

# Ecological site R150AY014LA Loamy Terrace Ridge

Last updated: 9/20/2019  
Accessed: 06/04/2023

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## General information

**Provisional.** A provisional ecological site description has undergone quality control and quality assurance review. It contains a working state and transition model and enough information to identify the ecological site.

## MLRA notes

Major Land Resource Area (MLRA): 150A—Gulf Coast Prairies

MLRA 150A is in the West Gulf Coastal Plain Section of the Coastal Plain Province of the Atlantic Plain in Texas (83 percent) and Louisiana (17 percent). It makes up about 16,365 square miles (42,410 square kilometers). It is characterized by nearly level plains that have low local relief and are dissected by rivers and streams that flow toward the Gulf of Mexico. Elevation ranges from sea level to about 165 feet (0 to 50 meters) along the interior margin. It includes the towns of Crowley, Eunice, and Lake Charles, Louisiana, and Beaumont, Houston, Bay City, Victoria, Corpus Christi, Robstown, and Kingsville, Texas. Interstates 10 and 45 are in the northeastern part of the area, and Interstate 37 is in the southwestern part. U.S. Highways 90 and 190 are in the eastern part, in Louisiana. U.S. Highway 77 passes through Kingsville, Texas. The Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge and the Fannin Battleground State Historic Site are in the part of the area in Texas.

## Classification relationships

USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, 2006.  
-Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) 150A

## Ecological site concept

Loamy Terrace Ridges historically supported a tallgrass prairie. They are comprised of silt loam soils on slopes of 0 to 3 percent.

## Associated sites

R150AY012LA	Loamy Terrace Prairie
R150AY013LA	Clayey Terrace Prairie

## Similar sites

F152BY005TX	Seasonally Wet Loamy Upland
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Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	Not specified
Herbaceous	Not specified

## Physiographic features

These nearly level to very gently sloping soils occur on flat coastal plains terrace ridges. The slope ranges from 0 to 3 percent. The water table fluctuates throughout the year but can be 7 to 21 inches below the surface, especially during the late fall and early winter.

**Table 2. Representative physiographic features**

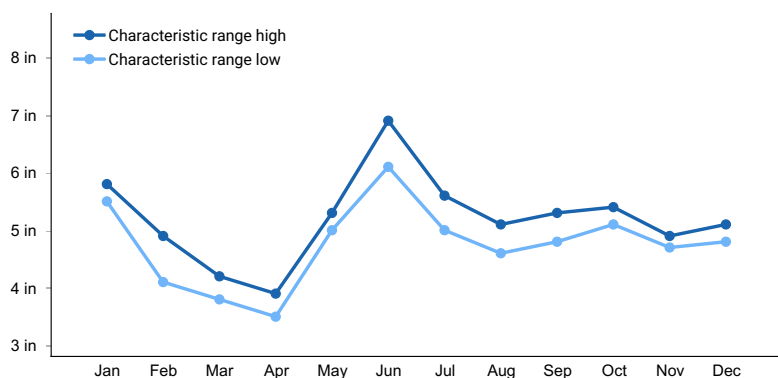
Landforms	(1) Coastal plain > Ridge
Runoff class	Medium to very high
Flooding frequency	None
Ponding frequency	None
Elevation	0–151 ft
Slope	0–3%
Water table depth	7–21 in

