Ecological site FX052X03X010
Dense Clay (DC) Dry Shrubland

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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): 052X–Brown Glaciated Plains

The Brown Glaciated Plains, MLRA 52, is an expansive, agriculturally and ecologically significant area. It consists of approximately 14.5 million acres and stretches across 350 miles from east to west, encompassing portions of 15 counties in north-central Montana. This region represents the southwestern limit of the Laurentide Ice Sheet and is considered to be the driest and westernmost area within the vast network of glacially derived prairie pothole landforms of the northern Great Plains. Elevation ranges from 2,000 feet (610 meters) to 4,600 feet (1,400 meters).

Soils are primarily Mollisols, but Entisols, Inceptisols, Alfisols, and Vertisols are also common. Till from continental glaciation is the predominant parent material, but alluvium and bedrock are also common. Till deposits are typically less than 50 feet thick, and in some areas glacially deformed bedrock occurs at or near the soil surface (Soller, 2001). Underlying sedimentary bedrock largely consisting of Cretaceous shale, sandstone, and mudstone (Vuke et al., 2007) is commonly exposed on hillslopes, particularly along drainageways. Significant alluvial deposits occur along glacial outwash channels and major drainages, including portions of the Missouri, Teton, Marias, Milk, and Frenchman Rivers. Large glacial lakes, particularly in the western half of the MLRA, deposited clayey and silty lacustrine sediments (Fullerton et al., 2013).

Much of the western portion of this MLRA was glaciated towards the end of the Wisconsin age, with the maximum glacial extent occurring approximately 20,000 years ago (Fullerton et al., 2004). The result is a geologically young landscape that is predominantly a level till plain interspersed with lake plains and dominated by soils in the Mollisol and Vertisol orders. These soils are very productive and generally are well suited to dryland farming. Much of this area is aridic-ustic. Crop-fallow dryland wheat farming is the predominant land use. Areas of rangeland typically are on steep hillslopes along drainages.

The rangeland, much of which is native mixedgrass prairie, increases in abundance in the eastern half of the MLRA. The Wisconsin-age till in the north-central part of this area typically formed large disintegration moraines with steep slopes and numerous poorly drained potholes. A large portion of Wisconsin-age till occurring on level terrain that would typically be optimal for farming has large amounts of less-suitable sodium-affected Natrustalfs. Significant portions of Blaine, Phillips, and Valley Counties were glaciated approximately 150,000 years ago during the Illinoisan age. Due to erosion and dissection of the landscape, many of these areas have steeper slopes and more exposed bedrock than areas glaciated during the Wisconsin age (Fullerton and Colton, 1986).

While much of the rangeland in the aridic-ustic portion of MLRA 52 is classified as belonging to the “dry grassland” climatic zone, sites in portions of southern MLRA 52 may belong to the “dry shrubland” climatic zone. The dry shrubland zone represents the northernmost extent of the big sagebrush (Artemisia tridentata) steppe on the Great Plains. Because similar soils occur in both southern and northern portions of the MLRA, it is currently hypothesized that climate is the primary driving factor affecting big sagebrush distribution in this area. However, the precise factors are not yet fully understood.

Sizeable tracts of largely unbroken rangeland in the eastern half of the MLRA and adjacent southern Saskatchewan are home to the northern Montana population of greater sage grouse (Centrocercus urophasianus), and large portions of this area are considered to be a Priority Area for Conservation (PAC) by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2013). This population is unique among sage grouse populations in the fact that many individuals overwinter in the big sagebrush steppe (dry shrubland) in the southern portion of the MLRA and then migrate to the northern portion of the MLRA, which lacks big sagebrush (dry grassland), to live the rest of the year (Smith, 2013).

Areas of the till plain near the Bearpaw and Highwood Mountains as well as the Sweetgrass Hills and Rocky Mountain foothills are at higher elevations, receive higher amounts of precipitation, and have a typic-ustic moisture regime. These areas have significantly more rangeland production than the drier aridic-ustic portions of the MLRA and have enough moisture to produce crops annually rather than just bi-annually, as in the drier areas. Ecological sites in this higher precipitation area are classified as the Moist Grassland climatic zone.

Classification relationships

Hierarchical Classification Relationships

NRCS Soil Geography Hierarchy
• Land Resource Region: Northern Great Plains
• Major Land Resource Area (MLRA): 052 Brown Glaciated Plains
• Climate Zone: Dry Shrubland

National Hierarchical Framework of Ecological Units (Cleland et al., 1997; McNab et al., 2007)
• Domain: Dry
• Division: Temperate Steppe
• Province: Great Plains-Palouse Dry Steppe Province 331
• Section: Northwestern Glaciated Plains 331D
• Subsection: Montana Glaciated Plains 331Dh
• Landtype Association/Landtype Phase: N/A

National Vegetation Classification Standard (Federal Geographic Data Committee, 2008)
• Class: Xeromorphic Woodland, Scrub and Herb Vegetation Class (3)
• Subclass: Cool Semi-Desert Scrub and Grassland Subclass (3.B)
• Formation: Cool Semi-Desert Scrub and Grassland Formation (3.B.1)
• Division: Cool Semi-Desert Scrub and Grassland Division (3.B.1.Ne)
• Macrogroup: Artemisia tridentata - Artemisia tripartita ssp. tripartita - Purshia tridentata Steppe and Shrubland Macrogroup (3.B.1.Ne.3)
• Group: Artemisia tridentata - Artemisia tripartita - Purshia tridentata Big Sagebrush Steppe & Shrubland Group (3.B.1.Ne.3.b)
• Alliance: Artemisia tridentata ssp. wyomingensis Mesic Steppe & Shrubland Alliance
• Association: Artemisia tridentata ssp. wyomingensis / Pascopyrum smithii Shrub Grassland

