

## **Ecological site FX052X02X145 Panspot (Pn) Moist Grassland**

Last updated: 12/28/2022  
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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): 052X–Brown Glaciated Plains

The Brown Glaciated Plains, MLRA 52, is an expansive, agriculturally and ecologically significant area. It consists of approximately 14.5 million acres and stretches across 350 miles from east to west, encompassing portions of 15 counties in north-central Montana. This region represents the southwestern limit of the Laurentide Ice Sheet and is considered to be the driest and westernmost area within the vast network of glacially derived prairie pothole landforms of the northern Great Plains. Elevation ranges from 2,000 feet (610 meters) to 4,600 feet (1,400 meters).

Soils are primarily Mollisols, but Entisols, Inceptisols, Alfisols, and Vertisols are also common. Till from continental glaciation is the predominant parent material, but alluvium and bedrock are also common. Till deposits are typically less than 50 feet thick, and in some areas glacially deformed bedrock occurs at or near the soil surface (Soller, 2001). Underlying the till is sedimentary bedrock largely consisting of Cretaceous shale, sandstone, and mudstone (Vuke et al., 2007). The bedrock is commonly exposed on hillslopes, particularly along drainageways. Significant alluvial deposits occur along glacial outwash channels and major drainages, including portions of the Missouri, Teton, Marias, Milk, and Frenchman Rivers. Large glacial lakes, particularly in the western half of the MLRA, deposited clayey and silty lacustrine sediments (Fullerton et al., 2013).

Much of the western portion of this MLRA was glaciated towards the end of the Wisconsin age, and the maximum glacial extent occurred approximately 20,000 years ago (Fullerton et al., 2004). The result is a geologically young landscape that is predominantly a level till plain interspersed with lake plains and dominated by soils in the Mollisol and Vertisol orders. These soils are very productive and generally are well suited to dryland farming. Much of this area is aridic ustic. Crop-fallow dryland wheat farming is the predominant land use. Areas of rangeland typically are on steep hillslopes along drainages.

The rangeland, much of which is native mixedgrass prairie, increases in abundance in the eastern half of the MLRA. The Wisconsin-age till in the north-central part of this area typically formed large disintegration moraines with steep slopes and numerous poorly drained potholes. A large portion of Wisconsin-age till occurring on the type of level terrain that would typically be optimal for farming has large amounts of less-suitable sodium-affected Natrustalfs. Significant portions of Blaine, Phillips, and Valley Counties were glaciated approximately 150,000 years ago during the Illinoian age. Due to erosion and dissection of the landscape, many of these areas have steeper slopes and more exposed bedrock than areas glaciated during the Wisconsin age (Fullerton and Colton, 1986).

While much of the rangeland in the aridic ustic portion of MLRA 52 is classified as belonging to the “dry grassland” climatic zone, sites in portions of southern MLRA 52 may belong to the “dry shrubland” climatic zone. The dry shrubland climatic zone represents the northernmost extent of the big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) steppe on the Great Plains. Because similar soils occur in both southern and northern portions of the MLRA, it is currently hypothesized that climate is the primary driving factor affecting big sagebrush distribution in this area. However, the precise factors are not fully understood at this time.

Sizeable tracts of largely unbroken rangeland in the eastern half of the MLRA and adjacent southern Saskatchewan

are home to the Northern Montana population of greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*), and large portions of this area are considered to be a Priority Area for Conservation (PAC) by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2013). This population is unique among sage grouse populations because many individuals overwinter in the big sagebrush steppe (dry shrubland) in the southern portion of the MLRA and then migrate to the northern portion of the MLRA, which lacks big sagebrush (dry grassland), to live the rest of the year (Smith, 2013).

Areas of the till plain near the Bearpaw and Highwood Mountains as well as the Sweetgrass Hills and Rocky Mountain foothills are at higher elevations, receive higher amounts of precipitation, and have a typical ustic moisture regime. These areas have significantly more rangeland production than the drier aridic ustic portions of the MLRA and have enough moisture to produce crops annually rather than just bi-annually, as in the drier areas. Ecological sites in this higher precipitation area are classified as the Moist Grassland climatic zone.

## Classification relationships

NRCS Soil Geography Hierarchy

- Land Resource Region: Northern Great Plains
- Major Land Resource Area (MLRA): 052 Brown Glaciated Plains
- Climate Zone: Moist Grassland

National Hierarchical Framework of Ecological Units (Cleland et al., 1997; McNab et al., 2007)

- Domain: Dry
- Division: Temperate Steppe
- Province: Great Plains-Palouse Dry Steppe Province 331
- Section: Northwestern Glaciated Plains 331D
- Subsection: Montana Glaciated Plains 331Dh
- Landtype association/Landtype phase: N/A

National Vegetation Classification Standard (Federal Geographic Data Committee, 2008)