### Climatic features

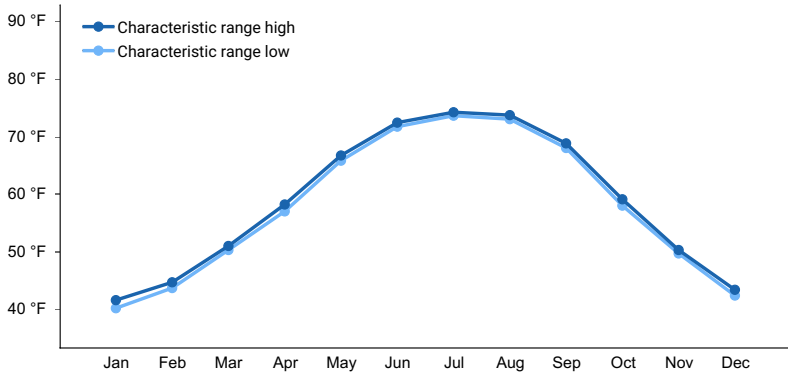
The climate of MLRA 150A is humid subtropical with mild winters. The average annual precipitation in the northern two-thirds of this area is 45 to 63 inches. It is 28 inches at the extreme southern tip of the area and 30 to 45 inches in the southwestern third of the area. The precipitation is fairly evenly distributed, but it is slightly higher in late summer and midsummer in the western part of the area and slightly higher in winter in the eastern part. Rainfall typically occurs as moderate intensity, tropical storms that produce large amounts of rain during the winter. The average annual temperature is 66 to 72 degrees F. The freeze-free period averages 325 days and ranges from 290 to 365 days, increasing in length to the southwest.

**Table 3. Representative climatic features**

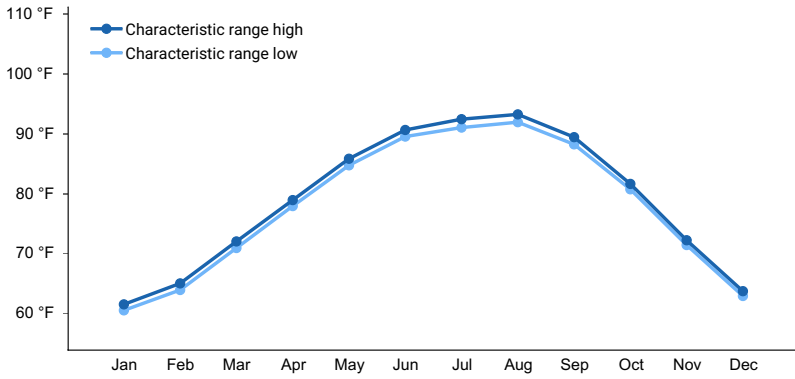
Frost-free period (characteristic range)	235-239 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	273-310 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	59-61 in
Frost-free period (actual range)	234-243 days
Freeze-free period (actual range)	271-351 days
Precipitation total (actual range)	58-61 in
Frost-free period (average)	238 days
Freeze-free period (average)	296 days
Precipitation total (average)	60 in



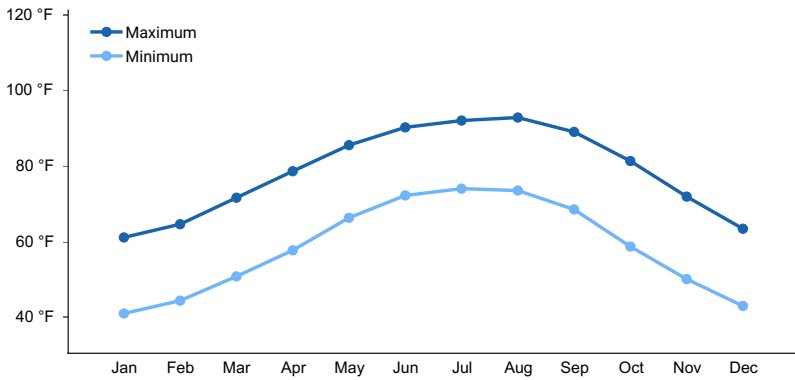
**Figure 1. Monthly precipitation range**



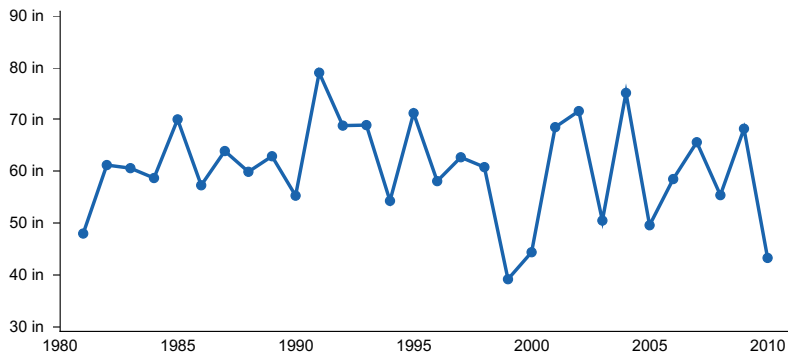
**Figure 2. Monthly minimum temperature range**



