

Ecological site R048AY448UT Mountain Stony Loam (Mountain Big Sagebrush)

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Rangeland health reference sheet

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

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| Author(s)/participant(s) | |
| Contact for lead author | |
| Date | 03/13/2020 |
| Approved by | Kirt Walstad |
| Approval date | |
| Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on | Annual Production |

Indicators

- 1. Number and extent of rills:** No rills present. Very minor rill development may occur in sparsely vegetated areas. If rills are present, they should be widely spaced and not connected. Rill development may increase following large storm events, but should begin to heal during the following growing season. Frost heaving will accelerate recovery. Rill development may increase when run inflow enters site from adjacent sites that produce large amounts of runoff (i.e. steeper sites, slickrock, rock outcrop). Site is essentially level and rills do not form.

- 2. Presence of water flow patterns:** Water flow patterns will be very short (1-3'), narrow (<1'), and meandering; interrupted by plants and exposed rocks. Slight to no evidence of erosion or deposition associated with flow patterns. Where slopes exceed 5%, water flow patterns may be of medium length (5 –10 feet).

- 3. Number and height of erosional pedestals or terracettes:** Plants may have small pedestals (1-3") where they are adjacent to water flow patterns, but without exposed roots. Terracettes should be few and stable. Terracettes should be small (1-3") and show little sign of active erosion. Some plants may appear to have a pedestal but rather than be formed by erosion, they are the result of litter and soil accumulating at plant bases, forming the appearance of a pedestal.

- 4. Bare ground from Ecological Site Description or other studies (rock, litter, lichen, moss, plant canopy are not bare ground):** 15-30% bare ground (soil with no protection from raindrop impact). Very few if any bare spaces of greater than 1 square foot. In general, bare ground increases as production decreases. As species composition of shrubs relative to grasses increases, bare ground is likely to increase. Poorly developed biological soil crust that is

susceptible to erosion from raindrop impact should be recorded as bare ground.

5. **Number of gullies and erosion associated with gullies:** No gullies present.

6. **Extent of wind scoured, blowouts and/or depositional areas:** Very minor evidence of active wind-generated soil movement. Wind scoured (blowouts) and depositional areas are rarely present. If present they have muted features and are mostly stabilized with vegetation and/or biological crust.

7. **Amount of litter movement (describe size and distance expected to travel):** Most litter resides in place with some redistribution caused by water and wind movement. Very minor litter removal may occur in water flow paths with deposition occurring at points of obstruction. Where litter movement does occur, litter accumulates at plant bases. Some leaves, stems, and small twigs may accumulate in soil depressions adjacent to plants. Woody stems are not likely to move.

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 average erosion rating of 6 using the soil stability kit test.

9. **Soil surface structure and SOM content (include type of structure and A-horizon color and thickness):** A1--0 to 7 inches; dark grayish brown (10YR 4/2) loam, very dark grayish brown (10YR 3/2) moist; weak fine subangular blocky structure that parts to weak fine granular; slightly hard, friable, slightly sticky and slightly plastic; many very fine and fine roots; few very fine tubular pores; 10 percent shale channers; neutral (pH 6.8); clear smooth boundary. (4 to 7 inches thick)

10. **Effect of community phase composition (relative proportion of different functional groups) and spatial distribution on infiltration and runoff:** Shrubs and well-developed biological soil crusts provide most of the interception of rainfall that prevents erosion. Biological soil crusts are resistant to raindrop impact and splash erosion. Biological soil crusts also provide surface roughness that slows runoff, allowing time for infiltration. Bunchgrasses, if present, may contribute to slowing runoff, but canopy cover from bunchgrasses is too low to provide much rainfall interception. Interspaces between shrubs and biological soil crusts may serve as water flow paths during episodic runoff events, with natural erosion expected in severe storms.

11. **Presence and thickness of compaction layer (usually none; describe soil profile features which may be mistaken for compaction on this site):** A compaction layer is not expected.

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: Dominant: Perennial cool-season bunchgrasses (needle and thread, muttongrass, bluebunch wheatgrass) = sprouting shrubs (antelope bitterbrush, Utah serviceberry)

Sub-dominant: Sub-dominant: Non-sprouting shrubs (mountain big sagebrush)

Other: Other: Perennial forbs>other perennial grasses = other shrubs

Additional:

13. **Amount of plant mortality and decadence (include which functional groups are expected to show mortality or decadence):** During years with average to above average precipitation, there should be very little recent mortality or decadence apparent in either the shrubs or grasses. Some mortality of bunchgrass and other shrubs may occur during very severe (long-term) droughts. There may be partial mortality of individual bunchgrasses and shrubs during less severe drought and toward the end of the fire cycle. Long-lived species dominate the site. Open spaces from disturbance are quickly filled by new plants through seedlings and asexual reproduction (tillering).
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14. **Average percent litter cover (%) and depth (in):** Litter cover includes litter under plants. Most litter will be fine (herbaceous) litter. Litter will be concentrated under plant canopies and sparser between plant canopies, with an average cover of 25-35% and an average depth of 0.5-1 inches. Litter cover may increase following years with favorable growing conditions. Excess litter may accumulate in absence of disturbance. Vegetative production may be reduced if litter cover exceeds 40%.
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15. **Expected annual annual-production (this is TOTAL above-ground annual-production, not just forage annual-production):** 1300-1400 lbs/acre.
Even the most stable communities exhibit a range of production values. Production will vary between communities and across the MRLA. Refer to the community descriptions in the ESD. Production will differ across the MLRA due to the naturally occurring variability in weather, soils, and aspect. The biological processes on this site are complex; therefore, representative values are presented in a land management context.
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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:** Invasive species unlikely because of high elevation
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17. **Perennial plant reproductive capability:** All perennial plants should have the ability to reproduce sexually or asexually, except in drought years. Density of plants indicates that plants reproduce at level sufficient to fill available resource. Within capability of site there are no restrictions on seed or vegetative reproductive capacity.
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