USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

# Ecological site R073XY111KS
# Sandy Plains

Last updated: 4/12/2021
Accessed: 05/13/2024

## General information

**Approved**. An approved ecological site description has undergone quality control and quality assurance review. It contains a working state and transition model, enough information to identify the ecological site, and full documentation for all ecosystem states contained in the state and transition model.

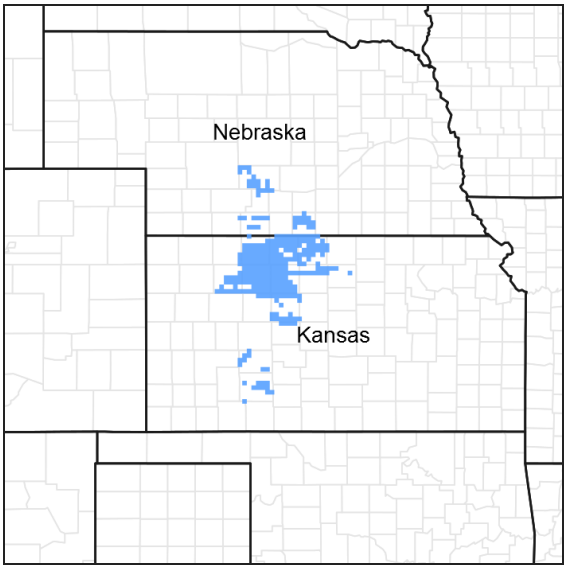



**Figure 1. Mapped extent**

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): 073X–Rolling Plains and Breaks

This ESD is located in the Rolling Plains and Breaks Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) 73 of the Central Great Plains Winter Wheat and Range Region of the United States. MLRA 73 is in Kansas (78 percent) and Nebraska (22 percent). It makes up about 21,485 square miles (13,750,400 acres). The towns of Hays, Great Bend, and Dodge City, Kansas, and Alma, Curtis, Holdrege, and McCook, Nebraska are in this MLRA. The MLRA is bisected by Interstate 70. The Platte River is at the northern edge of the area, and the Arkansas River is at the southern edge.

## Classification relationships

Major land resource area (MLRA): 073-Rolling Plains and Breaks

## Ecological site concept

The Sandy Plains ecological site is characterized by sandy soils, generally with greater than 52 percent sand. Sandy eolian sediments make up the parent material of this ecological site. This site occurs on plains. The textures for the surface of the components of this group are loamy sand and fine sandy loam.

## Associated sites

| | |
|---|---|
| R073XY107KS | **Sandy Floodplain**<br>This site occurs on nearly level to moderately sloping floodplains and low terraces. The Sandy Floodplain site is characterized by soils with greater than 55 percent sand in the surface. The soils characteristic of this site formed in sandy alluvium from mixed sources. |
| R073XY119KS | **Loamy Terrace**<br>The Loamy Terrace ecological site is on nearly level to gently sloping alluvial benches, terraces, or fans. This site receives some additional water in the form of run-in from nearby uplands. The flooding frequency is none to rare on this site. |

**Table 1. Dominant plant species**

| | |
|---|---|
| Tree | Not specified |
| Shrub | Not specified |
| Herbaceous | Not specified |

## Physiographic features

The western half of MLRA 73 and areas along the Arkansas River have remnants of the Tertiary river-laid sediments washed out onto the plains from erosion of the prehistoric Rocky Mountains in Colorado. In the valley of the Arkansas River, the wind reworked these sediments, forming a hummocky dune surface of eolian sand. A loess mantle occurs on the higher ground in the western half of the area. The Tertiary-age Ogallala and White River Formations cover Cretaceous Pierre Shale in the northern part of the area. The Ogallala Formation consists of loose to well cemented sand and gravel, and the White River Formation consists of ashy claystone and sandstone. Pierre Shale and Niobrara Chalk are at the surface in the valleys of the Republican, Smoky Hill, and Saline Rivers. Fort Hays limestone of the Niobrara Formation and Blue Hill shale of the Carlile Formation are at the surface in the valleys of the Saline and Smoky Hill Rivers. Shale can be seen exposed in the eastern half of this MLRA, in Kansas. Quaternary and more recent sand and gravel partially cover the shale in the river valleys.

The Sandy Plains site occurs on relatively smooth loess-mantled plains dissected by several river valleys with associated gently sloping to steep breaks. The elevation varies from 2,500 to 4,025 feet above mean sea level. This site occurs on nearly level to rolling topography with associated low sand dunes. The surface layer textures are loamy sand and fine sandy loam.

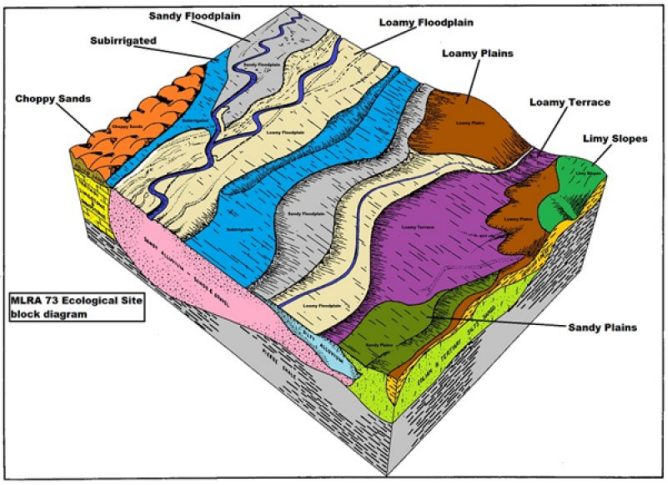



**Figure 2. MLRA 73 ecological site block diagram.**

**Table 2. Representative physiographic features**

| | |
|---|---|
| Landforms | (1) Plain |
| Flooding frequency | None |
| Ponding frequency | None |

| | |
|---|---|
| Elevation | 762–1,227 m |
| Slope | 0–24% |
| Ponding depth | 0 cm |
| Water table depth | 152 cm |

## Climatic features

For MLRA 73 the average annual precipitation is 19 to 30 inches (48 to 76 centimeters). Most of the rainfall occurs as high-intensity, convective thunderstorms during the growing season. The maximum precipitation occurs from the middle of spring to the early autumn months. Precipitation in winter occurs as snow. The annual snowfall ranges from about 17 inches (45 centimeters) in the southern part of the area to 24 inches (60 centimeters) in the northern part. The average annual temperature is 48 to 56 degrees F (9 to 14 degrees C). The freeze-free period averages 180 days and ranges from 145 to 210 days, increasing in length from northwest to southeast. The following weather data originated from weather stations chosen across the geographical extent of the ecological site, and will likely vary from the data for the entire MLRA. The climate data derives from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) National Water and Climate Center. The data set is from 1981-2010.