**Figure 3. Monthly maximum temperature range**



**Figure 4. Monthly average minimum and maximum temperature**



**Figure 5. Annual precipitation pattern**

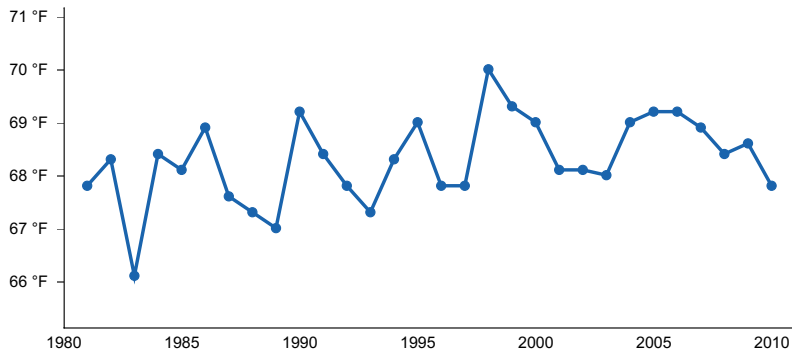


Figure 6. Annual average temperature pattern

### Climate stations used

- (1) EUNICE [USC00162981], Eunice, LA
- (2) CROWLEY 2 NE [USC00162212], Crowley, LA
- (3) JENNINGS [USC00164700], Jennings, LA
- (4) LAKE CHARLES [USW00003937], Lake Charles, LA

### Influencing water features

Water does not regularly pond or flood the sites, but due to the increased clay content, puddles may form after intense rains.

### Soil features

The sites consist of very deep, somewhat poorly drained, slowly to very slowly permeable soils that formed in clayey fluviomarine deposits of the Pleistocene age. Soils correlated to this site include: Crowley, Kaplan, Mamou, and Patourville.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Fluviomarine deposits
Surface texture	(1) Silt loam (2) Silt
Family particle size	(1) Fine (2) Fine-silty
Drainage class	Somewhat poorly drained to somewhat excessively drained
Permeability class	Slow to very slow
Soil depth	80 in

### Ecological dynamics

The pre-settlement plant community of the Loamy Terrace Ridge was a tallgrass prairie. Soils, climate, fire, and grazing by native wild herbivores were the major influences on the plant community. Historically, bison were the primary large ungulates that grazed the site. There are historic records that fires commonly occurred, but none that definitively describe the frequency, timing, or intensity of fires. It has been postulated fires occurred as frequent as every 2 to 5 years.

Under the influences mentioned above, this prairie was dominated by tallgrasses. Major tallgrass species include little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), yellow Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), and eastern gamagrass (*Tripsacum dactyloides*). Perennial forbs are an important part of the composition and include ashy sunflower (*Helianthus mollis*), button snake root (*Eryngium yuccifolium*), gayfeather (*Liatris* spp.), and goldenrod (*Solidago* spp.). The species composition varies to include species from several families and will vary along the moisture gradient. The micro-highs and lows contribute to the

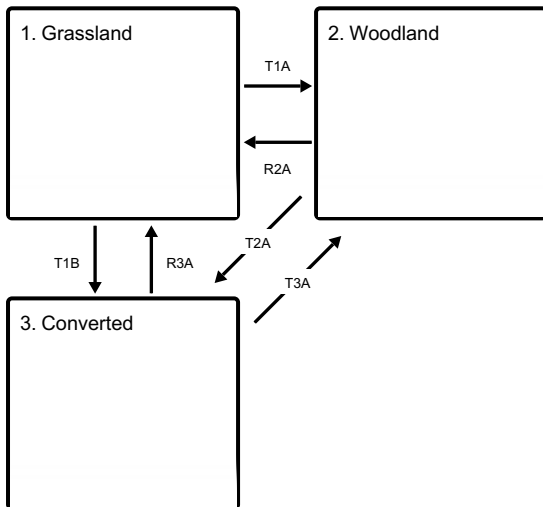
diverse plant community; the micro-highs are slightly drier and the micro-lows slightly wetter. Elevation differences between highs and lows range from 6 to 15 inches. Vegetation tolerant of moist soil grows on the lower elevations of the while less water-tolerant vegetation grows on the higher elevations.

