

# Ecological site R107XB012MO

## Calcareous Loess Upland Prairie

Last updated: 5/21/2020  
Accessed: 04/30/2025

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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): 107X—Iowa and Missouri Deep Loess Hills

The Iowa and Missouri Deep Loess Hills (MLRA 107B) includes the Missouri Alluvial Plain, Loess Hills, Southern Iowa Drift Plain, and Central Dissected Till Plains landform regions (Prior 1991; Nigh and Schroeder 2002). It spans four states (Iowa, 53 percent; Missouri, 32 percent; Nebraska, 12 percent; and Kansas 3 percent), encompassing over 14,000 square miles (Figure 1). The elevation ranges from approximately 1565 feet above sea level (ASL) on the highest ridges to about 600 feet ASL along the Missouri River near Glasgow in central Missouri. Local relief varies from 10 to 20 feet in the major river floodplains, to 50 to 100 feet in the dissected uplands, and loess bluffs of 200 to 300 feet along the Missouri River. Loess deposits cover most of the area, with deposits reaching a thickness of 65 to 200 feet in the Loess Hills and grading to about 20 feet in the eastern extent of the region. Pre-Illinoian till, deposited more than 500,000 years ago, lies beneath the loess and has experienced extensive erosion and dissection. Pennsylvanian and Cretaceous bedrock, comprised of shale, mudstones, and sandstones, lie beneath the glacial material (USDA-NRCS 2006).

The vegetation in the MLRA has undergone drastic changes over time. Spruce forests dominated the landscape 30,000 to 21,500 years ago. As the last glacial maximum peaked 21,500 to 16,000 years ago, they were replaced with open tundras and parklands. The end of the Pleistocene Epoch saw a warming climate that initially prompted the return of spruce forests, but as the warming continued, spruce trees were replaced by deciduous trees (Baker et al. 1990). Not until approximately 9,000 years ago did the vegetation transition to prairies as climatic conditions continued to warm and subsequently dry. Between 4,000 and 3,000 years ago, oak savannas began intermingling within the prairie landscape. This prairie-oak savanna ecosystem formed the dominant landscapes until the arrival of European settlers (Baker et al. 1992).

### Classification relationships

Major Land Resource Area (MLRA): Iowa and Missouri Deep Loess Hills (107B) (USDA-NRCS 2006)

USFS Subregions: Central Dissected Till Plains Section (251C), Loess Hills (251Cb) Subsection ; Nebraska Rolling Hills Section (251H), Pawnee City-Seneca Rolling Hill (251Hd) (Cleland et al. 2007)

U.S. EPA Level IV Ecoregion: Steeply Rolling Loess Prairies (47e), Nebraska/Kansas Loess Hills (47h), Western Loess Hills (47m) (USEPA 2013)

Biophysical Setting (LANDFIRE 2009): Central Tallgrass Prairie (4214210)

Ecological Systems (National Vegetation Classification System, Nature Serve 2015): Central Tallgrass Prairie (CES205.683)

Eilers and Roosa (1994): Loess Hills

Iowa Department of Natural Resources (INAI nd): Western Dry-Mesic Prairie

Missouri Natural Heritage Program (Nelson 2010): Dry Loess/Glacial Till Prairie

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (Steinauer and Rolfsmeier 2003): Upland Tall-Grass Prairie

Plant Associations (National Vegetation Classification System, Nature Serve 2015): *Andropogon gerardii* – *Sorghastrum nutans* – *Hesperostipa spartea* Loess Hills Herbaceous Vegetation (CEGL002025)

Rosburg (1994): Mid-Grass Community

White (1983): Dry-Mesic: Iowa Type

### Ecological site concept

Calcareous Loess Upland Prairies are generally located within the green areas on the map (Figure 1). They occur on summits with slopes less than fifteen percent, upslope from other calcareous loess ecological sites. Soils are Entisols that are well-drained and very deep, formed from loess with a significant component of calcium carbonates at or near the surface, resulting in an alkaline (increased pH) environment. These fine-silty, fertile soils have high soil uniformity resulting in increased nutrient- and water-holding capacity, increased organic matter retention, and good soil aeration that allows deep penetration by plant roots, which generally results in high plant productivity (Catt 2001).

The historic pre-European settlement vegetation on this site was dominated by tallgrass prairie species adapted to dry-mesic habitats irrespective of aspect (Rosburg 1994). Big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii* Vitam) and little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium* (Michx.) Nash) are the dominant monocot species for the ecological site. Other important grasses and grass-likes include sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula* (Michx.) Torr.), hairy grama (*Bouteloua hirsuta* Lag.), sun sedge (*Carex inops* L.H. Bailey ssp. *heliophila* (Mack.) Crins), plains muhly (*Muhlenbergia cuspidata* (Torr. ex Hook.) Rydb), and Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans* (L.) Nash). Forb species typical of an undisturbed plant community associated with this ecological site include tall false foxglove (*Agalinis aspera* (Douglas ex Benth.) Britton), rush skeletonplant (*Lygodesmia juncea* (Pursh) D. Don ex Hook.), yellow sundrops (*Calylophus serrulatus* (Nutt.) P.H. Raven), and dotted blazing star (*Liatris punctata* Hook.) (Drobney et al. 2001; Nelson 2010). Leadplant (*Amorpha canescens* Pursh) and roughleaf dogwood (*Cornus drummondii* C.A. Mey.) are common shrubs that can be found lightly scattered throughout the prairie (Nelson 2010; Steinauer and Rolfsmeier 2010). Fire was the primary disturbance factor that maintained this site, while drought and native large mammal grazing were secondary factors.

Relative to other calcareous loess prairie ecological sites in the MLRA, the gentle slopes of Calcareous Loess Upland Prairies are slightly moister than the downslope sites resulting in the occurrence of more mesic plant species and greater overall diversity. However, compared to calcareous till prairie sites, species composition suggests a slightly drier condition. Lastly, unlike similar loess prairie ecological sites with a higher clay content, this ecological site has a lower soil moisture and higher coefficient of wetness (i.e. site is drier) as evidenced by the presence of mostly obligate upland species.