EPA Ecoregions
• Level 1: Great Plains (9)
• Level 2: West-Central Semi-Arid Prairies (9.3)
• Level 3: Northwestern Glaciated Plains (42)
• Level 4: North-Central Brown Glaciated Plains (42o) and Glaciated Northern Grasslands (42j)

Ecological site concept

This provisional ecological site occurs in the Dry Shrubland climatic zone of MLRA 52. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of this ecological site based on current data. This map is approximate, is not intended to be definitive, and may be subject to change. Dense Clay Dry Shrubland ecological site is a moderately extensive site occurring on alluvial landscapes throughout MLRA 52. It occurs on fans, drainageways, and terraces.

The distinguishing characteristic of this site is that soils contain more than 45 percent clay in the upper 4 inches. Soils in this ecological site are typically very deep (more than 60 inches) and derived from clayey glaciolacustrine or outwash deposits. Soil textures in the upper 4 inches are typically clay, or silty clay. The soils commonly have an ochric epipedon and weakly developed underlying horizons. Characteristic vegetation is western wheatgrass (Pascopyrum smithii), green needlegrass (Nassella viridula), and Wyoming big sagebrush (Artemisia tridentata subsp. Wyomingensis).

Associated sites

FX052X03X001	**Clayey (Cy) Dry Shrubland** This site occupies similar landscapes and slope positions as the Dense Clay Dry Shrubland ecological site but is typically upslope where clay content is less. On lake plains, the Clayey Dry Shrubland site is around the perimeters whereas the Dense Clay Dry Shrubland site is closer to the center.
FX052X03X005	**Clayey-Steep (Cystp) Dry Shrubland** This site is adjacent to Dense Clay Dry Shrubland where terraces or lake plains have been dissected by streams or drainageways. It is on sideslopes whereas the Dense Clay Dry Shrubland site is on summits or toeslopes.
FX052X03X012	**Dense Clay Sodic (Dcsd) Dry Shrubland** This site is on similar landscapes as Dense Clay Dry Shrubland but typically occupies the lowest position on the landscape where salts have accumulated.

Similar sites

FX052X01X010	**Dense Clay (DC) Dry Grassland** This site differs from Dense Clay Dry Shrubland ecological site in that it has slightly cooler annual temperatures and supports silver sagebrush rather than big sagebrush.
FX052X03X001	**Clayey (Cy) Dry Shrubland** This site differs from Dense Clay Dry Shrubland in that clay content is greater than 35 percent but not more than 45 percent.
FX052X99X003	**Alkali Flat (Af)** This site differs from Dense Clay Dry Shrubland in that it receives additional moisture and contains accumulated salts in the upper 20 inches of soil. This site is normally on active playas that experience frequent long-duration ponding.
FX052X03X012	**Dense Clay Sodic (Dcsd) Dry Shrubland** This site differs from Dense Clay Dry Shrubland in that soils contain accumulated salts in the upper 20 inches. This is evidenced by sodium-tolerant shrubs such as greasewood and a lack of mid-statured bunchgrasses.

Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	Not specified
Herbaceous	Not specified

Legacy ID

R052XY707MT

Physiographic features

Dense Clay Dry Shrubland ecological site is a moderately extensive ecological site occurring on fans, drainageways, terraces, and lake plains.

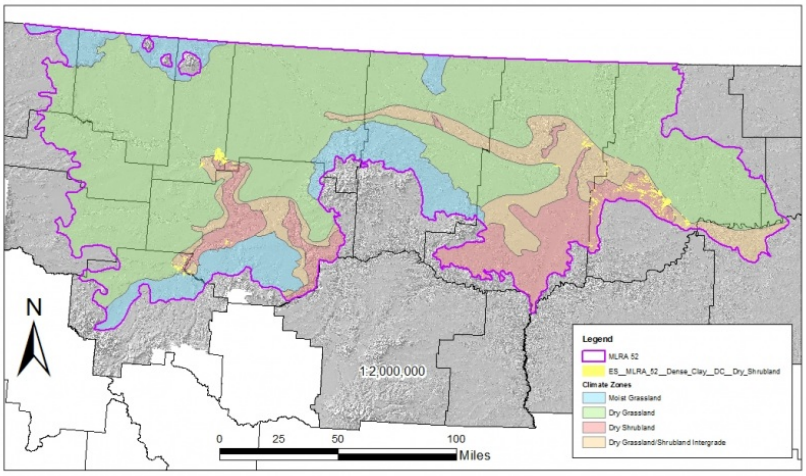

Figure 1. Figure 1. General distribution of the Dense Clay Dry Shrubland ecological site by map unit extent.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Fan (2) Drainageway (3) Terrace (4) Lake plain
Elevation	2,000–3,870 ft
Slope	0–14%
Aspect	Aspect is not a significant factor

Climatic features

The Brown Glaciated Plains is a semi-arid region with a temperate continental climate that is characterized by frigid winters and warm to hot summers (Cooper et al., 2001). The average frost-free period for this ecological site is 125 days. The majority of precipitation occurs as steady, soaking, frontal system rains in late spring to early summer. Summer rainfall comes mainly from convection thunderstorms that typically deliver scattered amounts of rain in intense bursts. These storms may be accompanied by damaging winds and large-diameter hail and result in flash flooding along low-order streams. Severe drought occurs on average in 2 out of 10 years. Annual precipitation ranges from 10 to 14 inches, and 70 to 80 percent of this occurs during the growing season (Cooper et al., 2001). Extreme climatic variations, especially droughts, have the greatest influence on species cover and production (Coupland, 1958, 1961; Biondini et al., 1998).

