

Ecological site R067BY047CO Alkaline Plains

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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.

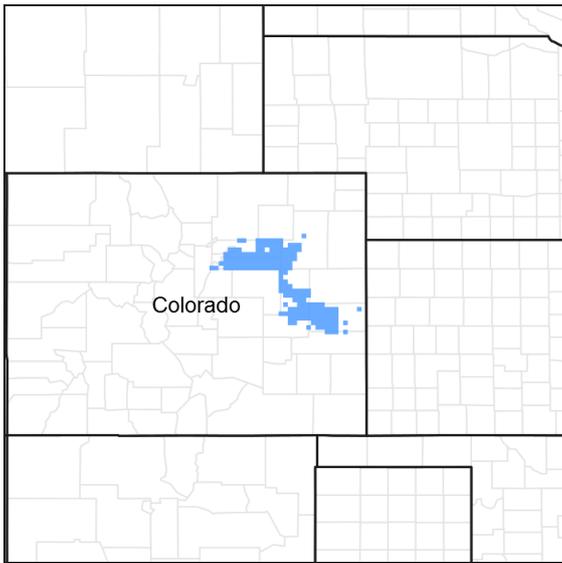


Figure 1. Mapped extent

Areas shown in blue indicate the maximum mapped extent of this ecological site. Other ecological sites likely occur within the highlighted areas. It is also possible for this ecological site to occur outside of highlighted areas if detailed soil survey has not been completed or recently updated.

MLRA notes

Major Land Resource Area (MLRA): 067B–Central High Plains, Southern Part

MLRA 67B occurs in eastern Colorado and consists of rolling plains and river valleys. Some canyonlands occur in the southeast portion. The major rivers are the South Platte and Arkansas which flow from the Rocky Mountains to Nebraska and Kansas. Other rivers in the MLRA include the Cache la Poudre and Republican and associated tributaries. This MLRA is traversed by Interstate 25, 70 and 76; and U.S. Highways 50 and 287. Major land uses include 54 percent rangeland, 35 percent cropland, and 2 percent pasture and hayland. Urban, developed open space, and miscellaneous land occupy approximately 9 percent. Major Cities in this area include Fort Collins, Greeley, Sterling, and Denver. Other cities include Limon, Cheyenne Wells, and Springfield. Land ownership is mostly private. Federal lands include Pawnee and Comanche National Grasslands (U.S. Forest Service), Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site (National Park Service), and Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service). State Parks include Cherry Creek and Chatfield Reservoirs, and Barr and Jackson Lakes.

This region is periodically affected by severe drought, including the historic “Dust Bowl” of the 1930s. Dust storms may form during drought years in windy periods. Elevations range from 3,400 to 6,000 feet. The Average annual precipitation ranges from 14 to 17 inches per year and ranges from 13 inches to over 18 inches, depending upon location. Precipitation occurs mostly during the growing season, often during rapidly developing thunderstorms. Mean annual air temperature (MAAT) is 48 to 52 degrees Fahrenheit. Summer temperatures may exceed 100

degrees Fahrenheit. Winter temperatures may be sub-zero, and snowfall varies from 20 to 40 inches per year. Snow cover frequently melts between snow events.

LRU notes

Land Resource Unit (LRU) A is the northeast portion of MLRA 67B, to an extent of approximately 9 million acres. Most of the LRU is rangeland, and includes the Pawnee National Grassland. Dryland winter wheat/fallow rotations (that may include dryland corn, sunflowers, and sorghum) are grown in most counties. Irrigated cropland is utilized in the South Platte Valley. Small acreage and urban ownership are more concentrated on the Front Range. This LRU is found in portions of Adams, Arapahoe, Elbert, Kit Carson, Larimer, Lincoln, Logan, Washington, and Weld counties. Other counties include Boulder, Cheyenne, Denver, Jefferson, and Yuma. The soil moisture regime is aridic ustic. The mean annual air temperature (MAAT) is 50 degrees Fahrenheit.

LRU B is in the southeast portion of MLRA 67B (2.6 million acres) and includes portions of Baca, Bent, Cheyenne, Kiowa, Las Animas, and Prowers counties. Most of the LRU remains in rangeland and includes the Comanche National Grassland. On the farmed land, a system of dryland winter wheat/fallow rotations (that may include dryland corn, sunflowers, and sorghum) is implemented. Irrigated cropland is found in the Arkansas Valley. The soil moisture regime is aridic ustic and the MAAT is 52 degrees Fahrenheit.

LRU C occurs in portions of Morgan and Weld counties (approximately 1.2 million acres). Most of LRU C is in rangeland. On the farmed land, a system of dryland winter wheat/fallow rotations (that may include dryland corn, sunflowers, and sorghum) is implemented. The soil moisture regime is ustic aridic and the MAAT is 48 degrees Fahrenheit.

Classification relationships

MLRA 67B is in the Colorado Piedmont and Raton Sections of the Great Plains Province (USDA, 2006). The MLRA is further defined by Land Resource Units (LRUs) A, B, and C. Features such as climate, geology, landforms, and key vegetation further refine these concepts and are described in other sections of the Ecological Site Description (ESD). NOTE: To date, these LRUs are DRAFT.

Relationship to Other Hierarchical Classifications:

NRCS Classification Hierarchy: Physiographic Division, Physiographic Province, Physiographic Section, Land Resource Region, Major Land Resource Area, Land Resource Unit (Fenneman, 1946).

USFS Classification Hierarchy: Domain, Division, Province, Section, Subsection,

Land Type Association: Land Type, Land Type Phase (Cleland et al, 1997).

REVISION NOTES:

The Alkaline Plains Ecological Site was developed by an earlier version (2004, revised 2007). This earlier version was based on input from Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly Soil Conservation Service) and historical information obtained from the Alkaline Plains Range Site descriptions (1975). This ESD meets the Provisional requirements of the National Ecological Site Handbook (NESH). This ESD will continue refinement towards an Approved status according to the NESH.