### Associated sites

|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| R107XB003MO | <b>Deep Loess Exposed Backslope Savanna</b><br>Calcareous loess soils on slopes greater than fifteen percent on north and east slopes, including Dow and Ida               |
| R107XB006MO | <b>Calcareous Loess Exposed Backslope Prairie</b><br>Calcareous loess soils on slopes greater than 15 percent with south and west aspects, including Dow, Hamburg, and Ida |

## Similar sites

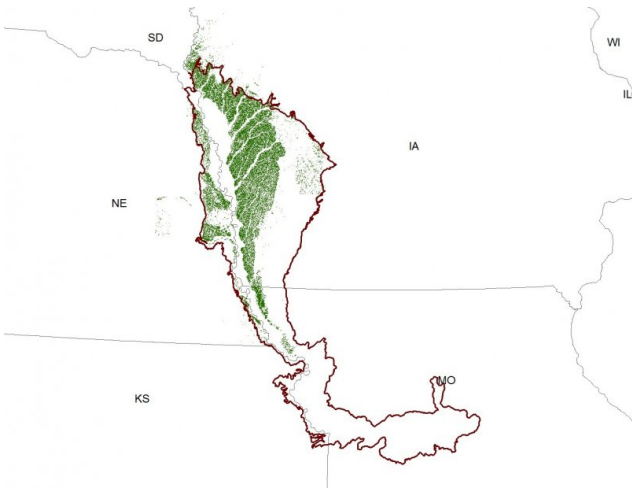
|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| R107XB006MO | <p><b>Calcareous Loess Exposed Backslope Prairie</b></p> <p>Calcareous Loess Exposed Backslope Prairies are similar in composition but frequency and production of little bluestem and sideoats grama are greater in this ecological site; occurs only on shoulders and backslopes</p> |
| R107XB007MO | <p><b>Loess Upland Prairie</b></p> <p>Loess Upland Prairies are similar in supporting a prairie plant community but parent material contains no carbonates and a higher clay content</p>   |
| R107XB002MO | <p><b>Deep Loess Upland Prairie</b></p> <p>Deep Loess Upland Prairies are similar in supporting a prairie plant community but parent material contains no carbonates and a higher clay content</p>   |
| R107XB027IA | <p><b>Calcareous Till Upland Prairie</b></p> <p>Calcareous Till Upland Prairies are similar in landscape position but parent material is glacial till</p>  |

**Table 1. Dominant plant species**

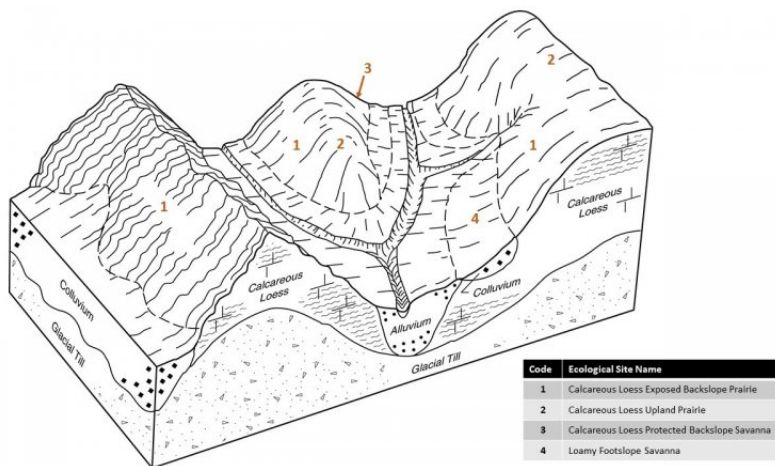
|            |  |
|------------|--|
| Tree       | Not specified  |
| Shrub      | Not specified  |
| Herbaceous | (1) <i>Andropogon gerardii</i><br>(2) <i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i> |

## Physiographic features

Calcareous Loess Upland Prairies occur on upland summits and shoulders with slopes less than fifteen percent on dissected till plains (Figure 2). This ecological site is unique to the Loess Hills landform situated on elevations ranging from approximately 600 to 1,560 feet ASL. This site does not experience flooding but rather generates runoff to adjacent, downslope ecological sites.



**Figure 2. Figure 1. Location of Calcareous Loess Upland Prairie ecological site within MLRA 107B.**



**Figure 3. Figure 2. Representative block diagram of Calcareous Loess Upland Prairie and associated ecological sites.**

**Table 2. Representative physiographic features**

|                     |                                    |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|
| Hillslope profile   | (1) Summit<br>(2) Shoulder         |
| Slope shape across  | (1) Convex                         |
| Slope shape up-down | (1) Convex                         |
| Landforms           | (1) Loess hill                     |
| Flooding frequency  | None                               |
| Ponding frequency   | None                               |
| Elevation           | 185–475 m                          |
| Slope               | 0–15%                              |
| Water table depth   | 203 cm                             |
| Aspect              | Aspect is not a significant factor |

## Climatic features

The Iowa and Missouri Deep Loess Hills falls into two Köppen-Geiger climate classifications (Peel et al. 2007): hot humid continental climate (Dfa) dominates the majority of the MLRA with small portions in the south falling into the humid subtropical climate (Cfa). In winter, dry, cold air masses periodically shift south from Canada. As these air masses collide with humid air, snowfall and rainfall result. In summer, moist, warm air masses from the Gulf of Mexico migrate north, producing significant frontal or convective rains (Decker 2017). Occasionally, high pressure will stagnate over the region, creating extended droughty periods. These periods of drought have historically occurred on 22-year cycles (Stockton and Meko 1983).

The soil temperature regime of MLRA 107B is classified as mesic, where the mean annual soil temperature is between 46 and 59°F (USDA-NRCS 2006). Temperature and precipitation occur along a north-south gradient, where temperature and precipitation increase the further south one travels. The average freeze-free period of this ecological site is about 175 days, while the frost-free period is about 154 days (Table 2). The majority of the precipitation occurs as rainfall in the form of convective thunderstorms during the growing season. Average annual precipitation is 28 inches, which includes rainfall plus the water equivalent from snowfall (Table 3). The average annual low and high temperatures are 38 and 61°F, respectively.