**Table 3. Representative climatic features**

| | |
|---|---|
| Frost-free period (average) | 147 days |
| Freeze-free period (average) | 174 days |
| Precipitation total (average) | 660 mm |

## Climate stations used

- (1) ALTON 1 W [USC00140201], Alton, KS
- (2) HILL CITY 1E [USC00143665], Hill City, KS
- (3) NORTON DAM [USC00145852], Norton, KS
- (4) SMITH CTR [USC00147542], Smith Center, KS
- (5) PLAINVILLE 4WNW [USC00146435], Plainville, KS
- (6) WEBSTER DAM [USC00148648], Stockton, KS

## Influencing water features

This ecological site is characterized by very deep sandy soils that are excessively drained.

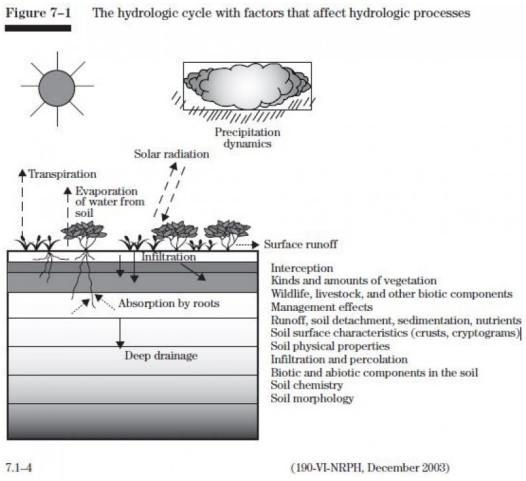



**Figure 7. Fig.7-1 from National Range and Pasture Handbook.**

## Soil features

The soil series making up this ecological site consists of very deep, well drained soils that have a parent material of

eolian deposits. These soils are on sand sheets, interdunes, plains, and hillslopes, and have slopes of 0 to 24 percent.

The surface texture is represented by loamy sand and fine sandy loam. The subsoil and underlying layers may become heavier-textured. The content of organic matter generally is moderately low or moderate. These soils are highly susceptible to wind erosion when vegetative cover is opened. Roads, trails, pipeline, overgrazing, fire, and other disturbances can be the cause of severe wind erosion on this site.

The Reference Plant Community should portray slight to no evidence of rills. Water flow paths, if present, are broken, irregular in appearance, or discontinuous with numerous debris dams or vegetative barriers. Wind- scoured areas and pedestaled plants may exist in areas but should be minor. The soil surface is stable and intact. Sub-surface soil layers are non-restrictive to water movement and root penetration.

Major soil series correlated to this ecological site include: Anselmo, Attica, Hersh, Sarben, and Carwile.

These attributes represent 0-40 inches in depth or to the first restrictive layer.

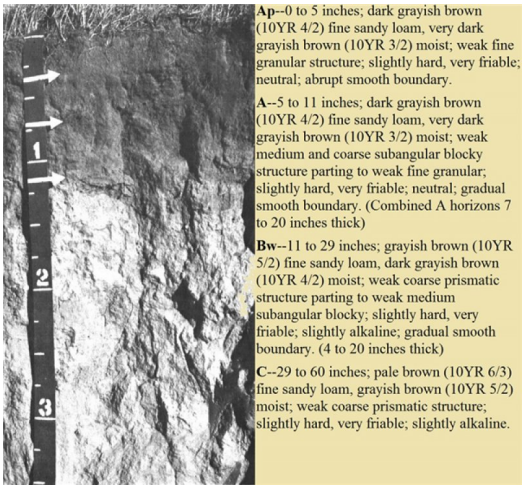



**Figure 8. Anselmo soil series. Logan County, NE, 1974.**

**Table 4. Representative soil features**

| | |
|---|---|
| Surface texture | (1) Loamy sand<br>(2) Fine sandy loam |
| Family particle size | (1) Sandy |
| Drainage class | Well drained to excessively drained |
| Permeability class | Moderate to rapid |
| Soil depth | 152–203 cm |
| Surface fragment cover <=3" | 0–7% |
| Surface fragment cover >3" | 0–1% |
| Available water capacity (0-101.6cm) | 18.52–25.78 cm |
| Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-101.6cm) | 0–2% |
| Electrical conductivity (0-101.6cm) | 0–1 mmhos/cm |
| Sodium adsorption ratio (0-101.6cm) | 0 |
| Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-101.6cm) | 6.5–7.2 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (Depth not specified) | 0–7% |
| Subsurface fragment volume >3" (Depth not specified) | 0–2% |

## Ecological dynamics

The grasslands of Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) 73, the Rolling Plains and Breaks, is located in south-central Nebraska and central Kansas. It evolved under sub-humid (20-40 inch precipitation range) climates, characterized by much the same weather extremes of temperatures, rainfall, and snowfall we are familiar with today. As a result of glacial activity and other natural forces, then and later, plants have migrated from their places of origin, so that today MLRA 73 grasslands are simple-to-complex mixtures of perennial grasses and forbs, plus a few native annuals and biennials. Species composition has been modified by the introduction of Kentucky bluegrass and cool-season annual and perennial grasses, particularly Japanese brome (Launchbaugh and Owensby, 1978).