During the winter months, the western half of MLRA 52 commonly experiences chinook winds, which are strong west to southwest surface winds accompanied by abrupt increases in temperature. The chinook winds are strongest on the western boundary of the MLRA near the Rocky Mountain foothills and decrease eastward. In addition to producing damaging winds, prolonged chinook episodes can result in drought or vegetation kills due to a reaction of plants to a “false spring” (Oard, 1993).

Table 3. Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (average)	125 days
Freeze-free period (average)	145 days
Precipitation total (average)	13 in

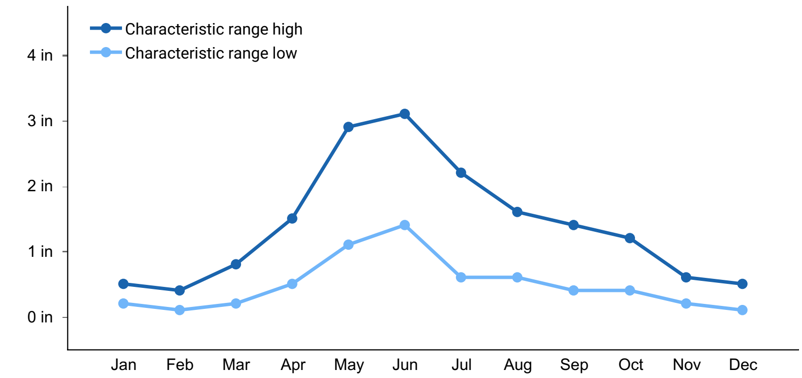

Figure 2. Monthly precipitation range

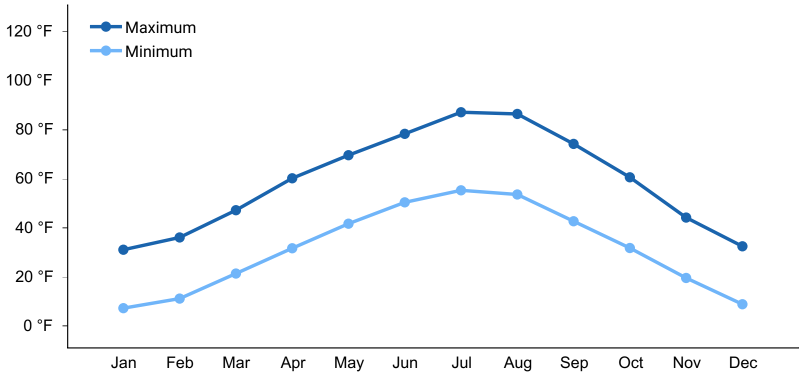

Figure 3. Monthly average minimum and maximum temperature

Climate stations used

- (1) CONTENT 3 SSE [USC00241984], Zortman, MT
- (2) FT BENTON [USC00243113], Fort Benton, MT
- (3) FT PECK PWR PLT [USC00243176], Fort Peck, MT
- (4) LOMA 1 WNW [USC00245153], Loma, MT
- (5) MALTA 7 E [USC00245338], Malta, MT
- (6) MALTA 35 S [USC00245340], Zortman, MT

Influencing water features

This is a semi arid upland site and the water budget is normally contained within the soil pedon. During intense precipitation events, precipitation rates frequently exceed infiltration rates and this site delivers moisture to downslope sites via surface runoff. Moisture loss through evapotranspiration exceeds precipitation for the majority of the growing season. Soil moisture levels are greatest in May and June, but rarely reach field capacity in the upper 40 inches.

Soil features

Soil series that best represent the central concept for this ecological site are Marias and Pendroy. They are both in the Haplusterts great group. Marias is in the fine family, meaning it contains between 35 and 60 percent clay in the particle-size control section. Pendroy is in the very-fine family, meaning it contains more than 60 percent clay in the particle-size control section. The typical parent material for these series is clayey glaciolacustrine deposits. Underlying horizons exhibit strong shrink-swell characteristics, as evidenced by slickensides (USDA-NRCS, 2016) and are very hard to extremely hard when dry. The minerology for both soils is smectitic. These and all soils in this site concept are characterized by a surface horizon that lacks enough organic matter to have a mollic epipedon. The soil moisture regime for all soils in this ecological site concept is ustic bordering on aridic, which means that the soils are moist in some or all parts for either 180 cumulative days or 90 consecutive days during the growing season but are dry in some or all parts for over 90 cumulative days. These soils have a frigid soil temperature regime (Soil Survey Staff, 2014).