Climate data and analyses are derived from 30-year average gathered from six National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) weather stations contained within the range of this ecological site (Table 4).

**Table 3. Representative climatic features**

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| Frost-free period (characteristic range) | 133-152 days |
|--|--------------|

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| Freeze-free period (characteristic range)  | 156-179 days |
| Precipitation total (characteristic range) | 787-864 mm   |
| Frost-free period (actual range)           | 132-154 days |
| Freeze-free period (actual range)          | 156-184 days |
| Precipitation total (actual range)         | 711-864 mm   |
| Frost-free period (average)                | 140 days     |
| Freeze-free period (average)               | 165 days     |
| Precipitation total (average)              | 813 mm       |

## Climate stations used

- (1) SIDNEY [USC00137669], Sidney, IA
- (2) GLENWOOD 3SW [USC00133290], Glenwood, IA
- (3) ONAWA 3NW [USC00136243], Onawa, IA
- (4) SIOUX CITY GATEWAY AP [USW00014943], Sioux City, IA
- (5) LOGAN [USC00134894], Logan, IA
- (6) TARKIO [USW00014945], Tarkio, MO

## Influencing water features

Calcareous Loess Upland Prairies are not influenced by wetland or riparian water features. Precipitation is the main source of water for this ecological site. Infiltration is moderate (Hydrologic Group B), and surface runoff is low to medium. Precipitation infiltrates the soil surface and percolates downward through the horizons unimpeded by any restrictive layer. The Dakota bedrock aquifer in the northern region of this ecological site is typically deep and confined, leaving it generally unaffected by recharge. However, there are surficial aquifers in the Pennsylvanian strata in the southern extent of the ecological site that are shallow and allow some recharge (Prior et al. 2003). Surface runoff contributes some water to downslope ecological sites. Evapotranspiration rates occur on a latitudinal gradient, with the northern end of the ecological site receiving a greater number of days with sun and high winds resulting in a higher average evapotranspiration rate compared to the southern end (Visher 1954).

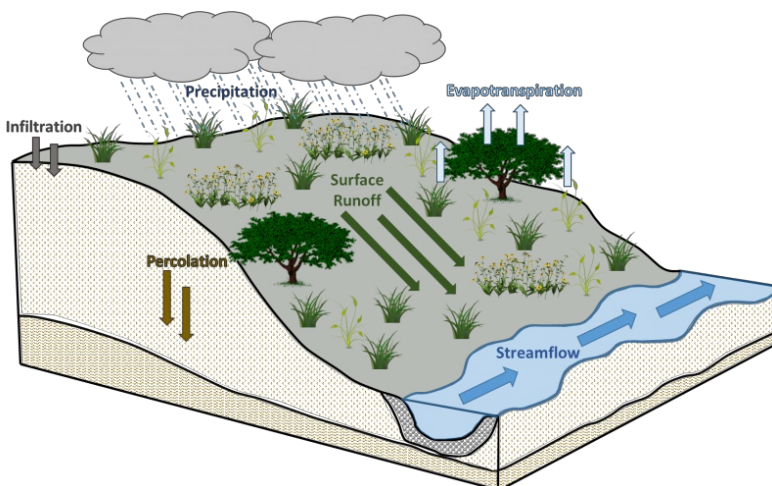


Figure 10. Figure 5. Hydrologic cycling in Calcareous Loess Upland Prairie ecological site.

## Soil features

Soils of Calcareous Loess Upland Prairies are in the Entisol order, further classified as Typic Udorthents. Even though these soils formed under prairie vegetation, they did not develop dark surface horizons due to a moderate infiltration and runoff potential. The soil series associated with this site includes Dow and Ida. The parent material is calcareous loess, and the soils are well-drained and very deep with no coarse fragments. Soil pH classes are neutral to moderately alkaline. No rooting restrictions are noted for the soils of this ecological site. Average clay

content is low limiting compaction susceptibility, but erosion from wind and water can be high.



Figure 11. Ida series (from Young, 1994)

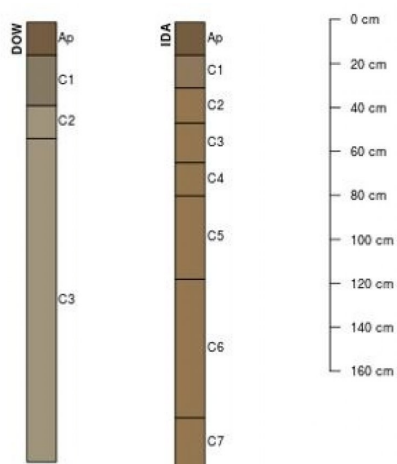


Figure 12. Figure 6. Profile sketches of soil series associated with Calcareous Loess Upland Prairie.

Table 4. Representative soil features

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Parent material                          | (1) Loess                                    |
| Surface texture                          | (1) Silt loam                                |
| Family particle size                     | (1) Fine-silty                               |
| Drainage class                           | Well drained to somewhat excessively drained |
| Permeability class                       | Moderately slow to moderate                  |
| Soil depth                               | 203 cm                                       |
| Available water capacity (0-101.6cm)     | 20.32 cm                                     |
| Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-101.6cm) | 0–30%  |
| Electrical conductivity (0-101.6cm)      | 0–2 mmhos/cm                                 |
| Sodium adsorption ratio (0-101.6cm)      | 0  |
| Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-101.6cm)    | 6.6–8.4                                      |

## Ecological dynamics

Prairie ecosystems are regarded as the most endangered ecosystem in North America where an estimated four percent of the tallgrass prairie habitat remains (Steinauer and Collins 1996). The Loess Hills region of MLRA 107B were once dominated by tall- and midgrass prairies, extending across more than 90 percent of the area (Rosburg 1994; Farnsworth 2009). However, by the early twenty-first century much of the land had been converted to agriculture, leaving an estimated 20 percent of the region to be classified as “grassland” and another three percent classified as “remnant prairie” (Farnsworth 2009).