Ecological site concept

The site is a run-off site on slopes of less than six percent. Bedrock is deeper than 40 inches from the surface and there are less than 15 percent rock fragments on the soil surface or in the subsoil. The site is not dominated by sandy surface or subsoil textures, and there are visible salts present in the soil profile or on the soil surface.

Associated sites

R067BY042CO	Clayey Plains This ecological site is commonly adjacent.
R067BY002CO	Loamy Plains This ecological site is commonly adjacent.

R067BY036CO	Overflow This ecological site is commonly adjacent.
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Similar sites

R067BY045CO	Shaly Plains The Shaly Plains Ecological Site does not have visible salts in the soil profile or on the surface.
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Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	(1) <i>Atriplex canescens</i> (2) <i>Krascheninnikovia lanata</i>
Herbaceous	(1) <i>Sporobolus airoides</i> (2) <i>Bouteloua gracilis</i>

Physiographic features

This site typically occurs on summits and side slopes of interfluves on dissected plains, but occurs on treads of terraces or in swales in a few places.

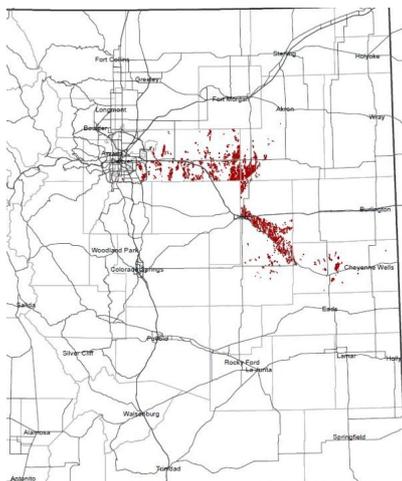


Figure 2. The distribution of the Alkaline Plains site in MLRA 67B.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Terrace (2) Swale (3) Interfluve
Runoff class	Low to high
Flooding frequency	None
Ponding frequency	None
Elevation	3,400–6,000 ft
Slope	0–6%
Ponding depth	0 in
Water table depth	80 in
Aspect	Aspect is not a significant factor

Climatic features

Average annual precipitation across the MLRA extent is 14 to 17 inches, and ranges from 13 to over 18 inches,

depending on location. Precipitation increases from north to south. Mean Annual Air Temperature (MAAT) is 50 degrees Fahrenheit in the northern part and increases to 52 degrees Fahrenheit in the southern part. Portions of Morgan and Weld counties are cooler and drier, the MAAT is 48 degrees Fahrenheit, and average precipitation is 13 to 14 inches per year.

Two-thirds of the annual precipitation occurs during the growing season from mid-April to late September. Snowfall averages 30 inches per year, area-wide, but varies by location from 20 to 40 inches per year. Winds are estimated to average 9 miles per hour annually. Daytime winds are generally stronger than at night, and occasional strong storms may bring periods of high winds with gusts to more than 90 mph. High-intensity afternoon thunderstorms may arise. The average length of the freeze-free period (28 degrees Fahrenheit) is 155 days from April 30th to October 3rd. The average frost-free period (32 degrees Fahrenheit) is 136 days from May 11th to September 24th. July is the hottest month, and December and January are the coldest months. Summer temperatures average 90 degrees Fahrenheit and occasionally exceed 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Summer humidity is low and evaporation is high. Winters are characterized with frequent northerly winds, producing severe cold with temperatures occasionally dropping to -30 degrees Fahrenheit or lower. Blizzard conditions may form quickly. For detailed information, visit the Western Regional Climate Center website:

Western Regional Climate Center Historical Data Western U.S. Climate summaries, NOAA Coop Stations Colorado <http://www.wrcc.dri.edu/summary/Climsmco.html>.

Table 3. Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (characteristic range)	119-129 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	134-151 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	14-17 in
Frost-free period (actual range)	102-132 days
Freeze-free period (actual range)	126-156 days
Precipitation total (actual range)	14-17 in
Frost-free period (average)	121 days
Freeze-free period (average)	142 days
Precipitation total (average)	15 in

Climate stations used

- (1) CHEYENNE WELLS [USC00051564], Cheyenne Wells, CO
- (2) FLAGLER 1S [USC00052932], Flagler, CO
- (3) FT MORGAN [USC00053038], Fort Morgan, CO
- (4) KIT CARSON [USC00054603], Kit Carson, CO
- (5) SPRINGFIELD 7 WSW [USC00057866], Springfield, CO
- (6) BRIGGSDALE [USC00050945], Briggsdale, CO
- (7) NUNN [USC00056023], Nunn, CO
- (8) GREELEY UNC [USC00053553], Greeley, CO
- (9) LIMON WSMO [USW00093010], Limon, CO
- (10) BRIGHTON 3 SE [USC00050950], Brighton, CO
- (11) BYERS 5 ENE [USC00051179], Byers, CO

Influencing water features

There are no water features associated with this ecological site.

Soil features

The soils on this site are very deep, well drained soils that formed from alluvium. They typically have a slow permeability class. The soil moisture regime is typically aridic ustic. The soil temperature regime is mesic.

The surface layer of the soils in this site are typically clay or silty clay, but may include clay loam or silty clay loam. The surface layer ranges from a depth of 4 to 7 inches thick. The subsoil is typically clay or silty clay, but may include clay loam and silty clay loam. Soils in this site typically have free carbonates at the surface, but some soils may be leached from 10 to 15 inches. These soils are salt affected, which adversely affect plants to varying degrees depending on the type and concentration of salt present. These areas have varying degrees of salt tolerant grasses and some non-tolerant species. These soils are susceptible to erosion by water and wind. The potential for water erosion accelerates with increasing slope.

Major soil series correlated to this ecological site include: Heldt (saline), Limon (saline), and Manzanst.

Other soil series that have been correlated to this site, but may eventually be re-correlated include: Manzanola.

The attributes listed below represent 0-40 inches in depth or to the first restrictive layer.