Excessive grazing by domestic livestock contributes to the reduction or elimination of eastern gamagrass, big bluestem, yellow Indiangrass, switchgrass, and little bluestem. As the site transitions, species such as brownseed paspalum (*Paspalum plicatulum*), bushy bluestem (*Andropogon glomeratus*), knotroot bristlegrass (*Setaria parviflora*), smutgrass (*Sporobolus indicus*), and shorter-stature species increase. In addition to site transition due to excessive grazing, farming has had a significant influence. Not only has the site changed through the loss of native plant communities from cultivation, but also through the change in soils, hydrology, and topography by land leveling, ditching, and leveeing. Continued overuse by livestock, lack of fire, or abandonment of cropping allows woody plants to invade. These woody pioneers include eastern baccharis (*Baccharis halamifolia*), hackberry (*Celtis* sp.), ash (*Fraxinus* sp.), and Chinese tallow (*Triadica sebifera*).

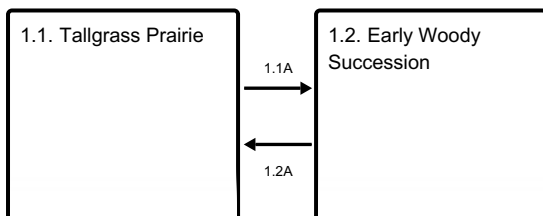
As the plant community transitions from the Tallgrass Prairie Community (1.1) to the other states, changes occur in plant composition, biomass production, litter accumulation, and water infiltration and storage. These changes influence most treatment alternatives including the ability to use fire as a management tool. The resulting increase in woody plant density signifies that a threshold has been crossed. Once this threshold is crossed, restoration back towards the reference plant community becomes much more difficult and expensive. Even though a plant community similar can establish, the reference community may never be fully restored. Although a combination of practices such as brush management, re-seeding, prescribed grazing, and fire are required for restoration. Also, the expansive soil disturbance associated with transition to a converted state removes soil micro environmental factors that can prevent total restoration.

## State and transition model

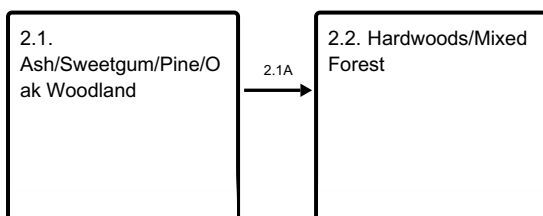
### Ecosystem states



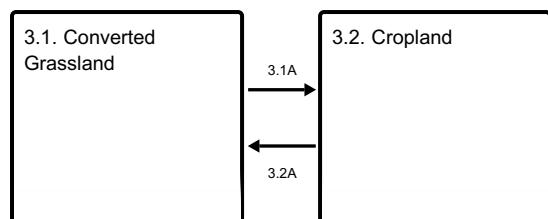
### State 1 submodel, plant communities



### State 2 submodel, plant communities



### State 3 submodel, plant communities



## State 1 Grassland

### Community 1.1 Tallgrass Prairie

This community historically covered 2.5 million acres that once dominated southwest Louisiana and is the reference plant community. Currently, less than 100 acres remain, making it one of the most endangered ecosystems. Most of the few remaining remnants of prairie in Louisiana are found on narrow strips of land along railroad tracks, small areas outside the reach of tillage, within grazing systems, and wildlife refuges. Despite the small size of these remnants, most contain a high diversity of native tallgrass prairie flora. Nearly 1,000 plant species have been identified in the Coastal Prairie and almost all are perennials. Conversion of these sites occurred over most of the region by plowing and planting crop species or repeated and severe overgrazing, a practice which favors nonnative, sod-forming plants. Restoration is difficult as soil microbial communities are largely not well understood and seed sources for the quantities of species are difficult to locate. Historic disturbances included fire and grazing by bison. Their grazing was intense but were followed by long periods of recovery. The bison grazing accelerated nutrients cycling, removed any decadent plants, and promoted species diversity. Fire set by storms or Native Americans recycled minerals and nutrients, retarded the invasion of woody species, and increased the quality of the plants. Bison would have been attracted to these burned areas. The combined effect of fire and grazing over long periods kept the prairie functioning. This disturbance-driven community was always evolving with shifts in species composition by time of year, climatic variability, and disturbance.

