USDA Natural Resources
Conservation Service

Ecological site R043BP813MT
Subirrigated Saline-Sodic Grassland Group

Last updated: 3/01/2024
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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): 043B–Central Rocky Mountains

The Central Rocky Mountains (MLRA 43B) of Montana occupy some 28,850 square miles and exist primarily in Central and SW portions of the state. The climate is extremely variable with precipitation lows of 9 to 100 inches per year and frost free days of less than 30 to over 110 days. The geology of the region is also highly variable. The combination of variable climate and geology create a complex relationship of plant communities. MLRA 43B elevations typically exist between 6000 and 12,799ft at Granite Peak (the highest point in Montana).

The Continental Divide runs through this MLRA effectively splitting its watershed to contribute to either the Missouri River to the East and the Columbia River to the West.

Ecological site concept

• Site receives additional water
• This site occurs on low terraces adjacent to flood plains of perennial or intermittent streams (though not in the floodplain), near springs and seeps, or other areas having a permanent or perched water table.
• Moisture Regime: ustic
• Temperature Regime: frigid to cry
• Elevation Range: 3900-6750ft
• Area of rugged mountain, hills, plateaus, and valleys of the Central Rocky Mountains in Southwest Montana
• Soils are
o Saline or saline-sodic (EC>7 or SAR>12 in surface 18cm)
o Moderately deep, deep, or very deep
o Typically less than 5% stone and boulder cover (<10% max)
• Seasonal high water table within 40" (~100cm) of soil surface.
• Dominant Cover: rangeland (grass dominated)
• Slope: 0-5%

Site Development and Testing Plan
This Provisional Ecological Site Description was developed to meet the criteria as defined in Soil Survey National Instruction part 306 (430-306-NI, April 2015) as interpreted by Regional Ecological Site Specialist. Information in this description are first approximations based on broad groupings of soil properties and vegetation characteristics associated with those groupings. Although this description has been through the quality control and quality assurance review process it has not been certified for use in conservation planning.

Associated sites

R043BP814MT	**Subirrigated Saline-Sodic Shrubland Group** The Subirrigated Saline-Sodic Shrubland shares landscape position with the Subirrigated Saline-Sodic Grassland. These neighboring sites can intermix and be hard to separate. The Subirrigated Saline-Sodic Shrubland has a water table and similar hydrology as the Subirrigated Saline-Sodic Grassland.
R043BP807MT	**Saline Sodic Grassland Group** The Saline-Sodic Grassland is often upslope to the Subirrigated Saline-Sodic Grassland. These two sites have plant species overlap however the Saline-Sodic Grassland does not have a water table.
R043BP808MT	**Saline Sodic Sagebrush Shrubland Group** The Saline Sagebrush Shrubland is often upslope to the Subirrigated Saline-Sodic Grassland. These two sites have plant species overlap however the Saline Shrubland does not have a water table.

Similar sites

R043BP814MT	**Subirrigated Saline-Sodic Shrubland Group** The Subirrigated Saline-Sodic Shrubland shares landscape position with the Subirrigated Saline-Sodic Grassland. These neighboring sites can intermix on the landscape and they share many common plant species so they be hard to separate. The Subirrigated Saline-Sodic Shrubland has a water table and similar hydrology as the Subirrigated Saline-Sodic Grassland. These plant communities share similar State and Transition Models.
R043BP807MT	**Saline Sodic Grassland Group** The Saline-Sodic Grassland and Subirrigated Saline-Sodic Grassland have plant species overlap however the Saline-Sodic Grassland does not have a water table and often produces less annual biomass.
R043BP808MT	**Saline Sodic Sagebrush Shrubland Group** The Saline Sagebrush Shrubland and Subirrigated Saline-Sodic Grassland have plant species overlap however the Saline Shrubland does not have a water table and often produces less annual biomass.

Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	Not specified
Herbaceous	(1) *Leymus cinereus* (2) *Deschampsia cespitosa*

Physiographic features

This site occurs in flood plains of perennial and intermittent streams, near springs and seeps, or other areas having a permanent or perched water table within 40 inches. Site is gently sloping from nearly level up to 5 percent (typically less than 5 percent).