Note: Revisions to soil surveys are on-going. For the most recent updates, visit the Web Soil Survey, the official site for soils information: <http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/app/WebSoilSurvey.aspx>.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Alluvium
Surface texture	(1) Clay (2) Sandy clay (3) Clay loam
Drainage class	Well drained
Permeability class	Slow
Soil depth	80 in
Surface fragment cover <=3"	0%
Surface fragment cover >3"	0%
Available water capacity (0-40in)	3-8 in
Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-40in)	0-15%
Electrical conductivity (0-40in)	2-8 mmhos/cm
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-40in)	0-13
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-40in)	7.4-9
Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (Depth not specified)	0-5%
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (Depth not specified)	0%

Ecological dynamics

The Alkaline Plains Ecological Site is characterized by four states: Reference, Warm-Season Shortgrass, Increased *Bare Ground*, and Tilled. The Reference State is characterized by warm-season bunchgrass (alkali sacaton, blue grama), and cool-season midgrass (western wheatgrass, green needlegrass). The Warm-season Shortgrass State is characterized by a warm-season short bunchgrass (blue grama) and stoloniferous grass (buffalograss). The Increased *Bare Ground* State is characterized by early successional warm-season bunchgrass (Fendler threeawn), cool-season short bunchgrass (squirreltail), annual grasses, and annual forbs. The Tilled State has been mechanically disturbed by equipment and includes either a variety of reseeded warm- and cool-season grasses or early successional plants as well as annual grasses and forbs.

Grazing by large herbivores, without adequate recovery periods following each grazing occurrence, causes alkali sacaton to decrease and blue grama and buffalograss to increase. Blue grama and buffalograss may eventually form a sod-like appearance. Cool-season grasses such as western wheatgrass and green needlegrass decrease in frequency and production. Fourwing saltbush decreases in frequency and production. American vetch and other highly palatable forbs also decreases. Fendler threeawn, annuals, and bare ground increase under heavy, continuous grazing, excessive defoliation, or long-term non-use. Areas of this ecological site have been tilled and used for crop production or converted to suburban residence and small acreages, especially near the larger communities.

The degree of grazing has a significant impact on the ecological dynamics of the site. This region was historically occupied by large grazing animals, such as bison, elk, pronghorn, and mule deer. Grazing by these large herbivores, along with climatic and seasonal weather fluctuations, had a major influence on the ecological dynamics of the site. Deer and pronghorn are widely distributed throughout the MLRA. Secondary influences of herbivory by species such as prairie dogs and other small rodents, insects, and root-feeding organisms continues to impact the vegetation.

Historically, grazing patterns by herds of large ungulates were driven by water distribution, precipitation events, drought events, and fire. It is believed that grazing periods would have been shorter, followed by longer recovery periods. These large migrating herds impacted the ecological processes of nutrient and hydrologic cycles, by urination, trampling (incorporation of litter into the soil surface), and breaking of surface crust, (which increases water infiltration).

Today, livestock grazing, especially beef cattle has been a major influence on the ecological dynamics of the site. Grazing management, coupled with the effects of annual climatic variations, largely dictates the plant communities for the site.

Recurrent drought has historically impacted the vegetation of this region. Changes in species composition vary depending upon the duration and severity of the drought cycle and prior grazing management. Drought events since 2002 have significantly increased mortality of blue grama and buffalograss in some locales.

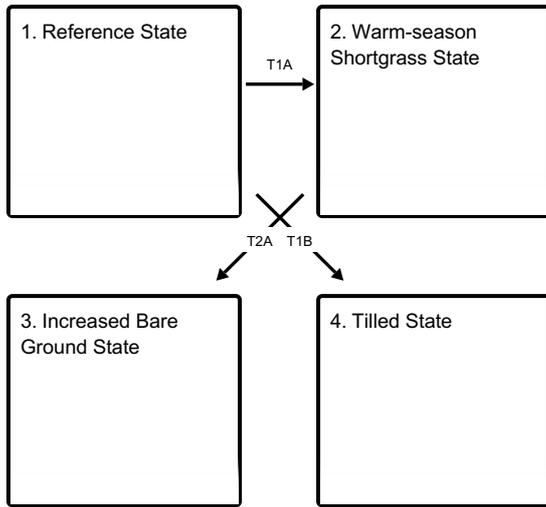
This site developed with occasional fire as part of the ecological processes. Historic fire frequency (pre-industrial) is estimated at 10 to 14 years (Guyette, 2012), randomly distributed, and started by lightning at various times throughout the growing season. Early human inhabitants also were likely to start fires for various reasons (deliberate or accidental). It is believed that fires were set as a management tool for attracting herds of large migratory herbivores (Stewart, 2002). The impact of fire over the past 100 years has been relatively insignificant due to the human control of wildfires and the lack of acceptance of prescribed fire as a management tool.

Mechanical treatment consisting of contour pitting, furrowing, terracing, chiseling, and disking has been practiced in the past. It was theorized that the use of this high-input technology would improve production and plant composition on rangeland. These high-cost practices have shown to have no significant long-term benefits on production or plant composition and have only resulted in a permanently rough ground surface. Prescribed grazing that mimics the historic grazing of herds of migratory herbivores, as described earlier, has been shown to result in desired improvements based on management goals for this ecological site.

Eastern Colorado was strongly affected by extended drought conditions in the "Dust Bowl" period of the 1930's, with recurrent drought cycles in the 1950s and 1970s. Extreme to exceptional drought conditions have re-visited the area from 2002 to 2012, with brief interludes of near normal to normal precipitation years. Long-term effects of these latest drought events have yet to be determined. Growth of native cool-season plants begins about April 1 and continues to mid-June. Native warm-season plants begin growth about May 1 and continue to about August 15. Regrowth of cool-season plants occurs in September in most years, depending on the availability of moisture.

