<i>Festuca campestris</i>	600–1000	–
	bluebunch wheatgrass	PSSP6	<i>Pseudoroegneria spicata</i>	600–1000	–
	Idaho fescue	FEID	<i>Festuca idahoensis</i>	180–360	–
	needle and thread	HECO26	<i>Hesperostipa comata</i>	90–180	–
	needlegrass	ACHNA	<i>Achnatherum</i>	90–180	–
2	Shortgrasses/Rhizomatous Grass/Grasslikes			100–270	
	Idaho fescue	FEID	<i>Festuca idahoensis</i>	100–270	–
	prairie Junegrass	KOMA	<i>Koeleria macrantha</i>	45–200	–
	Sandberg bluegrass	POSE	<i>Poa secunda</i>	45–90	–
Forb					
3	Forbs			100–270	
	common yarrow	ACMI2	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	45–90	–
	pussytoes	ANTEN	<i>Antennaria</i>	45–90	–
	twin arnica	ARSO2	<i>Arnica sororia</i>	45–90	–
	timber milkvetch	ASMI9	<i>Astragalus miser</i>	45–90	–
	bluebell bellflower	CARO2	<i>Campanula rotundifolia</i>	45–90	–
	limestone hawksbeard	CRIN4	<i>Crepis intermedia</i>	45–90	–
	fleabane	ERIGE2	<i>Erigeron</i>	45–90	–
	blanketflower	GAAR	<i>Gaillardia aristata</i>	45–90	–
	northern bedstraw	GABO2	<i>Galium boreale</i>	45–90	–
	old man's whiskers	GETR	<i>Geum triflorum</i>	45–90	–
	roundleaf alumroot	HECY2	<i>Heuchera cylindrica</i>	45–90	–
	houndstongue hawkweed	HICY	<i>Hieracium cynoglossoides</i>	45–90	–
	western stoneseed	LIRU4	<i>Lithospermum ruderales</i>	45–90	–
	nineleaf biscuitroot	LOTR2	<i>Lomatium triternatum</i>	45–90	–
	silky lupine	LUSE4	<i>Lupinus sericeus</i>	45–90	–
	yellow penstemon	PECO6	<i>Penstemon confertus</i>	45–90	–
	cinquefoil	POTEN	<i>Potentilla</i>	45–90	–
	largeflower triteleia	TRGR7	<i>Triteleia grandiflora</i>	45–90	–
Shrub/Vine					
4	Shrubs			50–135	
	prairie sagewort	ARFR4	<i>Artemisia frigida</i>	23–45	–
	yellow rabbitbrush	CHVI8	<i>Chrysothamnus viscidiflorus</i>	23–45	–
	rubber rabbitbrush	ERNA10	<i>Ericameria nauseosa</i>	23–45	–
	Woods' rose	ROWO	<i>Rosa woodsii</i>	23–45	–

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Approval

Kirt Walstad, 9/07/2023

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	05/02/2024
Approved by	Kirt Walstad
Approval date	
Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on	Annual Production

Indicators

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

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

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

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:**

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

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:
-

17. **Perennial plant reproductive capability:**
-