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Mountains > Flood plain (2) Mountains > Stream terrace
Flooding duration	Extremely brief (0.1 to 4 hours) to very brief (4 to 48 hours)
Flooding frequency	Rare
Elevation	5,200–7,500 ft
Slope	0–8%
Water table depth	60 in
Aspect	Aspect is not a significant factor

Climatic features

Climate for this site tends to be drier than most for MLRA43B. Relative Effective Annual Precipitation (REAP) is 10 to 20 inches and frost-free days vary from 70 to 110 days.

Table 3. Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (characteristic range)	6-47 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	43-99 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	14-21 in
Frost-free period (actual range)	3-63 days
Freeze-free period (actual range)	40-109 days
Precipitation total (actual range)	12-23 in
Frost-free period (average)	26 days
Freeze-free period (average)	72 days
Precipitation total (average)	18 in

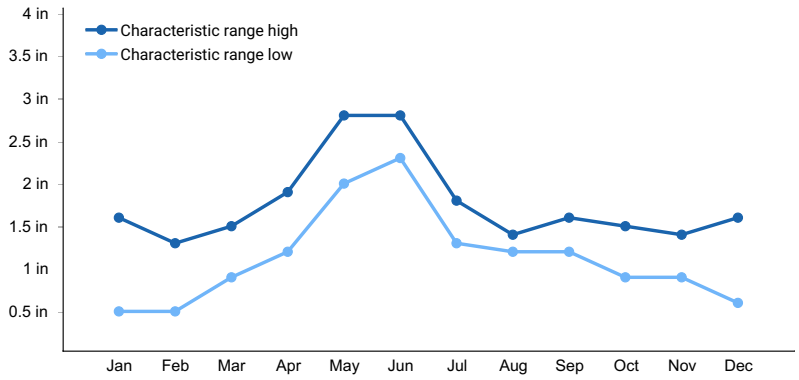


Figure 1. Monthly precipitation range