State and transition model

Ecosystem states

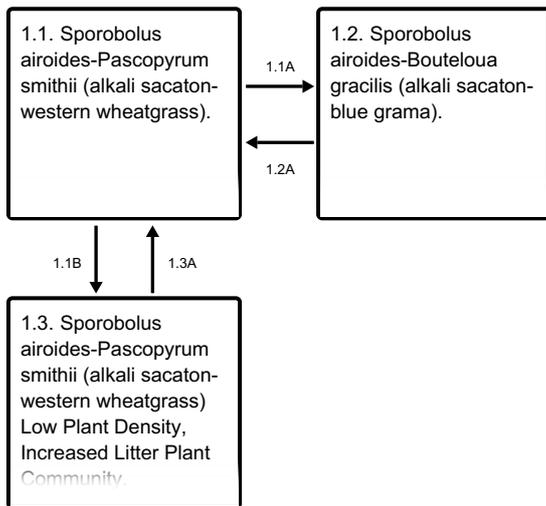


T1A - excessive grazing. Lack of fire.

T1B - Mechanical tillage.

T2A - Excessive grazing. Lack of fire.

State 1 submodel, plant communities



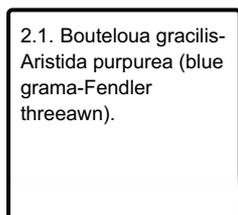
1.1A - Excessive grazing. Lack of fire.

1.1B - Non-use. Lack of fire.

1.2A - Prescribed grazing. Prescribed fire.

1.3A - Prescribed grazing. Prescribed fire.

State 2 submodel, plant communities



State 3 submodel, plant communities

3.1. Opuntia
polyacantha/Aristida
purpurea-Muhlenbergia
torreyi(pricklypear/Fen
dler threeawn-ring
muhly).

State 4 submodel, plant communities

4.1. Salsola-Bassia
scoparia/Bromus
tectorum-Aristida
purpurea (Russian
thistle-burningbush\
cheatgrass-Fendler
threeawn).

4.2. Seeded
Community

State 1 Reference State

The Reference State is characterized by three distinct plant community phases. The plant communities and the various successional stages between them represent the natural range of variability within the Reference State.

Dominant plant species

- fourwing saltbush (*Atriplex canescens*), shrub
- winterfat (*Krascheninnikovia lanata*), shrub
- alkali sacaton (*Sporobolus airoides*), grass
- western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*), grass

Community 1.1

Sporobolus airoides-Pascopyrum smithii (alkali sacaton-western wheatgrass).

This is the interpretive plant community. This plant community evolved with grazing by large herbivores, is well suited for grazing by domestic livestock, and can be found on areas that are properly managed with prescribed grazing. The Reference Plant Community consists mainly of warm and cool-season midgrasses. The principal dominant cool-season midgrasses are alkali sacaton, western wheatgrass, and green needlegrass. Blue grama is the dominant warm-season shortgrass. Grass and grass-likes of secondary importance are sideoats grama and sun sedge. Forbs and shrubs such as American vetch, leafy false goldenweed, fourwing saltbush, and winterfat are significant. The Reference Plant Community is about 75 to 85 percent grasses and grass-likes, 5 to 10 percent forbs and 10 to 15 percent shrubs by air-dry weight. This plant community is diverse and productive. Litter is properly distributed with very little movement off-site and natural plant mortality is very low. It is well suited to carbon sequestration, and wildlife and livestock use. The community dynamics, nutrient cycle, water cycle, and energy flow are functioning properly. This is a sustainable plant community in terms of soil stability, watershed function, and biological integrity. Total annual production, during a normal year, ranges from 600 to 1800 pounds per acre air-dry weight and averages 1400 pounds.

Dominant plant species

- fourwing saltbush (*Atriplex canescens*), shrub
- winterfat (*Krascheninnikovia lanata*), shrub
- alkali sacaton (*Sporobolus airoides*), grass
- western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*), grass

Table 5. Annual production by plant type

Plant Type	Low (Lb/Acre)	Representative Value (Lb/Acre)	High (Lb/Acre)
Grass/Grasslike	400	1120	1440
Shrub/Vine	135	175	215
Forb	65	105	145
Total	600	1400	1800

Figure 10. Plant community growth curve (percent production by month). CO6708, Warm-season/cool-season codominant; MLRA-67B; upland fine-textured soils..

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
0	0	2	8	20	35	18	10	5	2	0	0

Community 1.2

Sporobolus airoides-Bouteloua gracilis (alkali sacaton-blue grama).

Blue grama has increased but has not yet developed into a sod-bound condition. Key species such as alkali sacaton, western wheatgrass, green needlegrass, American vetch, fourwing saltbush, and winterfat have decreased. Forbs and shrubs such as scarlet globemallow, rubber rabbitbrush (aka green plume rabbitbrush), and broom snakeweed have increased. Total aboveground carbon has been reduced due to decreases in forage and litter production. Reduction of rhizomatous wheatgrass, nitrogen fixing forbs, the shrub component, and increased warm-season shortgrass has begun to alter the biotic integrity of this community. Water and nutrient cycles are at risk of becoming impaired. Total annual production during a normal year ranges from 400 to 1,100 pounds per acre air-dry weight and averages 800 pounds.

Dominant plant species

- fourwing saltbush (*Atriplex canescens*), shrub
- winterfat (*Krascheninnikovia lanata*), shrub
- alkali sacaton (*Sporobolus airoides*), grass
- blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*), grass

Figure 11. Plant community growth curve (percent production by month). CO6702, Warm-season dominant, cool-season subdominant; MLRA-67B, upland fine textured soils..

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
0	0	0	2	15	45	20	15	3	0	0	0

Community 1.3

Sporobolus airoides-Pascopyrum smithii (alkali sacaton-western wheatgrass) Low Plant Density, Increased Litter Plant Community.

This plant community occurs when grazing is removed for long periods of time in the absence of fire. Plant composition is similar to the Reference Plant Community, however individual species production and frequency will be lower. Much of the nutrients are tied up in excessive litter and standing dead canopy. The semiarid environment and the absence of animal traffic to break down litter slow nutrient recycling. Aboveground litter also limits sunlight from reaching plant crowns. Many plants, especially bunchgrasses (alkali sacaton, green needlegrass, and sideoats grama) die off. Increased litter and absence of grazing animals (animal impact) reduce seed germination and establishment. In advanced stages, plant mortality can increase and erosion may eventually occur if bare ground increases. Once this happens it will require increased energy input in terms of practice cost and management to bring back. Total annual production, during an average year, ranges from 400 to 1300 pounds per acre air-dry weight.