Surface textures found on this site are most commonly clay, clay loam, silty clay or silty clay loam. The upper 4 inches of soil contains more than 45 percent clay. The underlying horizons typically contain 40 to 75 percent clay and have clay or silty clay textures. Organic matter in the surface horizon typically ranges from 1 to 3 percent, and moist colors vary from grayish brown (2.5Y 5/2) to dark grayish brown (2.5Y 4/2). Calcium carbonate equivalent is typically less than 15 percent throughout the soil profile. Soil pH classes are moderately acid to slightly alkaline in the surface horizon and neutral to strongly alkaline in the subsurface horizons. The soil depth class for this site can be moderately deep (more than 20 inches) in places where bedrock is present but is typically very deep. Coarse fragments are typically rare or absent in the upper 20 inches of soil.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Glaciolacustrine deposits
Surface texture	(1) Clay (2) Clay loam (3) Silty clay (4) Silty clay loam
Drainage class	Well drained
Soil depth	20–72 in
Available water capacity (0-40in)	5.2–5.7 in
Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-5in)	0–14%
Electrical conductivity (0-20in)	0–3 mmhos/cm
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-20in)	0–12
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-40in)	5.6–9
Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (0-20in)	0–14%
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (0-20in)	0–14%

Ecological dynamics

The information in this ecological site description, including the state-and-transition model (STM), was developed based on historical data, current field data, professional experience, and a review of the scientific literature. As a result, all possible scenarios or plant species may not be included. Key indicator plant species, disturbances, and ecological processes are described to inform land management decisions.

The Dense Clay Dry Shrubland ecological site in MLRA 52 consists of five states: the Reference State (1), the Shortgrass State (2), the Invaded State (3), the Cropland State (4), and the Post-Cropland State (5). Plant communities associated with the Dense Clay Dry Shrubland ecological site evolved under the combined influences of climate, grazing, and fire. Extreme climatic variability results in frequent droughts, which can have the greatest influence on the relative contribution of species cover and production (Coupland, 1958, 1961; Biondini et al., 1998). Due to the dominance of cool-season graminoids, annual production is highly dependent upon mid- to late-spring precipitation (Heitschmidt and Vermeire, 2005; Anderson, 2006).

Native grazers also shaped these plant communities. American bison (Bison bison) were the dominant historic grazer, but pronghorn (Antilocapra americana), elk (Cervus canadensis), and deer (Odocoileus spp.) were also common. Small mammals such as prairie dogs (Cynomys spp.) and ground squirrels (Urocitellus spp.) also influenced this plant community (Salo et al., 2004). Grasshoppers and periodic outbreaks of Rocky Mountain locusts (Melanoplus spretus) also played an important role in the ecology of these communities (Lockwood, 2004).

Fire is a critical dynamic on the Dense Clay Dry Shrubland ecological site. The historic ecosystem experienced periodic lightning-caused fires. Historically, Native Americans also set periodic fires. The majority of lightning-caused fires occurred in July and August; whereas, Native Americans typically set fires during spring and fall to correspond with the movement of bison (Higgins, 1986). It is difficult to precisely determine the fire return interval in the Dry Shrubland climate zone, but estimates range from 6 to 25 years (Bragg, 1995) to 10 to 70 years (Howard, 1999). It is believed that the frequency and intensity of fire would be less on this ecological site than on adjacent sites due to the sparse vegetative cover. Generally, the herbaceous vegetation is resilient to fire and the primary effects of fire are reduction of litter and short term fluctuations in production (Vermeire et al., 2011, 2014). However, studies have shown that very short fire return intervals (less than 5 years) can have a negative effect, shifting species composition toward warm-season, short-statured grasses (Shay et al., 2001; Smith and McDermid, 2014). Conversely, fire has a significant effect on Wyoming big sagebrush cover. Wyoming big sagebrush is a non-sprouting shrub and is most often killed by fire (Howard, 1999). Often, it may take 30 years or more for a stand to recover following fire (Watts and Wambolt, 1996; Wambolt et. al., 2001). It is likely that fire return intervals shorter than 30 years will result in a reduction in Wyoming big sagebrush cover over the long term. Long-term fire suppression in the 20th century removed periodic fire from the ecosystem altogether. Very little is known how this has affected the Dry Shrubland ecosystem. Some studies suggest an increase in Wyoming big sagebrush cover, presumably due to fire suppression (Bloom-Cornelius, 2011). Increased decadence in Wyoming big sagebrush may also occur (Howard, 1999), but these results are inconclusive.

Lack of periodic fires can also result in an increase in litter accumulation and, in some cases, provide ideal conditions for seed germination and seedling establishment of non-native annual brome species, such as field or Japanese brome (*Bromus arvensis*) (Whisenant, 1990). These species have become naturalized in relatively undisturbed grasslands (Ogle et al., 2003; Harmoney, 2007) and can be present in any state within the scope of this ecological site. They typically do not have a significant ecological impact; however, their presence can reduce the production of cool-season perennial grasses in some cases (Haferkamp et al., 1997). Their abundance varies depending on precipitation and germination conditions. The fire-recovery cycle is a critical element in managing the Dry Shrubland ecosystem. Further study is needed in this area to determine a balanced and sustainable fire cycle.

Improper grazing of this site can result in a reduction in the cover of the mid-statured cool-season grasses and an increase in shortgrasses (Smoliak et al., 1972; Smoliak, 1974). Improper grazing practices include any practices that do not allow sufficient opportunity for plants to physiologically recover from a grazing event or multiple grazing events within a given year, and that do not provide adequate cover to prevent soil erosion over time. These practices may include, but are not limited to, overstocking, continuous grazing, and inadequate seasonal rotation moves over multiple years. Periods of extended drought (approximately 3 years or more) can reduce mid-statured cool-season grasses, triggering an increase in shortgrasses such as prairie Junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*) (Coupland, 1961; Clarke et al., 1947).