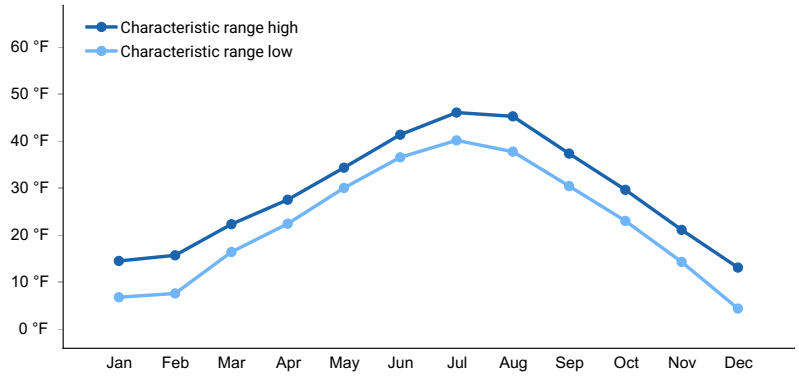


Figure 2. Monthly minimum temperature range

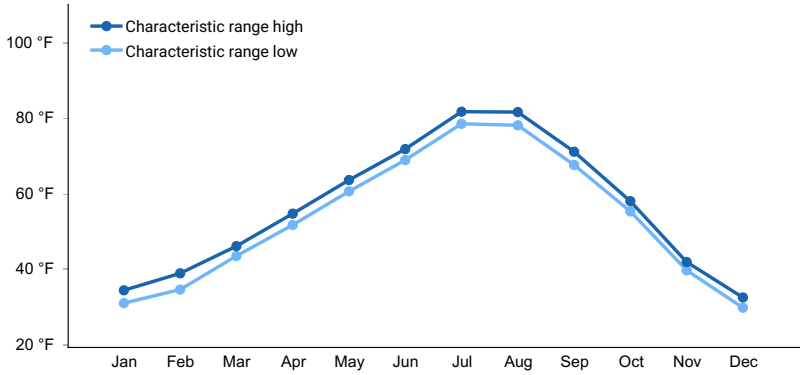


Figure 3. Monthly maximum temperature range

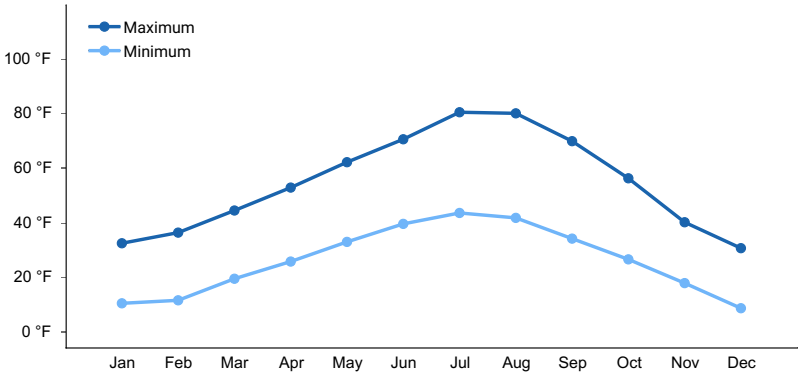


Figure 4. Monthly average minimum and maximum temperature

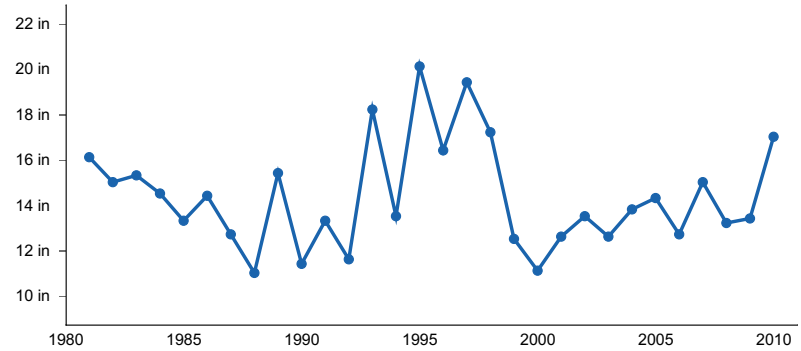


Figure 5. Annual precipitation pattern

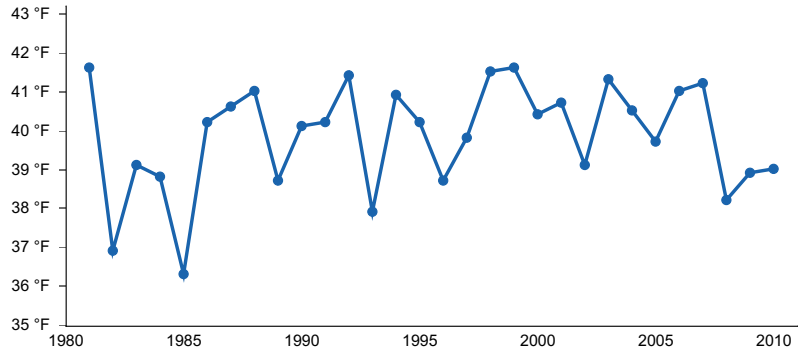


Figure 6. Annual average temperature pattern

Climate stations used

- (1) LINCOLN RS [USC00245040], Lincoln, MT
- (2) NEIHART 8 NNW [USC00246008], Monarch, MT
- (3) WEST YELLOWSTONE [USC00248857], West Yellowstone, MT
- (4) PONY [USC00246655], Cardwell, MT
- (5) WISE RIVER 3 WNW [USC00249082], Wise River, MT
- (6) BUTTE BERT MOONEY AP [USW00024135], Butte, MT
- (7) SULA 14 NE [USC00247967], Sula, MT
- (8) SULA 3 ENE [USC00247964], Sula, MT

Influencing water features

Site receives water from overflow and has a water table within 40 inches of the soil surface due to its location adjacent to streams, springs, and seeps.