Through the ages to modern times, wildfires – many started by lightning, but most by primitive people – influenced development of fire-tolerant grasses and suppressed woody vegetation (Sauer, 1950). Certain woody plants, however, always were present as natural components of some grasslands. Browsing by animals and frequent prairie fires were largely responsible for maintaining “normal” amounts of woody species (Dyksterhuis, 1958). In primitive time, numerous large herbivores subjected herbaceous vegetation to grazing stress. After the last glacial retreat, bison emerged as the major dominant large grazer, although the prairies and plains simultaneously supported many pronghorn antelope, elk, deer, prairie dogs, rabbits, rodents, and insects. Each exerted grazing pressures on the vegetation (Launchbaugh and Owensby, 1978). There is little doubt that during and long before Spanish explorations into this area, most of the grassland was used almost continuously throughout the year by one roving herd of buffalo after another, and by other grazing animals (early exploration accounts reviewed by Dary in 1974; diaries of early Kansas residents cited by Choate and Fleharty in 1975). Grazing and trampling by bison and their associates were often intensive, as was uncontrolled grazing by livestock in the late 1800s after most of the wild grazers had been eliminated.

The plant communities for the Sandy Plains ecological site are dynamic due to the complex interaction of many ecological processes. The interpretive plant community for this site is the Reference Plant Community. The Reference Community has been determined by the study of rangeland relic areas, areas protected from excessive disturbance, areas under long term rotational grazing strategies, literature of plant communities from the early 1900s, and local expertise. Trends in plant community dynamics ranging from heavily grazed to lightly grazed areas, seasonal use pastures, and historical accounts have also been used.

This ecological site is made up of a Grassland State, a Woody State, and a Tillage State. The Grassland State is characterized by non-broken land (no tillage), warm-season bunchgrasses, sod-forming grasses, forbs, and shrubs. The Woody State is characterized by a community made up of sand sagebrush, Chickasaw plum, and/or eastern redcedar with few remnant native grasses and forbs making up the understory. The Tillage State has been mechanically disturbed (broken) by equipment and includes either a variety of reseeded warm-season bunch and sod-forming grasses or early successional plants to include the latter as well as annual grasses and forbs.

Vegetation changes are expected within this ecological site and will be dependent on the site's geographical location inside Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) 73. Variation in precipitation east and west is not as affected as is temperature north and south. The northern part of MLRA 73 is characterized by cooler temperatures and shorter growing season in respect to the southern end. As a result, cool-season bunchgrasses and sod-formers proliferate. Growth of native cool-season plants begins about April 15, and continues to about June 15. Native warm-season plants begin growth about May 15, and continue to about August 15. Green-up of cool-season plants may occur in September and October if adequate moisture is available (weather data from National Climate Data Center, 1980-2010).

The Sandy Plains ecological site developed with occasional fires as part of the ecological processes. Historically, it is believed that the fires were infrequent, randomly distributed, and started by lightning at various times throughout the season when thunderstorms were likely to occur. It is also believed that pre-European inhabitants may have used fire as a management tool for attracting herds of large migratory herbivores (bison, elk, deer, and pronghorn). 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 in the sub-humid, High Plains and Smoky Hills area.

The degree of herbivory (feeding on herbaceous plants) has a significant impact on the dynamics of the site. Historically, periodic grazing by herds of large, migratory herbivores was a primary influence. Secondary influences of herbivory by species such as prairie dogs, grasshoppers, gophers, and root-feeding organisms impacted the vegetation historically, and continue to this day.

The management of herbivory by humans through grazing of domestic livestock and/or manipulation of wildlife populations has been a major influence on the ecological dynamics of the site. This management, coupled with the High Plains and Smoky Hills climate, largely dictates the plant communities for the site.

Drought cycles were part of the natural range of variability within the site and historically have had a major impact upon the vegetation. The species composition changes according to the duration and severity of the drought cycle (Albertson and Weaver, 1940).

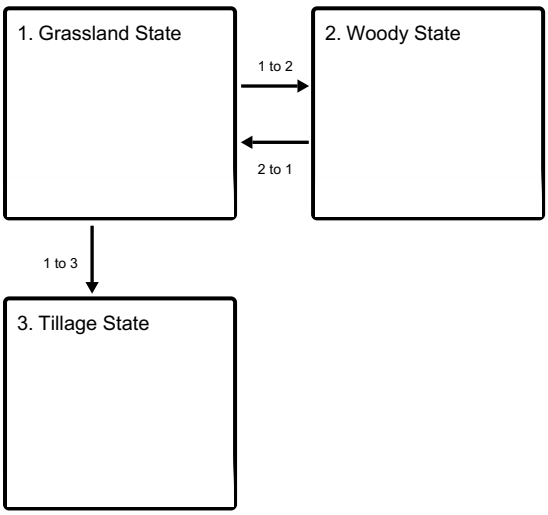
This site appears on nearly level to moderately steep uplands and stream terraces. This site is made up of well drained deep soils.

The general response of this site to long-term continuous grazing pressure is to gradually lose the vigor and reproductive potential of the tallgrass species, and shift the plant community toward mid- and shortgrasses.

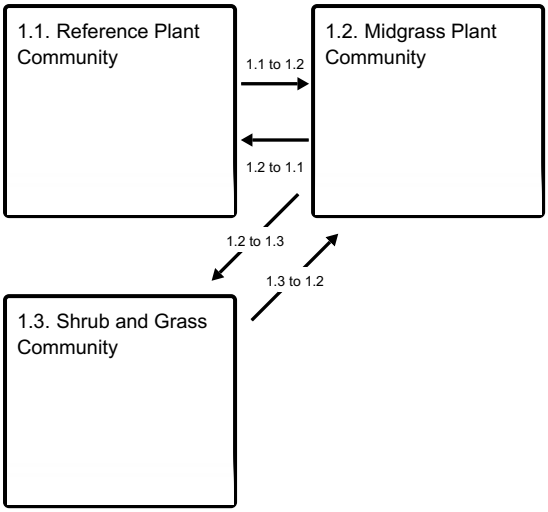
The following diagram illustrates pathways that the vegetation on this site may take from the Reference Plant Community as influencing ecological factors change. There may be other states or plant communities not shown in the diagram, as well as noticeable variations within those illustrated and described in the following sections.