Further degradation of the site due to improper grazing can result in a community dominated by shortgrasses such as prairie Junegrass and Sandberg bluegrass (*Poa secunda*). Mid-statured rhizomatous grasses and bunchgrasses are severely reduced or absent. Cover of prairie sagewort (*Artemisia frigida*), also known as fringed sagewort, can also increase.

Some of the Dense Clay Dry Shrubland ecological site has been converted to annual cropland. Cereal grains such as wheat and barley are sometimes grown on this site. When this site is taken out of production, this ecological site is either allowed to revert back to perennial grassland or is seeded with perennial forage species. Sites left to undergo natural plant succession after cultivation can, over several decades, support western wheatgrass and cool-season shortgrasses, although cover and production of these species are lower than in the Reference State. However, those sites seeded with non-native species, particularly crested wheatgrass, may persist as this cover type indefinitely (Christian and Wilson, 1999). Even when reseeded to native species, it may take over 75 years for soil organic matter to return to its pre-disturbed state (Dormaar and Willlms, 1990).

The state-and-transition model (STM) diagram (Figure 2) suggests possible pathways that plant communities on this site may follow as a result of a given set of ecological processes and management. The site may also support states not displayed in the STM diagram. Landowners and land managers should seek guidance from local professionals before prescribing a particular management or treatment scenario. Plant community responses vary across this MLRA due to variability in weather, soils, and aspect. The Reference State (1) may not necessarily be the management goal. The lists of plant species and species composition values are provisional and are not intended to cover the full range of conditions, species, and responses for the site. Species composition by dry weight is provided when available and is considered provisional based on the sources identified in the narratives associated with each community phase.

State 1: Reference State
The Reference State (1) contains three community phases characterized by rhizomatous wheatgrasses, mid-statured bunchgrasses, and Wyoming big sagebrush, a perennial, evergreen, non-sprouting shrub. Both western wheatgrass and thickspike wheatgrass (*Elymus lanceolatus*) can occur on this site, but western wheatgrass tends to be predominant in the Dry Shrubland due to its greater tolerance of higher temperatures and droughty conditions (Coupland 1961; Cooper et al., 2001; Heidel et al., 2000). This state evolved under the combined influences of climate, grazing, and fire with climatic variation having the greatest influence on cover and production. In general, this state was resilient to grazing, although heavy grazing could influence species composition in localized areas.

Phase 1.1: Shrubland Community Phase
The Shrubland Community Phase (1.1) is dominated by western wheatgrass and Wyoming big sagebrush. Green needlegrass is common and is the predominant mid-statured bunchgrass. Short-statured grasses such as prairie Junegrass and Sandberg bluegrass are not abundant in this phase but are generally present at low cover. Common forbs are spiny, or Hood's, phlox (*Phlox hoodii*), and scarlet globemallow (*Sphaeralcea coccinea*). The principle shrub on this site is Wyoming big sagebrush; canopy cover is typically 5 to 15 percent. The approximate species composition of the reference plant community is as follows:

Percent composition by weight*
Rhizomatous Wheatgrass 40%
Green Needlegrass 20%
Prairie Junegrass 5%
Other native grasses 10%
Perennial forbs 5%
Wyoming big sagebrush 15% (canopy cover 5-15%)
Other shrubs/subshrubs 5%

Estimated Total Annual Production (lbs./ac)*
Low - 400
Representative Value - 650
High - 900
*Estimated based on current data – subject to revision

Phase 1.2: Post-Fire Community Phase
The Post-Fire Community Phase (1.3) occurs when the plant community is burned either by wildfire or prescribed fire and may persist for as long as 30 years after burning. It is characterized by a rhizomatous wheatgrass dominated plant community. Green needlegrass is common and is the predominant mid-statured bunchgrass. Short-statured grasses such as prairie Junegrass and Sandberg bluegrass are not abundant in this phase but are generally present at low cover. Common forbs are spiny, or Hood's, phlox (*Phlox hoodii*), and scarlet globemallow (*Sphaeralcea coccinea*). Wyoming big sagebrush will be eliminated or nearly so immediately following fire. Recovery of Wyoming big sagebrush depends on many factors including climate, proximity to a seed source, and fire intensity. Typically, there is little or no regeneration for 5 to 10 years post-fire, then cover begins to increase gradually until an equilibrium level is reached (Watts and Wambolt, 1996). Generally recovery is prolonged, sometimes taking as long as 30 years (Wambolt et al., 2001).

Phase 1.3: At-Risk Community Phase
The At-Risk Community Phase (1.3) occurs when site condition declines due to drought, improper grazing management, or a combination of these factors. This community phase is characterized by nearly equal proportions of rhizomatous wheatgrasses and shortgrasses such as prairie Junegrass and Sandberg bluegrass. Rhizomatous wheatgrasses are in decline and are in shortgrasses are increasing. Mid statured bunchgrasses, particularly green needlegrass, are rare or absent. Cover of Wyoming big sagebrush will vary depending on the length of time since the last burn. If less than 30 years have passed since the last fire big sagebrush cover will be similar to Post-Fire Community Phase (1.2), but 30 years or more post-fire cover will be similar to Shrubland Community Phase (1.1).