Calcareous Loess Upland Prairies form a vegetative continuum throughout the Loess Hills, where soil moisture serves as the primary influence on community composition (White 1983; White and Glenn-Lewin 1984). This ecological site can occur on nearly any aspect along summits in the Loess Hills, but generally are found in areas with little elevation gain (Rosburg 1994). Species characteristic of this ecological site are sun-loving, fire- and drought-adapted plants.

Fire is the most important ecosystem driver for maintaining this ecological site (Vogl 1974; Anderson 1990; Eilers and Roosa 1994). Fire intensity typically consisted of periodic, low-intensity surface fires (Stambaugh et al. 2006; LANDFIRE 2009). Ignition sources included summertime lightning strikes from convective storms and bimodal, human ignitions during the spring and fall seasons. Native Americans regularly set fires to improve sight lines for hunting, driving large game, improving grazing and browsing habitat, agricultural and village clearing, and enhancing vital ethnobotanical plants (Day 1953; Barrett 1980; White 1994). Fire frequency has been estimated to occur on average every 6.6 years in the Loess Hills region (Stambaugh et al. 2006). This continuous disturbance provided critical conditions for perpetuating the native prairie ecosystem.

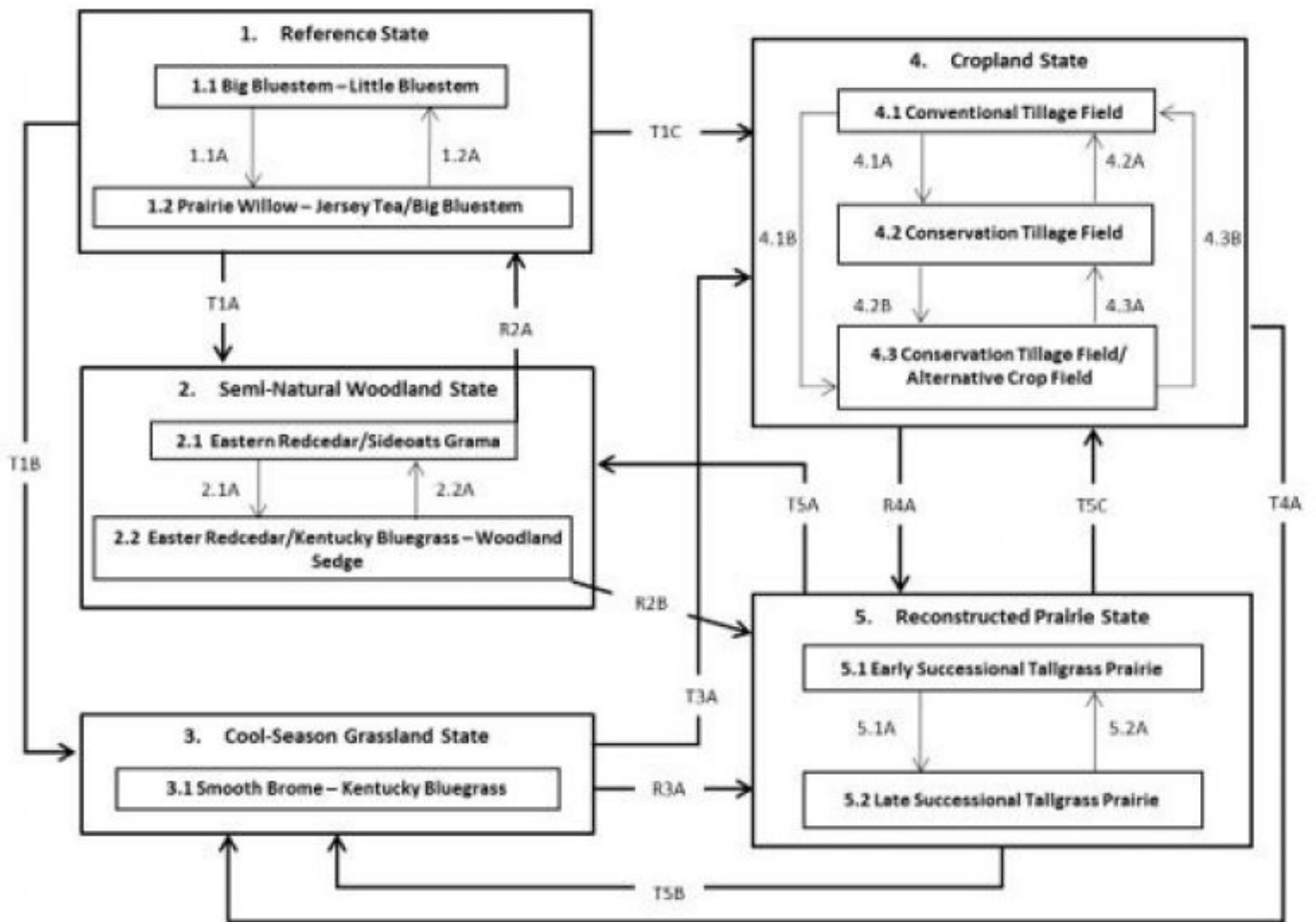
Grazing by native ungulates is often cited as an important disturbance regime of North American grasslands, with bison (*Bison bison*), prairie elk (*Cervus elaphus*), and white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) serving as the dominant herbivores of the area. However, plant community succession in the Loess Hills region does not necessarily follow this hypothesis. The steep and rugged topography of the Loess Hills has been considered an impediment to grazing by large ungulates such as bison. Any role bison played in the area was most likely relegated to the northwestern extent where the terrain is milder (Dinsmore 1994). Elk and deer are believed to have had some role in keeping woody vegetation at bay in the prairies of the Loess Hills (Farnsworth 2009; LANDFIRE 2009).

Drought has also played a part in shaping the prairie ecosystems in the Loess Hills. The periodic episodes of reduced soil moisture in conjunction with the well-drained soils have favored the proliferation of plant species tolerant of such conditions (Stambaugh et al. 2006). In addition, drought can also slow the growth of plants and result in dieback of certain species. When coupled with fire, periods of drought can also greatly delay the recovery of woody vegetation, substantially altering the extent of shrubs and trees (Pyne et al. 1996).