Dominant plant species

- fourwing saltbush (*Atriplex canescens*), shrub

- winterfat (*Krascheninnikovia lanata*), shrub
- alkali sacaton (*Sporobolus airoides*), grass
- western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*), grass

Figure 12. Plant community growth curve (percent production by month). CO6705, Warm-season/cool-season codominant, excess litter; MLRA-67B; upland fine textured soils.

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
0	0	2	7	18	35	18	13	5	2	0	0

Pathway 1.1A Community 1.1 to 1.2

Heavy, continuous grazing without adequate recovery opportunity between grazing events and reduced fire frequency shifts this plant community toward the 1.2 Community. Extended drought accelerates this transition. Recurring spring seasonal grazing decreases cool-season plants. Recurring summer grazing decreases warm-season plants. Biotic integrity is altered and water & nutrient cycles are impaired.

Pathway 1.1B Community 1.1 to 1.3

Non-use and lack of fire move this plant community to the 1.3 Community. Plant decadence and standing dead plant material impede energy flow. Water and nutrient cycles may become impaired as a result of this community pathway.

Pathway 1.2A Community 1.2 to 1.1

Grazing with adequate recovery periods after each occurrence, proper stocking rate, and prescribed fire return this plant community to the Reference Community, relative to climatic conditions. Drought followed by a return of normal precipitation may cause western wheatgrass to increase, resembling more closely the Reference Plant Community.

Conservation practices

Prescribed Burning
Prescribed Grazing

Pathway 1.3A Community 1.3 to 1.1

The return of grazing with adequate recovery periods and normal fire frequency triggers a return to the Reference Plant Community. This change can occur in a relatively short time frame with the return of these disturbances.

Conservation practices

Prescribed Burning
Prescribed Grazing

State 2 Warm-season Shortgrass State

An ecological threshold has been crossed and a significant amount of production and diversity has been lost when compared to the Reference State. Significant biotic and edaphic (soil characteristic) changes have negatively impacted energy flow and nutrient and hydrologic cycles. This is a very stable state, resistant to change due to the high tolerance of blue grama and buffalograss to grazing, the development of a shallow root system (aka rootpan),

and subsequent changes in hydrology and nutrient cycling. The loss of other functional/structural groups such as cool-season bunchgrasses, warm-season bunchgrasses, forbs, and shrubs, reduces the biodiversity and productivity of this site.

Dominant plant species

- plains pricklypear (*Opuntia polyacantha*), shrub
- broom snakeweed (*Gutierrezia sarothrae*), shrub
- blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*), grass
- Fendler threeawn (*Aristida purpurea* var. *longiseta*), grass

Community 2.1

Bouteloua gracilis-Aristida purpurea (blue grama-Fendler threeawn).

Green needlegrass, American vetch, fourwing saltbush, and winterfat have been removed. Alkali sacaton, western wheatgrass, and sideoats grama may persist in minor trace amounts, greatly reduced in vigor and not readily seen. Blue grama dominates the community and has developed into a sod bound condition. Fendler threeawn, ring muhly, bottlebrush squirreltail, desert princesplume, silky sophora, twogrooved milkvetch, mouse-ear povertyweed, and broom snakeweed have also increased. This plant community is resistant to change due to grazing tolerance of blue grama. A significant amount of production and diversity has been lost when compared to the Reference Plant Community. Loss of cool-season grasses, the shrub component, and nitrogen fixing forbs have negatively impacted energy flow and nutrient cycling. Water infiltration is reduced significantly due to the shallow root system (rootpan), characteristic of sod-bound blue grama. Soil loss may be obvious where flow paths are connected. Total annual production, during a normal year, ranges from 200 to 800 pounds per acre air-dry weight and averages 450 pounds.

Dominant plant species

- plains pricklypear (*Opuntia polyacantha*), shrub
- broom snakeweed (*Gutierrezia sarothrae*), shrub
- blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*), grass
- Fendler threeawn (*Aristida purpurea* var. *longiseta*), grass

Figure 13. Plant community growth curve (percent production by month). CO6707, Warm-season dominant; MLRA-67B; upland fine-textured soils..

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
0	0	0	3	20	45	20	10	2	0	0	0

State 3

Increased Bare Ground State

Bare ground is a major concern. Erosion potential is high especially where flow paths are continuous. Soil loss is expected and can be severe especially on long unbroken slopes. Plant pedestalling and rills can be evident. This state lacks stability, diversity, and productivity. An ecological threshold has been crossed.

Dominant plant species

- plains pricklypear (*Opuntia polyacantha*), shrub
- broom snakeweed (*Gutierrezia sarothrae*), shrub
- Fendler threeawn (*Aristida purpurea* var. *longiseta*), grass
- ring muhly (*Muhlenbergia torreyi*), grass
- Russian thistle (*Salsola*), other herbaceous
- burningbush (*Bassia scoparia*), other herbaceous

Community 3.1

Opuntia polyacantha/Aristida purpurea-Muhlenbergia torreyi(pricklypear/Fendler threeawn-ring muhly).

This community is in an extremely degraded condition. Blue grama can occur in remnant amounts or be totally

absent. Lower successional perennial species that dominate the community are Fendler threeawn, ring muhly, and pricklypear. Russian thistle, burningbush, and cheatgrass are common annual invaders. Total annual production, during an average year, ranges from 50 to 200 pounds per acre air-dry weight.

Dominant plant species

- plains pricklypear (*Opuntia polyacantha*), shrub
- broom snakeweed (*Gutierrezia sarothrae*), shrub
- Fendler threeawn (*Aristida purpurea* var. *longiseta*), grass
- ring muhly (*Muhlenbergia torreyi*), grass
- Russian thistle (*Salsola*), other herbaceous
- burningbush (*Bassia scoparia*), other herbaceous

Figure 14. Plant community growth curve (percent production by month). CO6707, Warm-season dominant; MLRA-67B; upland fine-textured soils..