Wetland description

Soils may or may not exhibit signs of redoximorphic processes due to timing and duration of inundation.

Soil features

Soils are saline or saline-sodic with electrical conductivity(EC) ratings greater than 7 or a sodium absorption ratio (SAR) greater than 12. Soils are considered moderately deep to deep. Textures vary slightly but tend to have higher amounts of clay with textures often being clay loam. Parent material is alluvium. Local geology may vary but is often derived from lake bed sedimentary formations.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Alluvium–igneous, metamorphic and sedimentary rock
Surface texture	(1) Clay loam
Drainage class	Somewhat poorly drained to poorly drained
Soil depth	100 in
Surface fragment cover <=3"	0–10%
Surface fragment cover >3"	0–5%
Available water capacity (0-40in)	4.4–7.5 in
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-10in)	7.9–8.4
Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (10-20in)	0–45%
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (10-20in)	0–16%

Ecological dynamics

1 - Reference State
1.1 Basin wildrye, western wheatgrass, and alkali sacaton dominant plants. Inland saltgrass present as subordinate plant. Scarlet globemallow, hoods phlox, and Chenopods common forbs. Saltbush and winterfat present. Bare ground is typically naturally low.

1.1a extended drought, improper grazing, climate change

1.2 Western wheatgrass and Alkali sacaton remain dominant, Mid-statured decreaser bunchgrasses will be rare. Saltgrass and other short-statured grasses and grass-likes increasing. Shrubs remain low. Bare ground may increase

1.2a proper grazing management, favorable growing conditions, time
T1A poor grazing, drought with improper grazing, multiple spring grazing events,
T1B introduction of invasive plants, multiple/frequent overgrazing events, drought

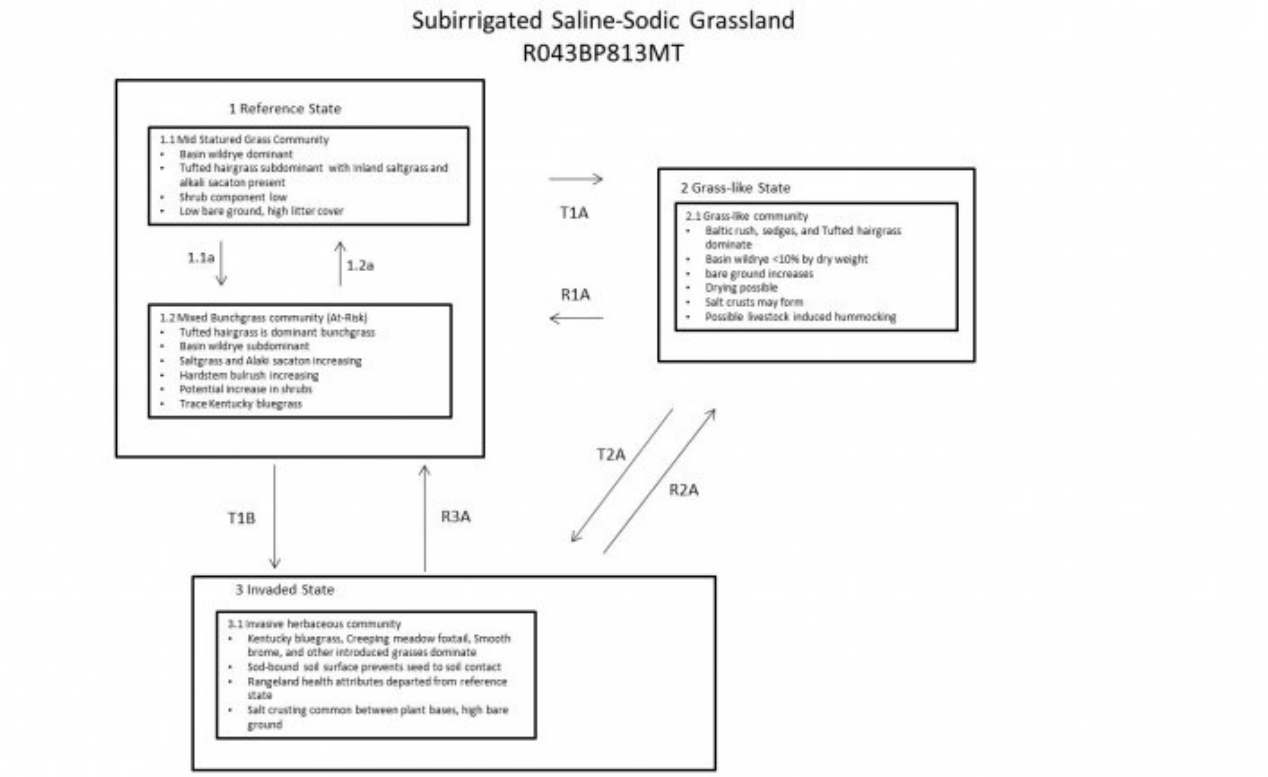
2 - Grass-like State
2.1 Hardstem bulrush, Baltic rush, tufted hairgrass dominant grasses and grass-likes. Forbs remain a small component of community. Saltbush takes on a prostrate growing form. Large gaps between plant bases. Possible salt crusting on soil surface. Waterflow patterns and pedestalling frequent.