Today, Calcareous Loess Upland Prairies are limited in their extent, having been reduced as a result of eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana* L.) encroachment from long-term fire suppression or having been converted to pasture or agricultural land. What remnants do exist show evidence of indirect anthropogenic influence as some non-native species (i.e., Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis* L.)) are present in the community composition. A return to the historic plant community may not be possible for the most highly-disturbed sites, but long-term restoration efforts can help to restore some natural diversity and ecological functioning.

## **State and transition model**

## R107BY012MO CALCAREOUS LOESS UPLAND PRAIRIE



| Code          | Process  |
|---------------|--|
| T1A, T5A      | Fire suppression   |
| T1B, T4A, T5B | Overgrazing, brush control, and interseeding of non-native cool-season grasses       |
| T1C, T3A, T5C | Agricultural conversion via tillage, seeding, and non-selective herbicide            |
| 1.1A          | Fire-free period, 4-6 years  |
| 1.2A          | Fire-free period, 1-4 years  |
| R2A           | Brush control, non-native species control and reintroduction of historic fire regime |
| 2.1A          | Fire-free period, >20 years  |
| 2.2A          | Fire-free period, <20 years  |
| T2A           | Brush control and interseeding of non-native, cool-season grasses                    |
| R2B, R3A, R4A | Site preparation, invasive species control, and seeding native species               |
| 4.1A          | Less tillage, residue management   |
| 4.1B          | Less tillage, residue management, and implementation of cover cropping               |
| 4.2B          | Implementation of cover cropping   |
| 4.2A, 4.3B    | Intensive tillage, remove residue, and reinitiate monoculture row cropping           |
| 4.3A          | Remove cover cropping  |
| 5.1A          | Invasive species control and implementation of disturbance regimes                   |
| 5.2A          | Drought or improper timing/use of management actions                                 |

Figure 13. STM

### State 1 Reference State

The reference plant community is categorized as a dry prairie and includes grasses, forbs, and varying components



of shrubs. The two community phases within the reference state are dependent on a fire frequency of every one to six years. Shorter fire intervals maintain dominance by grasses, while less frequent intervals allow woody vegetation to increase their importance in the plant canopy. Grazing and drought disturbances have less impact in the reference phases, but do contribute to overall species composition, diversity, cover, and productivity.

### **Dominant plant species**

- big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), grass
- little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), grass

## **Community 1.1**

### **Big Bluestem – Little Bluestem**

Big bluestem and little bluestem are the dominant monocot species for this reference community phase, but overall grass diversity is high (Rosburg 1994; Nelson 2010). Hairy grama, sideoats grama, and plains muhly are also common, but typically produce less cover and biomass than other grasses. Characteristic forbs include blacksamson echinacea (*Echinacea angustifolia* DC.), candle anemone (*Anemone cylindrica* A. Gray), and prairie blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium campestre* E.P. Bicknell). A few shrubs, such as leadplant, roughleaf dogwood, and snowberry (*Symphoricarpos* Duham.) can be scattered throughout the community (Rosburg 1994; Nelson 2010). The shrub component appears to be negatively correlated with latitude in that shrub cover tends to increase with decreasing latitude throughout this site (Rosburg 1994).

### **Dominant plant species**

- big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), grass
- little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), grass

## **Community 1.2**

### **Prairie Willow – Jersey Tea/Big Bluestem**

This reference community phase can occur when fire frequency is reduced to every four to six years (Stambaugh et al. 2006). The native prairie grasses continue to form the dominant herbaceous ground layer, but the reduced fire interval allows woody and suffruticose species to increase shrub cover across the prairie, with canopy coverage ranging from about ten to 30 percent (LANDFIRE 2009). Important shrub species in this phase include prairie willow (*Salix humilis* Marshall), Jersey tea (*Ceanothus herbaceus* Raf.), leadplant, and roughleaf dogwood (Rosburg 1994).

### **Dominant plant species**

- prairie willow (*Salix humilis*), shrub
- New Jersey tea (*Ceanothus americanus*), shrub
- big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), grass

## **Pathway P1.1A**

### **Community 1.1 to 1.2**

Natural succession as a result of an average fire return interval of four to six years.

## **Pathway P1.2A**

### **Community 1.2 to 1.1**

Natural succession as a result of an average fire return interval of four years or less.

## **State 2**

### **Semi-Natural Woodland State**

Fire suppression can transition the reference prairie community into a semi-natural woodland state dominated by eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana* L.) (Briggs et al. 2002; Anderson 2003). Eastern redcedar is a species native to the eastern half of North America with a range spanning from Ontario east to Nova Scotia, south across

the Great Plains into eastern Texas, and east to the Atlantic coast (Lawson 1990; Lee 1996). It is a long-lived (450+ years), slow-growing, fire-intolerant dioecious conifer and historically was found in areas that were protected from fire (e.g., bluffs, rocky hillsides, sandstone cliffs, granite outcrops, etc.) (Ferguson et al. 1968; Anderson 2003). Today, however, decades of fire suppression have allowed this species to spread and it can now be found occupying sites with highly variable aspects, topography, soils, and formerly stable plant communities (Anderson 2003).

#### **Dominant plant species**

- eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), tree
- sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*), grass
- eastern woodland sedge (*Carex blanda*), grass

### **Community 2.1**

#### **Eastern Redcedar/Sideoats Grama**

This community phase represents the early stages of eastern redcedar invasion into the prairie. Native grass species that can persist during this stage include big bluestem, little bluestem, sideoats grama, and Scribner's rosette grass (*Dichanthelium oligosanthes* (Schantz) Gould var. *scribnerianum* (Nash) Gould), however sideoats grama is the only species known to increase its cover during this phase. Candle anemone (*Anemone cylindrical* A. Gray), cutleaf anemone (*Pulsatilla patens* (L.) Mill. ssp. *Multifida* (Pritz.) Zamels), and Cuman ragweed (*Ambrosia psilostachya* DC.) comprise the persistent forb component of the plant community (Gehring and Bragg 1992; Rosburg 1994).