### Community 1.2 Early Woody Succession

This community is characterized by a diverse species composition of grasses and forbs with an increasing composition of woody species that are immature and low stature, specifically baccharis, ash, sweetgum and pines. If this community is not properly managed, and no brush management measures are taken, it will transition into a Woodland State (2). Control of woody species will require input of extensive resources. Conservation practices can include prescribed grazing, prescribed burning, mowing, disking, or herbicide treatments to manage undesired plants. Removing or reducing woody plants by disking or mowing should be implemented early before mechanical treatments are not effective. If a managed woodland is the desired community, proper management is required. Some Invasive woody species, such as Chinese tallow (*Triadica sebifera*), will invade and grow and produce seeds in as few as 3 years. This phase can be beneficial habitat for some wildlife species. Woody invasive species grow quickly and plant densities and size can be difficult and expensive to control. Restoration potential to grassland sites becomes increasingly problematic as this vegetation state matures.

#### Pathway 1.1A Community 1.1 to 1.2

Lack of brush management and fire will transition the reference community to the Early Woody Succession Community (1.2).

#### Pathway 1.2A Community 1.2 to 1.1

Brush management and return of regular fire will remove the woody species and restore the tallgrass prairie.

## **State 2 Woodland**

### **Community 2.1 Ash/Sweetgum/Pine/Oak Woodland**

This community has crossed a threshold to a more mature Woodland State. Ash, sweetgum, pine, and oak species make up the overstory unless Chinese tallow has become well established. If it has, it will create a closed woody canopy in a very few years. As the tallow trees mature and densities increase, the understory is shaded out and forage species disappear. These stands become unproductive for forage. Restoration to a productive grassland or becomes more difficult and expensive. Residual tallow seed will repopulate stands without continued woody management. Before complete canopy closure and die-off occur, this phase can provide beneficial habitat for some wildlife species.

### **Community 2.2 Hardwoods/Mixed Forest**

This community represents a forest of desirable hardwoods and/or pines. This phase represents managed stands of tree species. This phase can provide beneficial habitat for some wildlife species. If dual use of timber production and grazing is desired, proper grazing use must be employed to minimize disturbance to tree species. If timber production is desired, periodic brush management may be required to minimize competition from undesirable woody plants. Due to rainfall, drainage and soil properties, harvest limitations exist and will require attention for the conservation of the natural resources.

#### **Pathway 2.1A Community 2.1 to 2.2**

Continued, unabated growth by woody species will transition the woodland into a forest.

## **State 3 Converted**

### **Community 3.1 Converted Grassland**

This community is characterized by a typical hay production field. The species composition generally consists of a single grass species that is managed for forage production. These communities are typically harvested for stored forage although grazing may occur. These sites are productive for forage and can provide ecological benefits such as control of soil erosion. Allowing for adequate rest and regrowth of desired species is required to maintain productivity. Maintenance of monoculture stands also requires control of unwanted species which will require pest management and nutrient management to maintain the needed fertility. Some attempts are made to restore the native reference plant community. Due to the large numbers of plant species, and the variability within communities, the exact mixture and number of species will vary greatly. Many of the reference species seeds are not available for purchase. Therefore, full restoration to the reference community may not be fully possible, but a similar community with the same disturbance regime can be replicated. This community is disturbance dependent; primarily fire. Other methods for maintenance include prescribed grazing and brush management. There is an equilibrium that must be reached between maintaining species composition and disturbance. If a site is destructively grazed, trafficked in saturated soil conditions, utilized as a feeding area, mechanically disturbed, and plant crowns and/or roots are destroyed, the transition process to a Woodland State (2) will occur.