T2A overgrazing, introduction of weeds, drought, heavy human disturbance, conversion to introduced species
R1A proper grazing management, favorable growing conditions, time, tree/shrub establishment

3 - Invaded State
3.1 Subshrubs and short-stature grasses share dominance in native degraded site often containing foxtail barely, alkali bluegrass, and hardstem bulrush. Site invaded by pasture grasses will often contain creeping meadow foxtail and green foxtail. Forbs, particularly Chenopods (namely sumpweed), are common. Cheatgrass invades if site is dry. Bare ground high, salt crusting common.

R2A fire, range seeding, timely moisture, proper grazing management, IPM
R3A IPM, range seeding, timely moisture, grazing management, brush management, range seeding, tree/shrub establishment

State and transition model



MLRA 43B Subirrigated Saline/Sodic Grassland R043BP813MT

Legend

- **1.1** Basin wildrye, western wheatgrass, and alkali sacaton dominant plants. Inland saltgrass present as subordinate plant. Scarlet globemallow, hoods phlox, and Chenopods common forbs. Saltbush and winterfat present. Bare ground is typically naturally low.
- 1.1a extended drought, improper grazing, climate change
- **1.2** Western wheatgrass and Alakali sacaton remain dominant, Mid-statured decreaser bunchgrasses will be rare. Saltgrass and other shortgrasses and grasslikes increasing. Shrubs remain low. Bare ground may increase
- 1.2a proper grazing management, favorable growing conditions, time

- **2.1** Hardstem bulrush, Baltic rush, Tufted hairgrass dominant grasses and grasslikes . Forbs remain a small component of community. Saltbush takes on a prostrate growing form. Large gaps between plant bases. Possible salt crusting on soil surface. Waterflow patterns and pedestalling frequent.
- T1A poor grazing, drought with improper grazing, multiple spring grazing events,
- R1A proper grazing management, favorable growing conditions, time, tree/shrub establishment

- **3.1** Subshrubs and shortgrasses share dominance in native degraded site often containing foxtail barely, alkali bluegrass, and hardstem bullrush. Site invaded by pasture grasses will often contain Creeping meadow foxtail and green foxtail. Forbs particularly Chenopods (namely sumpweed) common, Cheatgrass invades if site is dry. Bare ground high, salt crusting common.
- T1B introduction of invasive plants, multiple/frequent overgrazing events, drought
- T2A overgrazing, introduction of weeds, drought, heavy human disturbance, conversion to introduced species
- R2A fire, range seeding, timely moisture, proper grazing management, IPM
- R3A IPM, range seeding, timely moisture, grazing management, brush management, range seeding, tree/shrub establishment

Animal community

The Subirrigated Saline-Sodic ecological site grouping provides wildlife habitat for an array of species. Prior to the

settlement of this area, large herds of antelope, elk and bison roamed. Though the bison that once utilized this landscape have been replaced with domestic livestock, wildlife still utilize this largely intact landscape for habitat

The relatively high grass component of the Reference Community provides excellent nesting cover for multiple neotropical migratory birds as well as provide cover for larger animals.