#### **Dominant plant species**

- eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), tree
- sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*), grass

### **Community 2.2**

#### **Eastern Redcedar/Kentucky Bluegrass-Woodland Sedge**

Sites falling into this community phase are strongly dominated by eastern redcedar as a result of over 20 years of fire suppression. As the canopies of the trees increase, light availability is greatly reduced to the ground layer and soil moisture increases, allowing more shade tolerant species, such as Kentucky bluegrass and sedges (*Carex* L.), to replace the heliophytic tallgrass prairie species (Gehring and Bragg 1992; Brantley and Young 2010; Pierce and Reich 2010). Over time, the diversity and productivity of the herbaceous understory is greatly reduced (Smith and Stubbendieck 1990; Gehring and Bragg 1992; Rosburg 1994). The continued absence of fire and other disturbances will allow this community to expand its range.

#### **Dominant plant species**

- eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), tree
- Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*), grass
- eastern woodland sedge (*Carex blanda*), grass

### **Pathway P2.1A**

#### **Community 2.1 to 2.2**

Pathway 2.1A – Fire is removed from the landscape in excess of 20 years.

### **Pathway P2.2A**

#### **Community 2.2 to 2.1**

Pathway 2.2A – Fire is restored to the landscape within 20 years of initial encroachment.

## **State 3**

### **Cool Season Pasture State**

The cool-season grassland state occurs when the reference state has been anthropogenically-altered for livestock and/or hay production. Fire suppression, seeding of non-native cool-season grasses, removal of woody vegetation, and grazing by domesticated livestock transition and maintain this simplified grassland state (Rosburg 1994). Early settlers seeded such non-native cool-season species as smooth brome (*Bromus inermis* Leyss.) and Kentucky bluegrass in order to help extend the grazing season (Smith 1998). Over time, as lands were continually grazed by large herds of cattle, the non-native species were able to spread and expand across the prairie habitat, reducing the native species diversity.

#### **Dominant plant species**

- smooth brome (*Bromus inermis*), grass
- Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*), grass

### **Community 3.1**

#### **Smooth Brome – Kentucky Bluegrass**

Species characteristic of this community phase include big bluestem, smooth brome, Kentucky bluegrass, and sweetclovers (*Melilotus* Mill.) (Nelson 2010). While the native big bluestem forms the dominant component of the canopy, smooth brome and Kentucky bluegrass occur in higher frequencies across the site. Annuals and biennials are important components of this community phase and are indicative of the disturbed nature of the site (Rosburg 1994).

#### **Dominant plant species**

- Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*), grass
- smooth brome (*Bromus inermis*), grass

### **State 4**

#### **Cropland State**

Loess is the main contributing factor to the Midwest's highly-productive agricultural soils, and as a result, much of the MLRA has been converted to cropland, including significant portions of this ecological site (USGS 1999). The continuous use of tillage, row-crop planting, and chemicals (i.e., herbicides, fertilizers, etc.) have effectively eliminated the reference community and many of its natural ecological functions in favor of crop production. Corn (*Zea mays* L.) and soybeans (*Glycine max* (L.) Merr.) are the dominant crops for the site. These areas are likely to remain in crop production for the foreseeable future.

### **Community 4.1**

#### **Conventional Tillage Field**

Sites in this community phase typically consist of monoculture row-cropping maintained by conventional tillage practices. They are cropped in either continuous corn or corn-soybean rotations. The frequent use of deep tillage, low crop diversity, and bare soil conditions during the non-growing season negatively impact soil health. Under these practices, soil aggregation is reduced or destroyed, soil organic matter is reduced, erosion and runoff are increased, and infiltration is decreased, which can ultimately lead to undesirable changes in the hydrology of the watershed (Tomer et al. 2005).

### **Community 4.2**

#### **Conservation Tillage Field**

This community phase is characterized by rotational crop production that utilizes various conservation tillage methods to promote soil health and reduce erosion. Conservation tillage methods include strip-till, ridge-till, vertical-till, or no-till planting systems. Strip-till keeps seedbed preparation to narrow bands less than one-third the width of the row where crop residue and soil consolidation are left undisturbed in-between seedbed areas. Strip-till planting may be completed in the fall and nutrient application either occurs simultaneously or at the time of planting. Ridge-till uses specialized equipment to create ridges in the seedbed and vegetative residue is left on the surface in between the ridges. Weeds are controlled with herbicides and/or cultivation, seedbed ridges are rebuilt during cultivation, and soils are left undisturbed from harvest to planting. Vertical-till systems employ machinery that lightly

tills the soil and cuts up crop residue, mixing some of the residue into the top few inches of the soil while leaving a large portion on the surface. No-till management is the most conservative, disturbing soils only at the time of planting and fertilizer application. Compared to conventional tillage system, conservation tillage methods can reduce soil erosion, increase organic matter and water availability, improve water quality, and reduce soil compaction.

### **Community 4.3**

#### **Conservation Tillage Field/Alternative Crop Field**

This condition applies conservation tillage methods as described above as well as adds cover crop practices. Cover crops typically include nitrogen-fixing species (e.g., legumes), small grains (e.g., rye, wheat, oats), or forage covers (e.g., turnips, radishes, rapeseed). The addition of cover crops not only adds plant diversity but also promotes soil health by reducing soil erosion, limiting nitrogen leaching, suppressing weeds, increasing soil organic matter, and improving the overall soil. In the case of small grain cover crops, surface cover and water infiltration are increased, while forage covers can be used to graze livestock or support local wildlife. Of the three community phases for this state, this phase promotes the greatest soil sustainability and improves ecological functioning within a cropland system.

#### **Pathway P4.1A**

##### **Community 4.1 to 4.2**

Tillage operations are greatly reduced, crop rotation occurs on a regular schedule, and crop residue is allowed to remain on the soil surface.

#### **Pathway P4.1B**

##### **Community 4.1 to 4.3**

Tillage operations are greatly reduced or eliminated, crop rotation is either reduced or eliminated, and crop residue is allowed to remain on the soil surface, and cover crops are implemented to prevent soil erosion.

#### **Pathway P4.2A**

##### **Community 4.2 to 4.1**

– Intensive tillage is utilized and monoculture row-cropping is established.

#### **Pathway P4.2B**

##### **Community 4.2 to 4.3**

Cover crops are implemented to prevent soil erosion.