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
0	0	0	3	20	45	20	10	2	0	0	0

State 4

Tilled State

The Tilled State is the result of the site being mechanically tilled. An ecological threshold has been crossed due to complete removal of vegetation. Physical, chemical, and biological soil properties have been dramatically altered.

Dominant plant species

- cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), grass
- Fendler threeawn (*Aristida purpurea* var. *longiseta*), grass
- Russian thistle (*Salsola*), other herbaceous
- burningbush (*Bassia scoparia*), other herbaceous

Community 4.1

Salsola-Bassia scoparia/Bromus tectorum-Aristida purpurea (Russian thistle-burningbush\ cheatgrass-Fendler threeawn).

Go-back land is created when the soil is tilled or farmed (sodbusted) and abandoned. All of the native plants are removed, soil organic matter is reduced, soil structure is altered, and a plowpan or compacted layer is formed. Residual synthetic chemicals often remain from past farming operations and erosion processes may be active. Over time, burningbush, Russian thistle, and cheatgrass begin to establish. The plant community in time becomes dominated by Fendler threeawn. Eventually, other early successional perennials may begin to establish.

Dominant plant species

- cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), grass
- Fendler threeawn (*Aristida purpurea* var. *longiseta*), grass
- Russian thistle (*Salsola*), other herbaceous
- burningbush (*Bassia scoparia*), other herbaceous

Community 4.2

Seeded Community

This community results from any plant community that was tilled and seeded to adapted native plant species. A seed mixture of adapted native grasses, forbs, and shrubs should be used to accomplish various management objectives.

Transition T1A

State 1 to 2

Continuous, heavy grazing without adequate recovery periods between grazing events and lack of fire shifts this state across an ecological threshold to the Warm-season Shortgrass Dominant State.

Transition T1B State 1 to 4

Mechanical tillage of this ecological site causes an immediate transition across an ecological threshold to the Tilled State. This transition can occur from any plant community and it is irreversible.

Transition T2A State 2 to 3

Long-term, heavy, continuous grazing without adequate recovery periods following each grazing event and lack of fire shifts this state to the Increased *Bare Ground* State. Erosion and loss of organic matter and carbon reserves are constraints to recovery.

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				1050–1190	
	alkali sacaton	SPAI	<i>Sporobolus airoides</i>	420–560	–
	western wheatgrass	PASM	<i>Pascopyrum smithii</i>	280–420	–
	blue grama	BOGR2	<i>Bouteloua gracilis</i>	210–280	–
	green needlegrass	NAVI4	<i>Nassella viridula</i>	70–140	–
	sideoats grama	BOCU	<i>Bouteloua curtipendula</i>	14–98	–
	Grass, perennial	2GP	<i>Grass, perennial</i>	14–70	–
	buffalograss	BODA2	<i>Bouteloua dactyloides</i>	0–42	–
	Sandberg bluegrass	POSE	<i>Poa secunda</i>	0–42	–
	sand dropseed	SPCR	<i>Sporobolus cryptandrus</i>	0–28	–
	sun sedge	CAINH2	<i>Carex inops ssp. heliophila</i>	14–28	–
	saltgrass	DISP	<i>Distichlis spicata</i>	0–14	–
	squirreltail	ELELE	<i>Elymus elymoides ssp. elymoides</i>	0–14	–
	ring muhly	MUTO2	<i>Muhlenbergia torreyi</i>	0–14	–
	Indian ricegrass	ACHY	<i>Achnatherum hymenoides</i>	0–14	–
	Fendler threeawn	ARPUL	<i>Aristida purpurea var. longiseta</i>	0–14	–
	tumblegrass	SCPA	<i>Schedonnardus paniculatus</i>	0–14	–
	little bluestem	SCSC	<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>	0–14	–
Forb					
2				70–140	
	Forb, perennial	2FP	<i>Forb, perennial</i>	14–70	–
	twogrooved milkvetch	ASBI2	<i>Astragalus bisulcatus</i>	14–28	–
	leafy false goldenweed	OOFOF	<i>Oonopsis foliosa var. foliosa</i>	14–28	–
	scarlet globemallow	SPCO	<i>Sphaeralcea coccinea</i>	14–28	–
	American vetch	VIAM	<i>Vicia americana</i>	14–28	–

	desert princesplume	STPIP	<i>Stanleya pinnata var. pinnata</i>	0–14	–
	upright prairie coneflower	RACO3	<i>Ratibida columnifera</i>	0–14	–
	silky sophora	SONU	<i>Sophora nuttalliana</i>	0–14	–
	purple prairie clover	DAPUP	<i>Dalea purpurea var. purpurea</i>	0–14	–
	povertyweed	IVAX	<i>Iva axillaris</i>	0–14	–
	dotted blazing star	LIPU	<i>Liatris punctata</i>	0–14	–
	lacy tansyaster	MAPIP4	<i>Machaeranthera pinnatifida ssp. pinnatifida var. pinnatifida</i>	0–14	–
Shrub/Vine					
3				140–210	
	fourwing saltbush	ATCA2	<i>Atriplex canescens</i>	70–140	–
	winterfat	KRLA2	<i>Krascheninnikovia lanata</i>	28–70	–
	Shrub (>.5m)	2SHRUB	<i>Shrub (>.5m)</i>	14–42	–
	rubber rabbitbrush	ERNAG	<i>Ericameria nauseosa ssp. nauseosa var. glabrata</i>	14–28	–
	broom snakeweed	GUSA2	<i>Gutierrezia sarothrae</i>	0–14	–
	plains pricklypear	OPPO	<i>Opuntia polyacantha</i>	0–14	–

Animal community

WILDLIFE INTERPRETATIONS:

The combination of grasses, forbs, and shrubs found on the ecological site provide habitat for numerous wildlife species. Historic large grazers that influenced these communities were bison, elk, mule deer, and pronghorn. Herbivory and soil disturbance by black-tailed prairie dogs influenced ecological processes, supporting unique wildlife species. Bison are no longer widely distributed in their historic range. Prairie dogs occupy a small fraction of their historic range. Pronghorn are the most abundant ungulates using this ecological site, followed by mule deer. Domestic grazers share these habitats with wildlife. The grassland communities of eastern Colorado are home to many bird species. Changes in the composition of the plant community when moving from the Reference Community to other communities on this ecological site may result in species shifts in bird species. Because of a lack of permanent water, fish are not common.