Community Phase Pathway 1.1a
Fire will transition the Shrubland Community Phase (1.1) to the Post-Fire Community Phase (1.2). Wyoming big sagebrush is killed and perennial grasses will dominate the site.

Community Phase Pathway 1.1b
Drought, improper grazing management, or a combination of these factors can shift the Shrubland Community Phase (1.1) to the At Risk Community Phase (1.3). These factors favor an increase in shortgrasses and a decrease in cool-season midgrasses (Coupland, 1961). Wyoming big sagebrush cover will be similar to the Shrubland Community Phase (1.1).

Community Phase Pathway 1.2a
Thirty years or more of natural vegetative regrowth will transition the Post-Fire Community Phase (1.2) to the Shrubland Community Phase (1.1). Thirty years or more without fire permits Wyoming big sagebrush to recolonize the site.

Community Phase Pathway 1.2b
Drought, improper grazing management, or a combination of these factors can shift the Post-Fire Community Phase (1.2) to the At Risk Community Phase (1.3). These factors favor an increase in shortgrasses and a decrease in cool-season midgrasses (Coupland, 1961). Wyoming big sagebrush cover will be similar to the Post-Fire Community Phase (1.2).

Community Phase Pathway 1.3a
Less than 30 years post-fire; normal or above-average precipitation and proper grazing management transitions the At Risk Community Phase (1.3) to the Post-Fire Community Phase (1.2).

Community Phase Pathway 1.3b
Thirty years or more post-fire; normal or above-average precipitation and proper grazing management transitions the At Risk Community Phase (1.3) to the Shrubland Community Phase (1.1).

Transition T1A
Prolonged drought, improper grazing practices, or a combination of these factors weaken the resilience of the Reference State (1) and drive its transition to the Shortgrass State (2). The Reference State (1) transitions to the Shortgrass State (2) when mid-statured cool-season grasses become rare and contribute little to production. Shortgrasses, particularly prairie Junegrass and Sandberg bluegrass, dominate the plant community.

Transition T1B
The Reference State (1) transitions to the Invaded State (3) when invasive plant species or noxious weeds invade the Reference State (1). These communities are commonly adjacent to seeded pastures. Exotic plant species dominate the site in terms of cover and production. Site resilience has been substantially reduced. In addition, other rangeland health attributes, such as reproductive capacity of native grasses (Henderson and Naeth, 2005) and soil quality (Smoliak and Dormaar, 1985; Dormaar et al., 1995), have been substantially altered from the Reference State (1).

Transition T1C
Tillage or application of herbicide followed by seeding of cultivated crops, such as winter wheat, spring wheat, and barley, transitions the Reference State (1) to the Cropland State (4).

State 2: Shortgrass State
The Shortgrass State (2) consists of two community phases. The dynamics of this state are driven by long-term drought, improper grazing management, or a combination of these factors. Shortgrasses increase with long-term improper grazing at the expense of cool-season midgrasses (Coupland, 1961; Biondini and Manske, 1996; Derner and Whitman, 2009). Reductions in stocking rates can reduce shortgrass cover and increase the cover of cool-season midgrasses, although this recovery may take decades (Dormaar and Willms, 1990). Cover of Wyoming big sagebrush varies depending on fire frequency, with dynamics similar to the Reference State (1).

Phase 2.1: Shrub/Shortgrass Community Phase
The Shrub/Shortgrass Community Phase (2.1) occurs when site conditions decline due to long-term drought or improper grazing, and a fire has not occurred on the site for at least 30 years. In this phase, mid-statured rhizomatous wheatgrasses have been largely eliminated and replaced by short-statured species, such prairie Junegrass and Sandberg bluegrass. Prairie sagewort may also increase in this phase. Cover of Wyoming big sagebrush is 5 to 15 percent.

Phase 2.2: Shortgrass Community Phase
The Shortgrass Community Phase (2.2) occurs when site conditions decline due to long-term drought or improper grazing, and a fire has occurred on the site less than 30 years prior. In this phase, mid-statured rhizomatous wheatgrasses have been largely eliminated and replaced by short-statured species, such prairie Junegrass and Sandberg bluegrass. Prairie sagewort may also increase in this phase. Wyoming big sagebrush is rare.

Community Phase Pathway 2.1a
Fire will transition the Shrub/Shortgrass Community Phase (2.1) to the Shortgrass Community Phase (2.2). Wyoming big sagebrush is killed and perennial grasses will dominate the site.

Community Phase Pathway 2.2a
It is believed that 30 years or more of natural vegetative regrowth could transition the Shortgrass Community Phase (2.2) to the Shrub/Shortgrass Community Phase (2.1). It is possible that this transition could occur over time, however, the processes are not fully understood at this time. Therefore, this pathway is considered hypothetical until further investigation can be completed.

Transition T2A
The Shortgrass State (2) transitions to the Invaded State (3) when invasive plant species invade the Shortgrass State (2). These communities are commonly adjacent to seeded pastures. Exotic plant species dominate the site in terms of cover and production. Site resilience has been substantially reduced. In addition, other rangeland health attributes, such as reproductive capacity of native grasses (Henderson and Naeth, 2005) and soil quality (Smoliak and Dormaar, 1985; Dormaar et al., 1995), have been substantially altered from the Shortgrass State (2).

Transition T2B
Tillage or application of herbicide followed by seeding of cultivated crops, such as winter wheat, spring wheat, and barley, transitions the Shortgrass State (2) to the Cropland State (4).