#### **Pathway P4.3B**

##### **Community 4.3 to 4.1**

Intensive tillage is utilized, cover crops practices are abandoned, monoculture row-cropping is established, and crop rotation is reduced or eliminated.

#### **Pathway P4.3A**

##### **Community 4.3 to 4.2**

Cover crop practices are abandoned.

### **State 5**

#### **Reconstructed Prairie State**

Prairie reconstructions have become an important tool for repairing natural ecological functioning and providing habitat protection for numerous grassland-dependent species. The historic plant community of the tallgrass prairie was extremely diverse and complex, and prairie replication is not considered to be possible once the native vegetation has been altered by post-European settlement land uses. Therefore ecological restoration should aim to

aid the recovery of degraded, damaged, or destroyed ecosystems. A successful restoration will have the ability to structurally and functionally sustain itself, demonstrate resilience to the natural ranges of stress and disturbance, and create and maintain positive biotic and abiotic interactions (SER 2002). The reconstructed prairie state is the result of a long-term commitment involving a multi-step, adaptive management process. Diverse, species-rich seed mixes are important to utilize as they allow the site to undergo successional stages that exhibit changing composition and dominance over time (Smith et al. 2010). On-going management via prescribed fire and/or light grazing will help the site progress from an early successional community dominated by annuals and some weeds to a later seral stage composed of native perennial grasses, forbs, and shrubs. Establishing a prescribed fire regimen that mimics natural disturbance patterns can increase native species cover and diversity while reducing cover of non-native forbs and grasses. Light grazing alone can help promote species richness, while grazing accompanied with fire can control the encroachment of woody vegetation (Brudvig et al. 2007).

### **Dominant plant species**

- big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), grass
- little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), grass

## **Community 5.1**

### **Early Successional Reconstructed Prairie**

This community phase represents the early community assembly from prairie reconstruction and is highly dependent on the seed mix utilized and the timing and priority of planting operations. The seed mix should look to include a diverse mix of native cool-season and warm-season annual and perennial grasses and forbs typical of the reference state (e.g., big bluestem, Indiangrass, little bluestem, sideoats grama, heath aster). Cool-season annuals can help to provide litter that promotes cool, moist soil conditions to the benefit of the other species in the seed mix. The first season following site preparation and seeding will typically result in annuals and other volunteer species forming the vegetative cover. Control of non-native species, particularly perennial species, is crucial at this point in order to ensure they do not establish before the native vegetation (Martin and Wilsey 2012). After the first season, native warm-season grasses should begin to become more prominent on the landscape and, over time, close the canopy.

## **Community 5.2**

### **Late Successional Reconstructed Prairie**

Appropriately timed disturbance regimes (e.g., prescribed fire) applied to the early successional community phase can help increase the beta diversity, pushing the site into a late successional community phase over time. While prairie communities are dominated by grasses, these species can suppress forb establishment and reduce overall diversity and ecological functioning (Martin and Wilsey 2006; Williams et al. 2007). Reducing accumulated plant litter from such tallgrasses as big bluestem and Indiangrass allows more light and nutrients to become available for forb recruitment, allowing for greater ecosystem complexity (Wilsey 2008).

## **Pathway P5.1A**

### **Community 5.1 to 5.2**

Selective herbicides are used to control non-native species, and prescribed fire and/or light grazing help to increase the native species diversity and control woody vegetation.

## **Pathway P5.2A**

### **Community 5.2 to 5.1**

Reconstruction experiences a decrease in native species diversity from drought or improper timing of management actions (e.g., reduced fire frequency, use of non-selective herbicides).

## **Transition T1A**

### **State 1 to 2**

Fire suppression and overgrazing by domestic livestock transition this site to the semi-natural woodland state (2).

## **Transition T1B**

### **State 1 to 3**

Overgrazing, interseeding non-native cool-season grasses, and brush control transition this site to the cool-season grassland state (3).

## **Transition T1C**

### **State 1 to 4**

Tillage, seeding of agricultural crops, and non-selective herbicide transition this site to the cropland state (4).

## **Restoration pathway R2A**

### **State 2 to 1**

Mechanical or chemical control of brush and non-native species and reintroduction of a historic fire regime restore the site back to the reference state (1).

## **Restoration pathway R2B**

### **State 2 to 5**

Site preparation, invasive species control (native and non-native), and seeding native species transition this site to the reconstructed prairie state (5).

## **Transition T3A**

### **State 3 to 4**

Tillage, seeding of agricultural crops, and non-selective herbicide transition this site to the cropland state (4).

## **Restoration pathway R3A**

### **State 3 to 5**

Site preparation, invasive species control (native and non-native), and seeding native species transition this site to the reconstructed prairie state (5).

## **Restoration pathway T4A**

### **State 4 to 3**

Non-selective herbicide, seeding of non-native cool-season grasses, and continuous grazing transitions the site to the cool-season pasture state (3).

## **Restoration pathway R4A**

### **State 4 to 5**

Site preparation, invasive species control (native and non-native), and seeding native species transition this site to the reconstructed prairie state (5).

## **Transition T5A**

### **State 5 to 2**

Fire suppression allows redcedar encroachment and transitions this site to the semi-natural woodland state (2).

## **Restoration pathway T5B**

### **State 5 to 3**

Land is converted to the cool-season grassland state through the use of non-selective herbicide and seeding of non-native cool-season grasses (3).

## Transition T5C

### State 5 to 4

Tillage, seeding of agricultural crops, and non-selective herbicide transition this site to the cropland state (4).

## Additional community tables

### Animal community

#### Wildlife\*

Game species that utilize this ecological site include:

Northern Bobwhite will utilize this ecological site for food (seeds, insects) and cover needs (escape, nesting and roosting cover).

Cottontail rabbits will utilize this ecological site for food (seeds, soft mast) and cover needs.

Turkey will utilize this ecological site for food (seeds, green browse, soft mast, insects) and nesting and brood-rearing cover. Turkey poult feed heavily on insects provided by this site type.