Managed livestock grazing is suitable on this site due to the potential to produce an abundance of high quality forage. This is often a preferred site for grazing by livestock, and animals tend to congregate in these areas. In order to maintain the productivity of this site, grazing on adjoining sites with less production must be managed carefully to be sure utilization is not excessive. Management objectives should include maintenance or improvement of the native plant community. Careful management of timing and duration of grazing is important. Shorter grazing periods and adequate deferment during the growing season are recommended for plant maintenance, health, and recovery.

Continual non-prescribed grazing of this site will be injurious, will alter the plant composition and production over time, and will result in transition to the Shortgrass State. Transition to other states will depend on duration of poorly managed grazing as well as other circumstances such as weather conditions and fire frequency.

Further degradation will result in transition to the Invaded State. Management should focus on grazing management strategies that will prevent further degradation, such as seasonal grazing deferment or winter grazing where feasible. Communities within this state are still stable and healthy under proper management. Forage quantity and quality may be substantially decreased from the Reference State.

Grazing is possible in the Invaded State. Invasive species are generally less palatable than native grasses. Forage production is typically greatly reduced in this state. Due to the aggressive nature of invasive species, sites in the Invaded State face increased risk for further degradation. Grazing has to be carefully managed to avoid further soil loss and degradation and possible livestock health issues.

Prescriptive grazing can be used to manage invasive species. In some instances, carefully targeted grazing (sometimes in combination with other treatments) can reduce or maintain species composition of invasive species.

Hydrological functions

The hydrologic cycle functions best in the Reference State (1) with good infiltration and deep percolation of rainfall; however, the cycle degrades as the vegetation community declines. Rapid rainfall infiltration, high soil organic matter, good soil structure, and good porosity accompany high bunchgrass canopy cover. High ground cover reduces rain drop impact on the soil surface, which keeps erosion and sedimentation transport low. Water leaving the site will have minimal sediment load, which allows for high water quality in associated streams. High rates of infiltration will allow water to move below the rooting zone during periods of heavy rainfall. The Reference Community (1.1) should have no rills or gullies present and drainage ways should be vegetated and stable. Water flow patterns, if present, will be barely observable. Plant pedestals are essentially non-existent. Plant litter remains in place and is not moved by wind or water.

Improper grazing management results in a community shift to the Bunchgrass Community (1.2). This plant community has a similar canopy cover, but only slightly higher bare ground. Therefore, the hydrologic cycle is functioning at a level similar to the water cycle in the Reference Community (1.1).

In the Invaded State (3) canopy and ground cover are greatly reduced compared to the Reference State (1), which impedes the hydrologic cycle. Infiltration will decrease and runoff will increase due to reduced ground cover, presence of shallow-rooted species, rainfall splash, soil capping, reduced organic matter, and poor structure. Sparse ground cover and decreased infiltration can combine to increase frequency and severity of flooding within a watershed. Soil erosion is accelerated, quality of surface runoff is poor, and sedimentation increases.

Recreational uses

This site provides some limited recreational opportunities for hiking, horseback riding, big game and upland bird hunting. The forbs have flowers that appeal to photographers. This site provides valuable open space.

Wood products

n/a

Inventory data references

Information presented was derived from NRCS inventory data, literature, field observations, and personal contacts with range-trained personnel (i.e., used professional opinion of agency specialists, observations of land managers, and outside scientists).

Other references

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Contributors

Petersen, Grant

Approval

Kirt Walstad, 3/01/2024

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	05/11/2025
Approved by	Kirt Walstad
Approval date	
Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on	Annual Production

Indicators

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

    Dominant:

    Sub-dominant:

    Other:

    Additional:

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:**