Restoration Pathway R2A
Reduction in livestock grazing pressure alone may not be sufficient to restore the Shortgrass State (2) to the Reference State (1) (Dormaar and Willms, 1990). Practices such as range seeding may be necessary (Hart et al., 1985), but these are management intensive and costly. Therefore, returning the Shortgrass State (2) to the Reference State (1) can require considerable energy and cost and may not be feasible within a reasonable amount of time.

State 3: Invaded State
The Invaded State (3) occurs when invasive plant species invade adjacent native grassland communities. Crested wheatgrass is a common concern, especially when native plant communities are adjacent to seeded pastures. An estimated 20 million acres of crested wheatgrass have been planted in the western U.S. (Holechek, 1981). Crested wheatgrass produces abundant seeds that can dominate the seedbank of invaded grasslands (Henderson and Naeth, 2005), although crested wheatgrass cover decreases with increasing distance from seeded areas (Heidinga and Wilson, 2002). The early growth of crested wheatgrass allows this species to take advantage of early season soil moisture, which may result in competitive exclusion of native cool-season rhizomatous wheatgrasses and bunchgrasses, such as green needlegrass and prairie Junegrass (Christian and Wilson, 1999; Heidinga and Wilson, 2002; Henderson and Naeth, 2005). Reduced soil quality (Dormaar et al., 1995), reduced plant species diversity, and simplified structural complexity (Henderson and Naeth, 2005) result in a state that is substantially departed from the Reference State (1).

Noxious weeds such as leafy spurge are uncommon on this site but are capable of invading if a seed source is present. These species are very aggressive and typically displace native species and dominate ecological function when they invade a site. In some cases, these species can be suppressed through intensive management (herbicide application, biological control, or intensive grazing management). Control efforts are unlikely to eliminate noxious weeds, but their density can be sufficiently suppressed so that species composition and structural complexity are similar to that of the Reference State (1). However, cessation of control methods will most likely result in recolonization of the site by the noxious species.

Transition T3A
Tillage or application of herbicide followed by seeding of cultivated crops, such as winter wheat, spring wheat, and

barley, transitions the Invaded State (3) to the Cropland State (4).

State 4: Cropland State
The Cropland State (4) occurs when land is put into cultivation. Major crops in MLRA 52 include winter wheat, spring wheat, and barley.

Transition T4A
The transition from the Cropland State (4) to the Post-Cropland State (5) occurs with the cessation of cultivation. The site may also be seeded to perennial forage species. Such seedings may be comprised of introduced grasses and legumes, or a mix of native species.

State 5: Post-Cropland State
The Post-Cropland State (5) occurs when cultivated cropland is abandoned and allowed to either re-vegetate naturally or is seeded back to perennial species for grazing or wildlife use. This state can transition back to the Cropland State (4) if the site is put back into cultivation. No formal studies have been obtained regarding big sagebrush recovery following cultivation. Preliminary evidence suggests that, initially, silver sagebrush may replace big sagebrush in this state. Further investigation is needed to assess big sagebrush recovery in the Post-Cropland State (5).

Phase 5.1: Abandoned Cropland Phase
The Abandoned Cropland Phase (5.1) occurs when cropland is abandoned. In the absence of active management, the site can re-vegetate naturally and, over time, potentially return to a perennial grassland community with rhizomatous wheatgrasses and shortgrasses. Shortly after cropland is abandoned, annual and biennial forbs and annual brome grasses invade the site (Samuel and Hart, 1994). The site is highly susceptible to erosion due to the absence of perennial species. Eventually, these pioneering annual species are replaced by perennial species such as western wheatgrass. Depending on the historical management of the site, perennial bunchgrasses may also return; however, species composition will depend upon the seed bank. Invasion of the site by exotic species, such as crested wheatgrass and annual bromes, will depend upon the site’s proximity to a seed source.

Fifty or more years after cultivation, these sites may have species composition similar to phases in the Reference State (1). However, soil quality is consistently lower than conditions prior to cultivation (Dormaar and Smoliak, 1985; Christian and Wilson, 1999) and a shift to the Reference State (1) is unlikely within a reasonable timeframe.

Phase 5.2: Perennial Grass Phase
The Perennial Grass Phase (5.2 occurs when the site is seeded to perennial forage species. When seeded to introduced species, particularly introduced perennial grasses, this community phase can persist for several decades. Crested wheatgrass, in particular, is very aggressive and may form monocultures persisting for at least 60 years (Krzic et al., 2000; Henderson and Naeth, 2005). A mixture of native species may also be seeded to provide species composition and structural complexity similar to that of the contemporary Reference State (2). However, soil quality conditions have been substantially altered and will not return to pre-cultivation conditions within a reasonable timeframe (Dormaar et al., 1994).

Transition 5A
Tillage or application of herbicide followed by seeding of cultivated crops, such as winter wheat, spring wheat, and barley, transitions the Post-Cropland State (5) to the Cropland State (4).