1.1 Reference Plant Community

Pronghorn and to a lesser extent, mule deer, use this plant community due to the prevalence of four-wing saltbush and winterfat which provide important browse resources, especially in winter. Black-tailed jackrabbits rely heavily on stands of fourwing saltbush for cover and browse. This site also supports a high diversity of migratory grassland birds including lark bunting, Cassin's sparrow, and loggerheaded shrike among others. Small mammal diversity may be higher on this site compared to others due to the forage and cover resources provided by shrubs.

1.2 Community

This community is very similar to the Reference Community therefore the value for wildlife is not significantly different. Wildlife species using this this plant community would similar to those using the Reference Community.

1.3 Community

This community is very similar to the Reference Community; therefore the value for wildlife is not significantly different. Wildlife species using this this plant community would similar to those using the Reference Community.

2.1 Community

The loss of shrubs and mid-grasses, and reduced forb diversity affects the diversity of wildlife species using this plant community. Pronghorn use this community but it has reduced forage value. Grassland birds preferring shorter structure grasses reside here and these include horned lark, McCown's and chestnut collared longspurs, among others.

3.1 Community

The loss of perennial forbs, combined with the increase in bare ground results in a change in wildlife species when compared with the Reference State. Prairie rattlesnake and other reptiles using the Reference state are still found here. Swainson's hawks continue to be found here because it will be easy to spot prey in this community. Black-tailed prairie dogs and their obligate species also use the state. This community has low value for pronghorn and mule deer due to the loss of shrubs and more palatable grasses and forbs.

4.1 Community

This community is very similar to the 3.1 Community therefore the value for wildlife is not significantly different and similar species use both communities.

4.2 Community

Wildlife use of tilled and replanted fields is dependent on the plant species used in the planted seed mix. The purpose of the seeding (i.e. reclamation, soil erosion control, livestock grazing, targeted wildlife species, etc.) affects the usability for wildlife. If wildlife use is a primary concern, then seed mixes must be designed to meet species specific habitat requirements.

GRAZING INTERPRETATIONS:

The following table lists suggested initial stocking rates for an animal unit (1000-pound beef cow) under continuous grazing (yearlong grazing or growing-season-long grazing) based on normal growing conditions. However, continuous grazing is not recommended. These estimates should only be used as preliminary guidelines in the initial stages of the conservation planning process. Often, the existing plant composition does not entirely match any particular plant community described in this ecological site description. Therefore, field inventories are always recommended to document plant composition, total production, and palatable forage production. Carrying capacity estimates that reflect on-site conditions should be calculated using field inventories.

If the following production estimates are used, they should be adjusted based on animal kind or class and on the specific palatability of the forage plants in the various plant community descriptions. Under a properly stocked, properly applied, prescribed grazing management system that provides adequate recovery periods following each grazing event, improved harvest efficiencies eventually result in increased carrying capacity. See USDA-NRCS Colorado Prescribed Grazing Standard and Specification Guide (528).

The stocking rate calculations are based on the total annual forage production in a normal year multiplied by 25 percent harvest efficiency divided by 912.5 pounds of ingested air-dry vegetation for an animal unit per month (AUM).

Reference PC - (1400) (0.38)

1.2 PC - (800) (0.22)

2.1 PC - (450) (0.12)

Grazing by domestic livestock is one of the major income-producing industries in the area. Rangelands in this area provide yearlong forage under prescribed grazing for cattle, sheep, horses and other herbivores.

An on-site inventory must be conducted prior to developing a grazing plan.

Hydrological functions

Water is the principal factor limiting forage production on this site. This site is dominated by soils in hydrologic group D. Infiltration is low and runoff potential for this site varies from moderate to high depending on ground cover. In many cases, areas with greater than 75 percent ground cover have the greatest potential for high infiltration and lower runoff. An example of an exception would be where short grasses form a strong sod and dominate the site. Areas where ground cover is less than 50 percent have the greatest potential to have reduced infiltration and higher runoff (refer to NRCS Section 4, National Engineering Handbook (USDA-NRCS, 1972-2012) for runoff quantities and hydrologic curves).

Recreational uses

This site provides hunting, hiking, photography, bird watching, and other opportunities. The wide varieties of plants that bloom from spring until fall have an aesthetic value that appeals to visitors.

Wood products

No appreciable wood products are present on the site.

Other products

Site Development and Testing Plan

General Data (MLRA and Revision Notes, Hierarchical Classification, Ecological Site Concept, Physiographic, Climate, and Water Features, and Soils Data):

Updated. All "Required" items complete to Provisional level.

Community Phase Data (Ecological Dynamics, STM, Transition & Recovery Pathways, Reference Plant Community, Species Composition List, Annual Production Table):

Updated. All "Required" items complete to Provisional level.

NOTE: Annual Production Table is from the "Previously Approved" ESD 2004. The Species Composition List is also from the 2004 version, with minor edits. These will need review for future updates at Approved level.

Each Alternative State/Community:

Complete to Provisional level

Supporting Information (Site Interpretations, Assoc. & Similar Sites, Inventory Data References, Agency/State Correlation, References):

Updated. All "Required" items complete to Provisional level.

Livestock Interpretations updated to reflect Total Annual Production revisions in each plant community.

Wildlife interpretations, general narrative, and individual plant communities updated to the Provisional level. Hydrology, Recreational Uses, Wood Products, Other Products, Plant Preferences table, and Rangeland Health Reference Sheet carried over from previously "Approved" ESD 2004.

Reference Sheet

The Reference Sheet was previously approved in 2007. It will be updated at the next "Approved" level.

"Future work, as described in a project plan, to validate the information in this provisional ecological site description is needed. This will include field activities to collect low and medium intensity sampling, soil correlations, and analysis of that data. Annual field reviews should be done by soil scientists and vegetation specialists. A final field review, peer review, quality control, and quality assurance reviews of the ESD will be needed to produce the final document." (NI 430_306 ESI and ESD, April, 2015).