Bird species associated with this ecological site's reference state condition:

Breeding birds as related to vegetation structure (related to time since fire, grazing, haying, and mowing):

Vegetation Height Short (< 0.5 meter, low litter levels, bare ground visible):

Grasshopper Sparrow, Horned Lark, Northern Bobwhite

Medium Vegetation Height (0.5 – 1 meter, moderate litter levels, some bare ground visible): Eastern Meadowlark, Dickcissel, Field Sparrow, Northern Bobwhite, Bobolink, Eastern Kingbird

Brushy – Mix of grasses, forbs, native shrubs (e.g., *Rhus copallina*, *Prunus americana*, *Rubus* spp., *Rosa carolina*) and small trees (e.g., *Cornus drummondii*):

Bell's Vireo, Yellow-Breasted Chat, Loggerhead Shrike, Brown Thrasher, Common Yellowthroat

Amphibian and reptile species associated with this ecological site's reference state condition: Ornate Box Turtle (*Terrapene ornata ornata*), Western Slender Glass Lizard (*Ophisaurus attenuatus attenuatus*), Great Plains Skink (*Eumeces obsoletus*), Northern Prairie Skink (*E. septentrionalis septentrionalis*), Prairie Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis calligaster calligaster*), and Bullsnake (*Pituophis catenifer sayi*).

Small mammals associated with this ecological site's reference state condition:

Prairie Vole (*Microtus ochrogaster*), Meadow Jumping Mouse (*Zapus hudsonius*), Plains Pocket Gopher (*Geomys bursarius*), Franklin's Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus franklinii*), and Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus tridecemlineatus*).

Invertebrates: Many native insect species are likely associated with this ecological site, especially native bees, ants, beetles, butterflies and moths, and crickets, grasshoppers and katydids. However information on these groups is often lacking enough resolution to assign them to individual ecological sites.

Insect species known to be associated with this ecological site's reference state condition include: Prairie Meadow Katydid (*Conocephalus saltans*), Packard's Grasshopper (*Melanoplus packardii*), Mermiria Grasshopper (*Mermiria picta*), Black-margined Shield-back Katydid (*Pediocetes nigromarginata*), Ottoe Skipper butterfly (*Hesperia ottoe*) and two native bees (*Tetraloniella albata*, *Diadasia enavata*).

\*This section prepared by Mike Leahy, Natural Areas Coordinator, Missouri Department of Conservation, 2013

## Other information

Forestry

Management: This ecological site is not recommended for traditional timber management activity. Historically this site was dominated by a ground cover of native prairie grasses and forbs. Some scattered open grown trees may have also been present. May be suitable for non-traditional forestry uses such as windbreaks, environmental plantings, alley cropping (a method of planting, in which rows of trees or shrubs are interspersed with rows of crops) or woody bio-fuels.

## Inventory data references

Tier 3 Sampling Plot(s) used to develop the reference state, community phase 1.1:

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## Approval

Chris Tecklenburg, 5/21/2020

## Acknowledgments

This project could not have been completed without the dedication and commitment from a variety of partners and staff (Table 6). Team members supported the project by serving on the technical team, assisting with the development of state and community phases of the state-and-transition model, providing peer review and technical editing, and conducting quality control and quality assurance reviews.

Organization Name Title Location

Drake University:

Dr. Tom Rosburg Professor of Ecology and Botany Des Moines, IA

Iowa Department of Natural Resources:

Lindsey Barney District Forester Oakland, IA

John Pearson Ecologist Des Moines, IA

LANDFIRE (The Nature Conservancy):

Randy Swaty Ecologist Evanston, IL

Natural Resources Conservation Service:

Rick Bednarek IA State Soil Scientist Des Moines, IA

Stacey Clark Regional Ecological Site Specialist St. Paul, MN

Tonie Endres Senior Regional Soil Scientist Indianapolis, IA

John Hammerly Soil Data Quality Specialist Indianapolis, IN

Lisa Kluesner Ecological Site Specialist Waverly, IA

Sean Kluesner Earth Team Volunteer Waverly, IA

Jeff Matthias State Grassland Specialist Des Moines, IA

Kevin Norwood Soil Survey Regional Director Indianapolis, IN

Doug Oelmann Soil Scientist Des Moines, IA

James Phillips GIS Specialist Des Moines, IA

Dan Pulido Soil Survey Leader Atlantic, IA

Melvin Simmons Soil Survey Leader Gallatin, MO

Tyler Staggs Ecological Site Specialist Indianapolis, IN

Jason Steele Area Resource Soil Scientist Fairfield, IA

Doug Wallace Ecological Site Specialist Columbia, MO

## 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) | Lisa Kluesner     |
| Contact for lead author  |                   |
| Date                     | 04/30/2025        |
| Approved by              | Chris Tecklenburg |

|   |                   |
|---|-------------------|
| Approval date                               |                   |
| Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on | Annual Production |

## Indicators

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

---

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

---

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

---

4. **Bare ground from Ecological Site Description or other studies (rock, litter, lichen, moss, plant canopy are not bare ground):**

---

5. **Number of gullies and erosion associated with gullies:**

---

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

---

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

---

8. **Soil surface (top few mm) resistance to erosion (stability values are averages - most sites will show a range of values):**

---

9. **Soil surface structure and SOM content (include type of structure and A-horizon color and thickness):**

---

10. **Effect of community phase composition (relative proportion of different functional groups) and spatial distribution on infiltration and runoff:**

---

11. **Presence and thickness of compaction layer (usually none; describe soil profile features which may be mistaken for compaction on this site):**

---

12. **Functional/Structural Groups (list in order of descending dominance by above-ground annual-production or live foliar cover using symbols: >>, >, = to indicate much greater than, greater than, and equal to):**

Dominant:

Sub-dominant:

Other:

Additional:

---

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

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

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

16. **Potential invasive (including noxious) species (native and non-native). List species which BOTH characterize degraded states and have the potential to become a dominant or co-dominant species on the ecological site if their future establishment and growth is not actively controlled by management interventions. Species that become dominant for only one to several years (e.g., short-term response to drought or wildfire) are not invasive plants. Note that unlike other indicators, we are describing what is NOT expected in the reference state for the ecological site:**
- 

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