## State and transition model

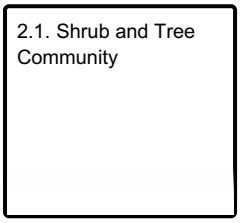
**Ecosystem states**



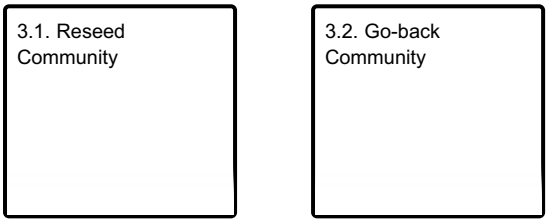
**State 1 submodel, plant communities**




**State 2 submodel, plant communities**




**State 3 submodel, plant communities**




## State 1
## Grassland State

The Grassland State is supported by empirical data, historical data, local expertise, and photographs. This state is defined by three native plant communities that are a result of periodic fire, drought, and grazing. These events are part of the natural disturbance regime and climatic process. The Reference Plant Community consists of both warm- and cool-season, tall- and midgrasses, forbs, shrubs. The Midgrass Plant Community consists of warm-season mid- and short-grasses, forbs, and shrubs, and/or woody species. The Shrub and Grass Plant Community consists of sand sagebrush and/or Chickasaw plum, remnant shortgrasses, forbs, and annuals.

## Community 1.1
## Reference Plant Community

The Reference Plant Community serves as the basis for all other interpretations. The potential vegetation of this site is a Tallgrass dominant prairie. This community includes approximately 85 percent grasses and grass-like plants, 10 percent forbs, and 5 percent trees, shrubs, and cacti. Tallgrasses make up nearly 40 percent of the total annual production per acre per year (ac/yr) and include sand bluestem, prairie sandreed, switchgrass, sand dropseed, Indiangrass. Midgrasses make up 25 percent, shortgrasses 15%, and cool-season grasses 5%. The midgrass plants include sideoats grama, little bluestem, sand lovegrass, plains muhly, and purple lovegrass. Blue grama and buffalograss make up the shortgrasses. The 5% cool-season species inlcude western wheatgrass, needle and thread, Indian ricegrass, sedge, threadleaf sedge, and prairie Junegrass. The Reference Plant Community has a forb population that makes up 10 percent of the total annual production per ac/yr while shrubs and cacti make up 5 percent. Prescription grazing that allows for adequate recovery periods after each grazing event and a forage and animal balance will maintain the biotic integrity of this plant community. Spring grazing and summer deferment will reduce the cool-season component of this plant community and increase the warm-season

component and palatable shrubs. Spring deferment and summer grazing will increase the cool-season component and decrease the warm-season component of this plant community. The Reference Plant Community is diverse and productive. The abundance and diversity of vegetation found on this site allows for excellent capture and storage of precipitation and increased infiltration rates. Plant litter, lack of large areas of bare ground, and a shrub component of less than 5 percent canopy cover will promote the proper function of the water and nutrient cycles. Decomposition of roots, high infiltration rates, and high litter cover allow for the proper function of the nutrient cycle in the Reference Plant Community. Total annual production ranges from 1,500 to 3,000 pounds of air-dried vegetation per acre per year and will average 2,100 pounds.

**Table 5. Annual production by plant type**

| Plant Type | Low (Kg/Hectare) | Representative Value (Kg/Hectare) | High (Kg/Hectare) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Grass/Grasslike | 1524 | 2001 | 2802 |
| Forb | 112 | 235 | 392 |
| Shrub/Vine | 45 | 118 | 168 |
| **Total** | **1681** | **2354** | **3362** |

**Figure 10. Plant community growth curve (percent production by month). KS7327, Sand Bluestem, Sideoats Grama, Little Bluestem.**

| Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | 0 | 3 | 7 | 20 | 35 | 20 | 10 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 |

## Community 1.2
## Midgrass Plant Community

This plant community developed under heavy, continuous season-long grazing. The dominant Reference Plant Community species were not given adequate rest and recovery during the growing season. Sand bluestem, sideoats grama, little bluestem, needleandthread, prairie sandreed and other desirable species lose productive capacity through loss of vigor and reproductive potential. Forb diversity is reduced. A decrease in tallgrass production and density is indicative of changes leading to a major shift in the plant community. This community phase marks a shift in plant composition from a tallgrass community to a midgrass plant community. Reference plant species, such as sand bluestem, needleandthread, and prairie sandreed are decreasing in vigor with continued defoliation. Tallgrasses are being replaced by a dominance of sideoats grama and little bluestem. Timing of defoliation (grazing, wildfire, hail, etc.) will have an impact on the proportions of species within the plant community. Due to the decrease in plant litter, organic matter, and biomass, effective precipitation is reduced, causing a decline in production compared to the Reference Plant Community. Total annual production ranges from 1,100 to 2,500 pounds of air-dried vegetation per acre per year and will average 1,800 pounds.

## Community 1.3
## Shrub and Grass Community

Sand sagebrush dominates the site with an understory of grasses. This site is at risk of completely losing many of the palatable species. Remnants of tall grasses and palatable forbs may still be present, but have significantly decreased due to continuous defoliation. A significant amount of production and diversity has been lost when compared to the Reference Plant Community. Loss of tallgrasses and desirable forbs have negatively impacted the plant community. Soil loss is obvious where flow paths are connected. The plant community lacks diversity. Due to the decrease in plant litter and biomass the effective precipitation is reduced, causing a decline in total annual production. The mineral, nutrient, and water cycles are moderately impaired at this point. Large areas of bare ground are obvious, as well as reduced litter. These factors limit infiltration, which affects the uptake of nutrients from the soil to the plant. The extra moisture (snowfall) trapped by the sand sagebrush plant in this state becomes less beneficial for all plants because of the decrease in forage and the continual increase of sand sagebrush. The more desirable and palatable grasses are not able to compete with the sand sagebrush plant for the moisture mainly due to individual growth patterns. The sand sagebrush plant starts using available moisture to put on leaf cover in mid to late April and warm-season grasses normally will not start growth until mid to late May. This community is at risk of completely losing many of the palatable species and crossing a threshold into the woody

state. Once this occurs it will require considerable energy, time, and expense to return to the Grassland State. Caution should be taken when chemical shrub control method is used on this site. The chemical control not only controls the sand sagebrush, but removes most if not all of the other shrubs and forbs in the applied vicinity. Plant diversity is reduced, resulting in a plant community predominately made up of grasses. Due to a lack of species diversity and an increase in bare ground, the site becomes susceptible to wind erosion. The species and production can vary considerably depending upon what was present when the management was applied, how long ago it was applied, and how long and in what manner the grazing has been managed. The community can vary from predominately blue grama to nearly pure stands of prairie sandreed. Secondary species can include needle and thread, sand dropseed, Fendler threeawn, and sandhill muhly. Total annual production ranges from 600 to 1,600 pounds of air-dried vegetation per acre per year and will average 900 pounds.