Other information

Relationship to Other Hierarchical Classifications:

NRCS Classification Hierarchy:

Physiographic Divisions of the United States (Fenneman, 1946): Physiographic Division Physiographic

ProvincePhysiographic SectionLand Resource RegionMajor Land Resource Area (MLRA)Land Resource Unit (LRU).

USFS Classification Hierarchy:

National Hierarchical Framework of Ecological Units (Cleland et al, 181-200):

DomainDivisionProvinceSectionSubsectionLandtype Association LandtypeLandtype Phase.

NRCS Classification Hierarchy:

Physiographic Divisions of the United States (Fenneman, 1946): Physiographic DivisionPhysiographic ProvincePhysiographic SectionLand Resource RegionMajor Land Resource Area (MLRA)Land Resource Unit (LRU).

USFS Classification Hierarchy:

National Hierarchical Framework of Ecological Units (Cleland et al, 181-200):

DomainDivisionProvinceSectionSubsectionLandtype Association LandtypeLandtype Phase.

Inventory data references

NRI: references to Natural Resource Inventory data

Information presented here has been derived from data collection on private and federal lands using:

- Double Sampling (clipped 2 of 5 plots)*
- Rangeland Health (Pellant et al., 2005)
- Soil Stability (Pellant et al., 2005)
- Line Point Intercept : Foliar canopy, basal cover (Forb, Graminoid, Shrub, subshrub, Lichen, Moss, Rock fragments, bare ground, % Litter) (Herrick et al., 2005)
- Soil pedon descriptions collected on site (Schoeneberger et al., 2012)

*NRCS double-sampling method, CO NRCS Similarity Index Worksheet 528(1).

Additional reconnaissance data collection using numerous ocular estimates and other inventory data; NRCS clipping data for USDA program support; Field observations from experienced range trained personnel. Specific data information is contained in individual landowner/user case files and other files located in county NRCS field offices.

Those involved in developing the 2004 site description include: Ben Berlinger, Rangeland Management Specialist, CO-NRCS; Harvey Sprock, Rangeland Management Specialist, CO-NRCS; James Borchert, Soil Scientist, CO-NRCS; Terri Skadeland, Biologist, CO-NRCS.

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Data collection for this ecological site was done in conjunction with the progressive soil surveys within the 67B Central High Plains (Southern Part) of Colorado. It has been mapped and correlated with soils in the following soil surveys: Adams County, Arapahoe County, Baca County, Bent County, Boulder County, Cheyenne County, El Paso County Area, Elbert County, Eastern Part, Kiowa County, Kit Carson County, Larimer County Area, Las Animas County Area, Lincoln County, Logan County, Morgan County, Prowers County, Washington County, Weld County, Northern Part, and Weld County, Southern Part.

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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)	Harvey Sprock, Ben Berlinger, Daniel Nosal
Contact for lead author	Harvey Sprock
Date	01/12/2005
Approved by	Kirt Walstad
Approval date	
Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on	Annual Production

Indicators

1. **Number and extent of rills:** None

2. **Presence of water flow patterns:** None

3. **Number and height of erosional pedestals or terracettes:** None

4. **Bare ground from Ecological Site Description or other studies (rock, litter, lichen, moss, plant canopy are not bare ground):** 3 percent or less bare ground, with bare patches generally less than 2 to 3 inches in diameter. Extended drought can cause bare ground to increase upwards to 10 to 20percent with bare patches reaching upwards to 6 to 12 inches in diameter.

5. **Number of gullies and erosion associated with gullies:** None

6. **Extent of wind scoured, blowouts and/or depositional areas:** None

7. **Amount of litter movement (describe size and distance expected to travel):** Litter movement is minimal and short.

8. **Soil surface (top few mm) resistance to erosion (stability values are averages - most sites will show a range of values):** Stability class rating is anticipated to be 5 to 6 in the interspaces at soil surface.

9. **Soil surface structure and SOM content (include type of structure and A-horizon color and thickness):** SOM ranges from 1 to 2 percent. Soil is moderately deep. Surface texture is silty clay loam to clay loam. A-horizon color is light brownish-gray at 0 to 4 inches in depth. Structure is weak medium sub-angular blocky parting to moderate very fine

granular.

10. **Effect of community phase composition (relative proportion of different functional groups) and spatial distribution on infiltration and runoff:** Raindrop impact is reduced by the diverse grass, forb, shrub functional/structural groups and root structure. This slows overland flow and provides increased time for infiltration to occur. Extended drought, wildfire or both may reduce basal density, canopy cover, and litter amounts (primarily from tall, warm-season bunch and rhizomatous grasses), resulting in decreased infiltration and increased runoff on steep slopes following intense rainfall events.
-
11. **Presence and thickness of compaction layer (usually none; describe soil profile features which may be mistaken for compaction on this site):** None
-
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: Warm-season mid bunchgrass >
- Sub-dominant: Cool-season mid rhizomatous > warm-season short bunchgrass > cool-season mid bunchgrass = shrubs >
- Other: forbs
- Additional:
-
13. **Amount of plant mortality and decadence (include which functional groups are expected to show mortality or decadence):** None to minimal. Expect slight shrub and grass mortality and decadence during and following extended drought or long-term lack of disturbance.
-
14. **Average percent litter cover (%) and depth (in):** Litter cover during and following extended drought ranges from 20 to 30 percent.
-
15. **Expected annual annual-production (this is TOTAL above-ground annual-production, not just forage annual-production):** 600 lbs./ac. low precip years, 1400 lbs./ac. average precip years, 1800 lbs./ac. high precip years. After extended drought or the first growing season following wildfire, production may be significantly reduced by 350 – 550 lbs./ac.
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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 plants should not occur in reference plant community. Russian thistle, burningbush, or other non-native species may invade following extended drought or fire assuming a seed source is available.

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17. **Perennial plant reproductive capability:** The only limitations are weather-related, wildfire, natural disease, and insects that may temporarily reduce reproductive capability.
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