### **Community 3.2 Cropland**

This community is characterized by a crop production field. Annual plantings for forage production would also be included in this phase, which may include cool-season annual grasses, legumes, and warm-season forage species. Vegetable crops are generally grown on a small scale. On fields with an adequate water source capable of being utilized for rice production, crawfish may be included in the rotation or as a standalone crop. Often two or more

crops will be grown in a multiyear rotation, this breaks pest cycles and some crops produce higher amounts of residue, which is left on the soil to improve soil quality. Maintenance of monoculture crop stands also requires control of unwanted species, which will require pest management and nutrient management to maintain the needed fertility.

### **Pathway 3.1A** **Community 3.1 to 3.2**

The land manager's decision to farm is the driver for transition to the Cropland Community (3.2).

### **Pathway 3.2A** **Community 3.2 to 3.1**

The land manager's decision to plant grass for grazing, hay, or restoration is the driver for transition to the Converted Grassland Community (3.1).

### **Transition T1A** **State 1 to 2**

Lack of prescribed grazing, fire, and brush management will transition the Grassland State (1) to the Woodland State (2).

### **Transition T1B** **State 1 to 3**

Planting introduced forages in the form of crops or grasses will transition the site to the Converted State (3).

### **Restoration pathway R2A** **State 2 to 1**

Restoration back to reference conditions requires brush management to remove the overstory canopy followed by prescribed grazing and return of regular fire intervals.

### **Transition T2A** **State 2 to 3**

Planting introduced forages in the form of crops or grasses will transition the site to the Converted State (3).

### **Restoration pathway R3A** **State 3 to 1**

Full restoration to reference conditions is difficult, if not impossible, due to the complexity of ecological restoration. Finding all reference species for seeding coupled with the potential loss of soil health make this task hard. Most often, restoration attempts will remain in the Converted Grassland Community (3.1), as long as natural disturbances are still applied.

### **Transition T3A** **State 3 to 2**

Without pest management and brush management to remove woody species, the Converted Grassland (3.1) or Cropland (3.2) can transition into a Woodland State (2).

## **Additional community tables**

### **Animal community**

The Coastal Prairie communities support a wide array of animals. Cattle and many species of wildlife make



extensive use of the site. White-tailed deer may be found scattered across the prairie and are found in heavier concentrations where woody cover exists. Feral hogs are present and at times abundant. Coyotes are abundant and fill the mammalian predator niche. Rodent populations rise during drier periods and fall during periods of inundation. Attwater's pocket gophers are abundant and have an important impact on the ecology of the site. The badger is present but not abundant in locations at the southern extent of the site. Locally unique species alligators and bullfrogs.

The region is a major flyway for waterfowl and migrating birds. Hundreds of thousands of ducks, geese, and sandhill cranes abound during winter. Two important endangered species occur in the area, the whooping crane and Attwater's prairie chicken. Many other species of avian predators including northern harriers, ferruginous hawks, red-tailed hawks, white-tailed kites, kestrels, and, occasionally, swallow-tailed kites utilize the vast grasslands. Many species of grassland birds use the site, including blue grosbeaks, dickcissels, eastern meadowlarks, several sparrows, including, vesper sparrow, lark sparrow, savannah sparrow, grasshopper sparrow, and Le Conte's sparrow.

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## Contributors

Tyson Hart, Ecologist, NRCS, Nacogdoches, TX  
Charles Stemmans, Ecologist, NRCS, Opelousas, LA

## Approval

David Kraft, 9/20/2019

## Rangeland health reference sheet

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

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

## Indicators

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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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):**

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

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

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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):**

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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:

Sub-dominant:

Other:

Additional:

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

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

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

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16. **Potential invasive (including noxious) species (native and non-native). List species which BOTH characterize degraded states and have the potential to become a dominant or co-dominant species on the ecological site if**

**their future establishment and growth is not actively controlled by management interventions. Species that become dominant for only one to several years (e.g., short-term response to drought or wildfire) are not invasive plants. Note that unlike other indicators, we are describing what is NOT expected in the reference state for the ecological site:**

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**17. Perennial plant reproductive capability:**

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