### Pathway 1.1 to 1.2
### Community 1.1 to 1.2

Long-term (>10 years) management that includes repetitive heavy use (grazing/defoliation) during the growing season, lack of rest, and recovery of the grazed key forage species, no prescribed fires, and/or no forage and animal balance may contribute to the cause of shift between community phases.

### Pathway 1.2 to 1.1
### Community 1.2 to 1.1

Management incorporating long-term (>10 years) prescription grazing that includes a forage and animal balance, prescription fires at a frequency of 1 in 7 years, and providing adequate rest and recovery periods of the key forage species during the growing season. Shifts in community phases are reversible through succession, natural disturbances, short-term climatic variations, and use of practices such as grazing management.

### Pathway 1.2 to 1.3
### Community 1.2 to 1.3

Long-term (>10 years) management without a forage and animal balance, an absence of brush maintenance or removal, consistently grazing during the summer months, no prescription fires, and continuous grazing without adequate recovery periods between grazing events. These types of management scenarios will convert the Midgrass Plant Community to a community of shortgrasses, forbs, and annuals.

### Pathway 1.3 to 1.2
### Community 1.3 to 1.2

Management that incorporates long-term (~10 years) prescription grazing, a forage and animal balance, brush management, adequate rest and recovery of the key forage species, and prescription fires will favor this plant community to restore to the Midgrass Plant Community.

## State 2
## Woody State

This state is dominated by a tree and/or shrub plant community. The increase and spread of trees results from an absence of fire. Woody plants can increase up to 34% from a lack of fire according to a study from 1937 to 1969, in contrast to a 1% increase on burned areas (Bragg and Hulbert, 1976). Periodic burning tends to hinder the establishment of most woody species, and favors forbs and grasses. However, it should be pointed out that not all unburned areas have a woody plant invasion. Hydrologic function is affected by the amount of vegetative cover. Canopy interception loss can vary from 25.4% to 36.7% (Thurow and Hester, 1997). A small rainfall event is usually retained in the foliage and does not reach the litter layer at the base of the tree. Only when canopy storage is reached and exceeded does precipitation fall to the soil surface. Interception losses associated with the accumulation of leaves, twigs, and branches at the bases of trees are considerably higher than losses associated with the canopy. The decomposed material retains approximately 40% of the water that is not retained in the canopy (Thurow and Hester, 1997). Soil dynamic property changes affected include biological activity, infiltration rates, and soil fertility. Special planning will be necessary to assure that sufficient amounts of fine fuel are available to carry fires with enough intensity to control woody species. In some locations the use of chemicals as a brush

management tool may be desirable to initiate and accelerate this transition. Birds, small mammals, and livestock are instrumental in the distribution of seed and accelerating the spread of most tree and shrubs common to this site. The speed of encroachment varies considerably and can occur on both grazed and non-grazed pastures. Many species of wildlife, especially bobwhite quail, turkey, and white-tailed deer benefit from the growth of trees and shrubs for both food and cover. Conversely, the presence of trees is considered detrimental to populations of greater prairie chickens and other upland birds. When management for specific wildlife populations is desirable, these options should be considered in any brush management plan.

### Community 2.1
### Shrub and Tree Community

This community is dominated by shrubs and/or trees with a canopy cover usually greater than 15-20 percent. Shrubs characterizing this community can include sand sagebrush and/or Chickasaw plum. Trees characterizing this community include eastern redcedar. When shrub and tree encroachment occurs on areas that have been subjected to long-term, continuous overgrazing, the associated grasses will usually consist of composite dropseed, purpletop tridens, purple lovegrass, Kentucky bluegrass, and Scribner's rosette grass. Trees and/or shrubs can also invade areas where both grazing and fire have been excluded for many years. A heavy accumulation of plant mulch and litter retards herbage growth. This provides a favorable habitat for seed germination and establishment of many woody species. Grass yields are significantly reduced, 10 to 30 percent of the total vegetative production, due to the competition from woody species. The combination of less water entering the soil and strong ability by the trees to extract water means that little water has a chance to drain beneath the root zone. Therefore, an invasion of trees and shrubs on large areas that were once primarily grassland has strong implications for recharge of aquifers. It can be a common occurrence to have seeps and springs stop flowing in conjunction with increases in tree and shrub cover (Thurow and Hester, 1997). In this plant community, the amount of available forage is heavily dependent upon the predominant woody species cover and the kind(s) of livestock and/or wildlife utilizing the site. A prescribed burning program, mechanical brush removal, and periodic rest and recovery accompanied by prescribed grazing can return the plant community to one dominated by grasses and forbs. The time frame will be dependent upon the percentage of canopy cover and remnant native grass population remaining. Special planning will be necessary to assure that sufficient amounts of fine fuel are available to carry fires with enough intensity to control woody species. Use of labeled herbicides and mechanical removal as a brush management tool will usually be necessary to reduce fire-resistant woody species populations in order to accelerate the recovery of desired vegetative cover. Some landowners rely on the browsing habits of goats to suppress the woody growth.

## State 3
## Tillage State

The Tillage State consists of abandoned cropland that has been naturally revegetated (go-back) or planted/seeded to grassland. Many reseeded plant communities were planted with a local seeding mix under the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) or were planted to a monoculture of sideoats grama. Go-back communities are difficult to define due to the variability of plant communities that can exist. Many of these communities are represented by the genus Aristida (threeawns). This is an alternative state. The energy, hydrologic, and nutrient cycles are altered to that of the Reference State. This state is no longer functioning within the natural disturbance regime. Bulk density, aggregate stability, soil structure, and plant functional and structural groups are not fully restored to that of the Reference State. Mechanical tillage can destroy soil aggregation. Soil aggregates are an example of dynamic soil property change. Aggregate stability is critical for infiltration, root growth, and resistance to water and wind erosion (Brady and Weil, 2008).