State and transition model

Dense Clay Dry Shrubland
R052XY707MT

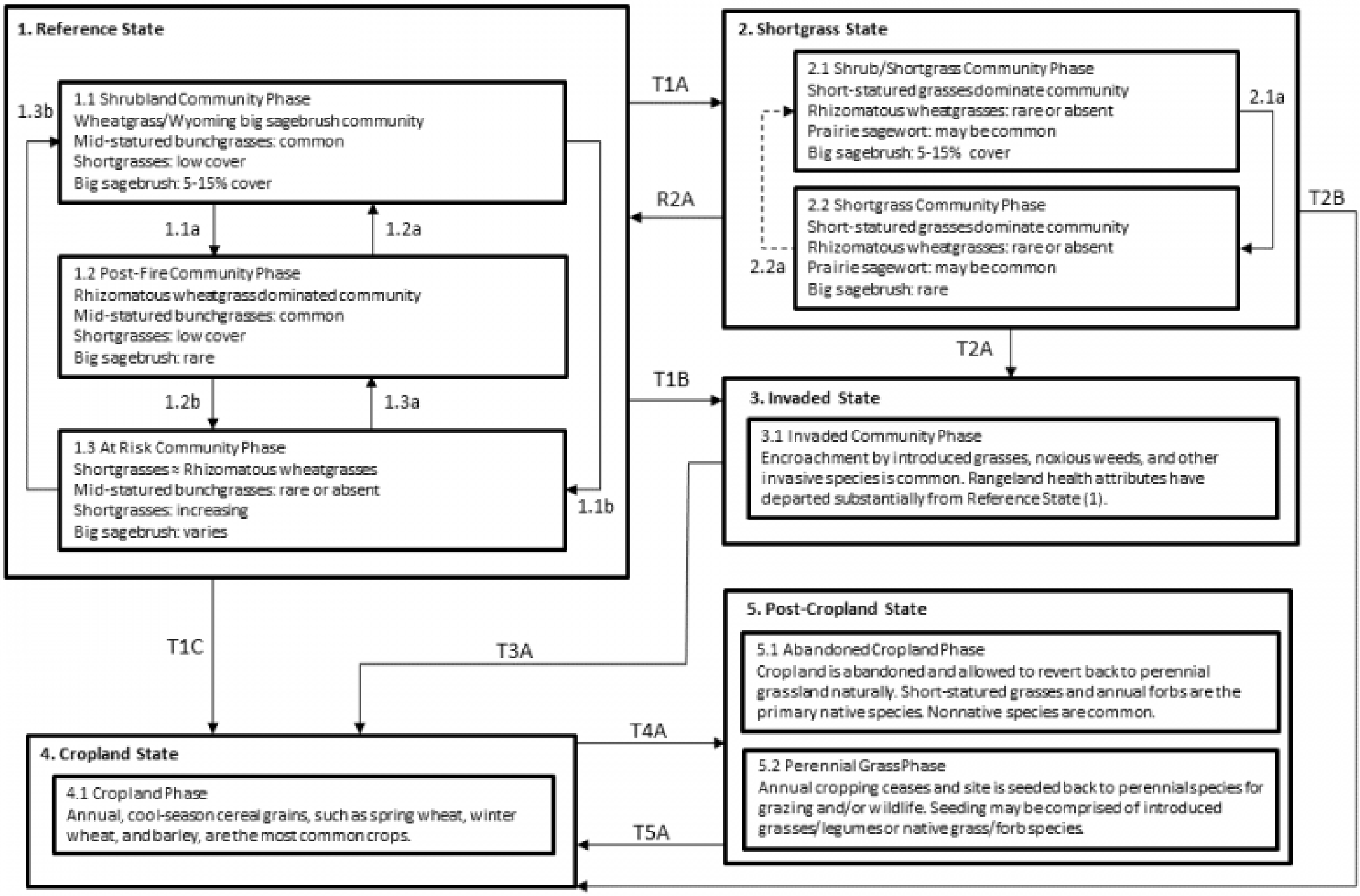

Figure 2. State-and-transition model (STM) diagram.

Dense Clay Dry Shrubland
R052XY707MT

Legend

1.1a, 2.1a - fire
1.2a, 2.2a - approximately 30 years post-fire regrowth
1.1b - drought, improper grazing management
1.2b - drought, improper grazing management
1.3a - normal or above average precipitation, proper grazing management (< 30 years post fire)
1.3b - normal or above average precipitation, proper grazing management (≥ 30 years post fire)
T1A - prolonged drought, improper grazing, or a combination of these factors
T1B - introduction of non-native invasive species (crested wheatgrass, noxious weeds, etc.)
T2A - introduction of weedy species; combined with drought and/or improper grazing management
R2A - range seeding, grazing land mechanical treatment, timely moisture, proper grazing management (management intensive and costly)
T1C, T2B, T3A, T5A - conversion to cropland
T4A - cessation of annual cropping

Note: dashed arrows represent hypothesized pathways

Figure 2. (continued).

Inventory data references

No field data was available for this provisional ecological site. One medium-intensity plot and 2 historical (417) plots for the Dense Clay Dry Grassland ecological site were used for reference. These plots, in combination with professional experience and a review of the scientific literature, were used to approximate the reference plant community. Information for other states and community phases was obtained from a review of the scientific literature and professional experience. All community phases are considered provisional based on these plots and the sources identified in this ecological site description.

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Approval

Kirt Walstad, 12/28/2022

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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.

Author(s)/participant(s)	

Contact for lead author	
Date	04/29/2024
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:

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13. **Amount of plant mortality and decadence (include which functional groups are expected to show mortality or decadence):**

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14. **Average percent litter cover (%) and depth (in):**

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15. **Expected annual annual-production (this is TOTAL above-ground annual-production, not just forage annual-production):**

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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:**

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17. **Perennial plant reproductive capability:**