### Community 3.1
### Reseed Community

This plant community is created when the soil is tilled or farmed (sodbusted), and abandoned. All of the native plants are killed, soil organic matter and carbon reserves are reduced, soil structure is altered, and a plowpan or compacted layer can be observed, limiting water infiltration. Synthetic chemicals may remain as a residual in the soil from farming operations. In early successional stages, this community is not stable. Wind and water erosion are concerns within this plant community. This plant community can vary considerably depending on how eroded the soil was, the species seeded, the stand that was established, how long ago the stand was established, and the management of the stand since establishment. Prescribed grazing that incorporates adequate recovery periods

between grazing events and a forage and animal balance is necessary to maintain the health, vigor, and productivity of desirable species. Selection of grass species by grazing animals on seeded rangeland sites can be significantly different from native range sites. Typically there is a reduced production level on seeded sites, compared to native sites with similar species composition. Species diversity is lower, and forb species generally take longer to re-establish. Seeded rangeland should be managed separately due to the natural ecological differences and livestock grazing preference.

### Community 3.2
### Go-back Community

This plant community originates when the soil is tilled or farmed (sodbusted), and abandoned. Generally land that has been used for purposes other than rangeland or hayland will start to revegetate when left undisturbed. Due to tillage activity there are no native plants, soil organic matter and carbon reserves are reduced, soil structure is altered, and a plowpan or compacted layer can be formed, limiting water infiltration. Many times synthetic chemicals remain as a residual from farming operations. Wind and water erosion is a concern within this plant community. The initial ground cover will primarily consist of kochia, annual bromes, pigweed, foxtail (bristlegrass), Russian thistle, witchgrass, and tumblegrass as well as other annuals. These plants give some protection from erosion and start to rebuild organic matter. The next succession of plants will be grasses such as composite dropseed, threeawn, silver bluestem, and annuals. Eventually, after decades, blue grama, sideoats grama, and buffalograss will come back. These species will not regain in proportions to that of the Reference State plant communities. Soil structure, aggregate stability, and organic matter will also not recover to conditions of the Reference State. Range seeding can accelerate the process of species composition and possibly production, but with high energy expense and inputs.

### Transition 1 to 2
### State 1 to 2

The absence of managing woody species are the variables that contribute directly to loss of state resilience and result in shifts between States. This transition involves a change in vegetation type and a canopy cover of greater than 15%. This transition could take generations, and possibly will not occur if there is not a tree-shrub seed source available.

### Transition 1 to 3
### State 1 to 3

This transition is triggered by a management action as opposed to a natural event. Tillage, or breaking the ground with machinery for crop production, will move the Grassland State to a Tillage State. The resilience of the Reference State has been compromised by the fracturing and blending of the native virgin sod. The energy, hydrologic, and nutrient cycles are altered and vary from that of the Grassland State.

### Restoration pathway 2 to 1
### State 2 to 1

Restoration efforts will be costly, labor-intensive, and can take many years, if not decades, to return to a Grassland State. Once canopy levels reach greater than 20 percent, estimated cost to remove trees is very expensive and includes high energy inputs. The technologies needed in order to go from an invaded Woody State to a Grassland State include but are not limited to: prescribed burning—the use of fire as a tool to achieve a management objective on a predetermined area under conditions where the intensity and extent of the fire are controlled; brush management—manipulating woody plant cover to obtain desired quantities and types of woody cover and/or to reduce competition with herbaceous understory vegetation, in accordance with overall resource management objectives; prescribed grazing—the controlled harvest of vegetation with grazing or browsing animals managed with the intent to achieve a specified objective. Grazing at an intensity that will maintain enough cover to protect the soil and maintain or improve the quantity and quality of desirable vegetation. When a juniper tree is cut and removed, the soil structure and the associated high infiltration rate may be maintained for over a decade (Hester, 1996). This explains why the area near the dripline usually has substantially greater forage production for many years after the tree has been cut. It also explains why runoff will not necessarily dramatically increase once juniper is removed. Rather, the water continues to infiltrate at high rates into soils previously ameliorated by junipers, thereby

increasing deep drainage potential. In rangeland, deep drainage amounts can be 16 percent of the total rainfall amount per year (Thurow and Hester, 1997).

**Conservation practices**

| |
|---|
| Brush Management |
| Prescribed Burning |
| Prescribed Grazing |

## Additional community tables

**Table 6. Community 1.1 plant community composition**

| Group | Common Name | Symbol | Scientific Name | Annual Production (Kg/Hectare) | Foliar Cover (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Grass/Grasslike** | | | | | |
| 1 | **Tallgrasses dominant component 40%** | | | 673–947 | |
| | sand bluestem | ANHA | *Andropogon hallii* | 224–359 | – |
| | switchgrass | PAVI2 | *Panicum virgatum* | 84–235 | – |
| | sand dropseed | SPCR | *Sporobolus cryptandrus* | 56–118 | – |
| | Indiangrass | SONU2 | *Sorghastrum nutans* | 17–118 | – |
| | prairie sandreed | CALO | *Calamovilfa longifolia* | 56–112 | – |
| 2 | **Midgrasses subdominant component 25%** | | | 224–583 | |
| | sideoats grama | BOCU | *Bouteloua curtipendula* | 118–241 | – |
| | little bluestem | SCSC | *Schizachyrium scoparium* | 118–235 | – |
| | sand lovegrass | ERTR3 | *Eragrostis trichodes* | 56–118 | – |
| | plains muhly | MUCU3 | *Muhlenbergia cuspidata* | 0–45 | – |
| | purple lovegrass | ERSP | *Eragrostis spectabilis* | 0–45 | – |
| 3 | **Shortgrasses subdominant 15%** | | | 168–359 | |
| | blue grama | BOGR2 | *Bouteloua gracilis* | 235–471 | – |
| | buffalograss | BODA2 | *Bouteloua dactyloides* | 0–118 | – |
| 4 | **Cool-season grasses minor 5%** | | | 0–112 | |
| | threadleaf sedge | CAFI | *Carex filifolia* | 0–118 | – |
| | sedge | CAREX | *Carex* | 0–118 | – |
| | purple lovegrass | ERSP | *Eragrostis spectabilis* | 0–45 | – |
| | prairie Junegrass | KOMA | *Koeleria macrantha* | 0–45 | – |
| | Indian ricegrass | ACHY | *Achnatherum hymenoides* | 0–22 | – |
| **Forb** | | | | | |
| 5 | **Forb minor component 10%** | | | 112–235 | |
| | slimflower scurfpea | PSTE5 | *Psoralidium tenuiflorum* | 17–45 | – |
| | dotted blazing star | LIPU | *Liatris punctata* | 17–45 | – |
| | lemon scurfpea | PSLA3 | *Psoralidium lanceolatum* | 6–39 | – |
| | Cuman ragweed | AMPS | *Ambrosia psilostachya* | 11–39 | – |
| | upright prairie coneflower | RACO3 | *Ratibida columnifera* | 6–39 | – |
| | white sagebrush | ARLUM2 | *Artemisia ludoviciana ssp. mexicana* | 6–28 | – |
| | common yarrow | ACMI2 | *Achillea millefolium* | 6–28 | – |
| | evening primrose | OENOT | *Oenothera* | 6–17 | – |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | scarlet beeblossom | OESU3 | *Oenothera suffrutescens* | 6–17 | – |
| | false boneset | BREU | *Brickellia eupatorioides* | 6–17 | – |
| | silky prairie clover | DAVI | *Dalea villosa* | 6–17 | – |
| | Carolina larkspur | DECAV2 | *Delphinium carolinianum ssp. virescens* | 6–17 | – |
| | annual buckwheat | ERAN4 | *Eriogonum annuum* | 6–17 | – |
| | hairy false goldenaster | HEVI4 | *Heterotheca villosa* | 6–17 | – |
| | scarlet globemallow | SPCO | *Sphaeralcea coccinea* | 6–17 | – |
| | white heath aster | SYER | *Symphyotrichum ericoides* | 6–17 | – |
| **Shrub/Vine** | | | | | |
| 6 | **Shrubs and Cacti minor component 5%** | | | 34–118 | |
| | sand sagebrush | ARFI2 | *Artemisia filifolia* | 11–22 | – |
| | prairie sagewort | ARFR4 | *Artemisia frigida* | 0–22 | – |
| | plains pricklypear | OPPO | *Opuntia polyacantha* | 11–22 | – |
| | Chickasaw plum | PRAN3 | *Prunus angustifolia* | 0–22 | – |
| | western sandcherry | PRPUB | *Prunus pumila var. besseyi* | 0–22 | – |
| | prairie rose | ROAR3 | *Rosa arkansana* | 0–22 | – |
| | soapweed yucca | YUGL | *Yucca glauca* | 11–22 | – |
| | leadplant | AMCA6 | *Amorpha canescens* | 0–17 | – |

## Animal community

Wildlife Interpretations

This ecological site is characterized by nearly level to undulating topography with associated low sand dunes. Much of this site has been converted to cropland, especially where irrigation is feasible resulting in fragmentation and loss of habitat. Historically, the predominance of grasses and forbs on this site supported grazers and mixed feeders such as bison, elk, mule deer, pronghorn, and a variety of grassland-associated birds and small mammals. Due to the inherent heterogeneity of all landscapes, some areas were not grazed uniformly by these historic large herds of grazing animals. This type of grazing enhanced habitat for wildlife by creating a mosaic pattern, or patchiness of vegetative structural diversity throughout the landscape. Wildlife native to the site depend on a plant community diverse in species and structure. This need is evident in the variability of known habitat requirements of grassland-associated wildlife.

Sand sagebrush may be present and locally abundant on this site. Sagebrush offers escape and thermal cover for several species of wildlife and a source of winter browse for other species. This site, as it occurs in the southern part of MLRA 73, is within the traditional range of the lesser prairie chicken and can offer exceptional habitat for this species. Tree encroachment can make this site generally unsuitable for prairie chickens and other ground-nesting birds that require large expanses of non-woody habitat. Woody species, such as those commonly established in tree plantings, provides habitat for mid-sized mammals such as raccoons, opossums, and striped skunks which can be detrimental to ground-nesting birds native to grassland habitats. The presence of trees can also increase the potential for nest parasitism by brown-headed cowbirds when adjacent to grasslands.

Periodic events such as prolonged drought, wildfire, disease, or high insect numbers will alter plant community diversity and structure and associated wildlife species.

Reference Plant Community

The high diversity of grasses and forbs in this community provides habitat for a diverse group of insects. Areas with high forb diversity will generally support more insects such as the leaf-hoppers, important to young grassland nesting birds. Grasshoppers, associated with grasses, are a critical food source for birds in later stages of development. Plains garter snakes, western hognose snakes, and six-lined racerunners are common reptiles on the

site. Reference Plant Community sites in good condition with tall native warm-season bunchgrasses and openings at ground level offer suitable northern bobwhite quail nesting habitat. Burrowing mammals such as thirteen-lined ground squirrels and kangaroo rats are common. Several species of pocket mice are common and provide prey for raptors such as red-tailed hawks and great-horned owls throughout the year, and prey for northern harriers and rough-legged hawks during the winter. Small mammals also provide prey for coyotes and other predators.

Grazing Interpretations

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. During the dormant period, livestock may need supplementation based on reliable forage analysis.

Calculating Safe Stocking Rates: Proper stocking rates should be incorporated into a grazing management strategy that protects the resource, maintains or improves rangeland health, and is consistent with management objectives. In addition to usable forage, safe stocking rates should consider ecological condition, trend of the site, past grazing use history, season of use, stock density, kind and class of livestock, forage digestibility, forage nutritional value, variation of harvest efficiency based on preference of plant species, and/or grazing system, and site grazeability factors (such as steep slopes, site inaccessibility, or distance to drinking water).

Often the current plant community does not entirely match any particular Community Phase as described in this Ecological Site Description. Because of this, a resource inventory is necessary to document plant composition and production. Proper interpretation of inventory data will permit the establishment of a safe initial stocking rate.

No two years have exactly the same weather conditions. For this reason, year-to-year and season-to-season fluctuations in forage production are to be expected on grazing lands. Livestock producers must make timely adjustments in the numbers of animals or in the length of grazing periods to avoid overuse of forage plants when production is unfavorable, and to make advantageous adjustments when forage supplies are above average.

Initial stocking rates should be improved through the use of vegetation monitoring and actual use records that include number and type of livestock, the timing and duration of grazing, and utilization levels. Actual use records over time will assist in making stocking rate adjustments based on the variability factors.

Average annual production must be measured or estimated to properly assess useable forage production and stocking rates.

## Hydrological functions

The soils of this site have sandy surface layers and sandy, loamy, or clayey subsoils. The intake rate is rapid with stored moisture varying from low to high, depending upon the texture of the subsoil.

## Recreational uses

None noted.

## Wood products

No appreciable wood products are present on the site.

## Other products

The sandy nature of this site limits its use primarily to rangeland. Large areas, however, are cultivated successfully when high residue-producing crops are grown and the residues are managed to prevent wind erosion.

## Other information

Site Development and Testing Plan

This site went through the approval process.

## Inventory data references

Information presented here has been derived from NRCS clipping data, numerous ocular estimates, and other inventory data. Field observations from experienced range-trained personnel were used extensively to develop this ecological site description.

NRCS individuals involved in developing the Sandy ESD in 2002 include Darrell Beougher, Jon Deege, Lorne Denetclaw, Sharla Schwien, Joel Willhoft, Dwayne Rice, and Bob Tricks from Kansas; and Nadine Bishop, Kristin Dickinson, Kim Stine, Dana Larson, and Chuck Markley from Nebraska.

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## Contributors

Chris Tecklenburg

## Approval

Curtis Talbot, 4/12/2021

## Acknowledgments

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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) | Chris Tecklenburg Revision 6-07-2017<br>David Kraft, John Henry, Doug Spencer and Dwayne Rice Original Authors 2-2005<br>Harvey Sprock and Dan Nosal 01/14/05 Sandy MLRA 72 |
| Contact for lead author | Chris Tecklenburg (chris.tecklenburg@ks.usda.gov) |
| Date | 10/01/2019 |
| Approved by | Curtis Talbot |
| Approval date | |
| Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on | Annual Production |

## Indicators

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

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2. **Presence of water flow patterns:** Typically none to slight. If present, are broken, irregular in appearance, or discontinuous with numerous debris dams or vegetative barriers.

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3. **Number and height of erosional pedestals or terracettes:** Pedestalled plants caused by wind or water erosion would be minor.

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4. **Bare ground from Ecological Site Description or other studies (rock, litter, lichen, moss, plant canopy are not bare ground):** 10% or less bare ground, with bare patches ranging from 3-5 inches in diameter. Prolonged drought or wildfire events will cause bare ground to increase upwards to >10% with bare patches ranging from 8-12 inches in diameter.

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5. **Number of gullies and erosion associated with gullies:** There are no gullies present on this site.

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6. **Extent of wind scoured, blowouts and/or depositional areas:** Minor wind scouring may occur on knolls. Wind erosior can occur with disturbances such as wildfire or extended drought.

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7. **Amount of litter movement (describe size and distance expected to travel):** Litter should be uniformly distributed with little movement.

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8. **Soil surface (top few mm) resistance to erosion (stability values are averages - most sites will show a range of values):** Plant canopy is sufficient to intercept the majority of raindrops. Soil organic matter is incorporated into aggregates at the surface, and/or adhesion of decomposing organic matter is present, and/or biological crusts are present on the surface. Soil stability scores will range from 4-6.

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9. **Soil surface structure and SOM content (include type of structure and A-horizon color and thickness):** Anselmo soil series OSD: Ap--0 to 5 inches; dark grayish brown (10YR 4/2) fine sandy loam, very dark grayish brown (10YR 3/2) moist; weak fine granular structure; slightly hard, very friable; neutral; abrupt smooth boundary.

   A--5 to 11 inches; dark grayish brown (10YR 4/2) fine sandy loam, very dark grayish brown (10YR 3/2) moist; weak medium and coarse subangular blocky structure parting to weak fine granular; slightly hard, very friable; neutral; gradual smooth boundary. (Combined A horizons 7 to 20 inches thick)

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10. **Effect of community phase composition (relative proportion of different functional groups) and spatial distribution on infiltration and runoff:** Diverse grass, forb, shrub canopy, and root structure reduces raindrop impact and slows overland flow, providing increased time for infiltration to occur. Extended drought and/or wildfire may reduce canopy cover and litter amounts, resulting in decreased infiltration and increased runoff on steeper slopes.

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11. **Presence and thickness of compaction layer (usually none; describe soil profile features which may be mistaken for compaction on this site):** There is no evidence of compacted soil layers due to animal impact or cultural practices.

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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: Group 1 Tallgrass dominant 40%; sand bluestem 200-320, prairie sandreed 50-100, switchgrass 75-210, sand dropseed 50-105, Indiangrass 15-105.

    Sub-dominant: Group 2 midgrasses subdominant 25%; sideoats grama 105-215, little bluestem 105-215, sand lovegrass 50-105, plains muhly 0-40, purple lovegrass 0-40.

    Other: Group 3 Shortgrasses subdominant 15%; blue grama 210-420, buffalograss 0-105
    Group 4 Cool-season grasses minor component 5%

    Additional: Group 5 Forbs minor 10%
    Group 6 Shrubs and Cacti minor 5%

---

13. **Amount of plant mortality and decadence (include which functional groups are expected to show mortality or decadence):** The majority of plants are alive and vigorous. Some mortality and decadence is expected for the site. This in part is due to drought, unexpected wildfire, or a combination of the two events. This would be expected for both dominant and subdominant groups.

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14. **Average percent litter cover (%) and depth ( in):** 40-65% litter cover at 0.25-0.50 inch depth. Litter cover during and following drought can range from 20-30% and 5-15% following wildfire.

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15. **Expected annual annual-production (this is TOTAL above-ground annual-production, not just forage annual-production):** 1,500 lbs./ac. low precipitation years, 2,100 lbs./ac. average precipitation years, 3,000 lbs./ac. high precipitation years. After extended drought or the first growing season following wildfire, production may be significantly reduced by 500 lbs./ac. or more.

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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. Following wildfire or extended drought, cheatgrass, Russian thistle, and kochia will invade assuming a seed source is available.

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17. **Perennial plant reproductive capability:** The number and distribution of tillers or rhizomes is assessed on perennial plants occupying the evaluation area. No reduction in vigor or capability to produce seed or vegetative tillers given the constraints of climate and herbivory.

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