- Class: Mesomorphic Shrub and Herb Vegetation Class (2)
- Subclass: Temperate and Boreal Grassland and Shrubland Subclass (2.B)
- Formation: Temperate Grassland, Meadow, and Shrubland Formation (2.B.2)
- Division: Great Plains Grassland and Shrubland Division (2.B.2.Nb)
- Macrogroup: *Hesperostipa comata* – *Pascopyrum smithii* – *Festuca hallii* Grassland Macrogroup (2.B.2.Nb.2)
- Group: *Pascopyrum smithii* – *Hesperostipa comata* – *Schizachyrium scoparium* – *Bouteloua* spp. Mixedgrass Prairie Group (2.B.2.Nb.2.c)
- Alliance: *Pascopyrum smithii* – *Nassella viridula* Northwestern Great Plains Herbaceous Alliance
- Association: *Pascopyrum smithii* – *Bouteloua gracilis* – *Carex filifolia* Herbaceous Vegetation

EPA Ecoregions

- Level 1: Great Plains (9)
- Level 2: West-Central Semi-Arid Prairies (9.3)
- Level 3: Northwestern Glaciated Plains (42)
- Level 4: North Central Brown Glaciated Plains (42o)

Glaciated Northern Grasslands (42j)

Cherry Patch Moraines (42m)

Milk River Pothole Upland (42n)

## Ecological site concept

This provisional ecological site occurs in the Moist Grassland climatic zone of MLRA 52. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of this ecological site based on current data. This map is approximate, is not intended to be definitive, and may be subject to change. Onsite evaluations are necessary, particularly in boundary or intergrade areas where ecological sites from multiple climate zones may overlap. Panspot Moist Grassland is a somewhat extensive ecological site occurring on areas of the till plain near the various mountain ranges as well as the Sweetgrass Hills in MLRA 52.

The distinguishing characteristic of this site is the presence of a dense, root-restricting, sodium-affected (natric)

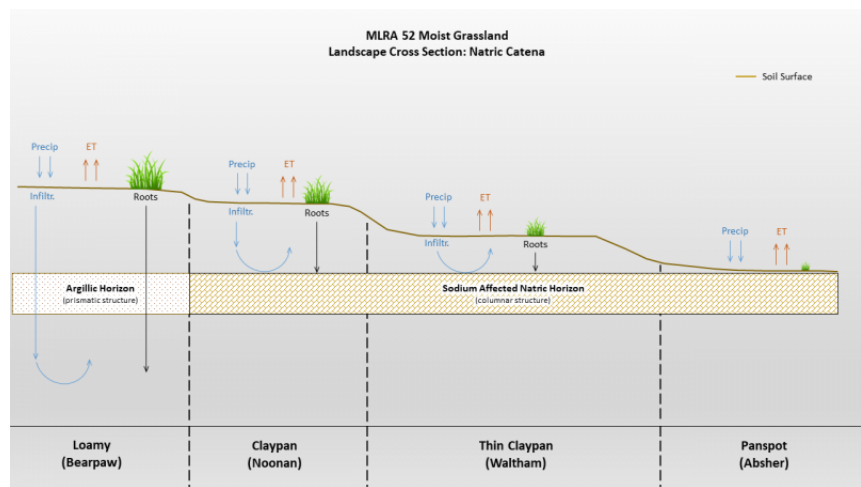
horizon at a depth of 1 inch or less from the soil surface. The natric horizon exhibits columnar structure, is very hard, and severely limits both root penetration and infiltration. Deep-rooted plant species are not well adapted to this site due to the shallow depth of the natric horizon. Species composition is dominated by shallow-rooted, short-statured species. Rhizomatous species are subdominant while deep-rooted bunchgrasses are generally absent. Characteristic vegetation is prairie Junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*), blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*), and western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*).

## Associated sites

FX052X02X032	<p><b>Loamy (Lo) Moist Grassland</b></p> <p>This site occupies similar landscapes to the Panspot Moist Grassland ecological site. In the natric soils complex, the Loamy Moist Grassland ecological site is typically found on the highest micro-topography; whereas, the Panspot Moist Grassland ecological site occupies the lowest positions.</p>
FX052X02X006	<p><b>Claypan (Cp) Moist Grassland</b></p> <p>This site occupies similar landscapes to the Panspot Moist Grassland ecological site. In the natric soils complex, the Claypan Moist Grassland ecological site is typically found on mid-level micro-topography, higher than the Thin Claypan Moist Grassland and the Panspot Moist Grassland ecological sites, but lower than the Loamy Moist Grassland ecological site.</p>
FX052X02X165	<p><b>Thin Claypan (Tcp) Moist Grassland</b></p> <p>This site occupies similar landscapes to the Panspot Moist Grassland ecological site. In the natric soils complex, the Thin Claypan Moist Grassland ecological site is found on mid-level micro-topography, between the Panspot Moist Grassland and Claypan Moist Grassland ecological sites.</p>

## Similar sites

FX052X02X032	<p><b>Loamy (Lo) Moist Grassland</b></p> <p>This site differs from the Panspot Moist Grassland ecological site in that the root restricting layer (evidenced by columnar structure) is either absent or greater than 10 inches below the soil surface. Deep rooted bunchgrasses are a major component of the plant community.</p>
FX052X02X006	<p><b>Claypan (Cp) Moist Grassland</b></p> <p>This site differs from the Panspot Moist Grassland ecological site in that the root restricting layer (evidenced by columnar structure) is greater than 4 inches to 10 inches below the soil surface. Needle and thread occurs, but is not a major plant species.</p>
FX052X02X165	<p><b>Thin Claypan (Tcp) Moist Grassland</b></p> <p>This site differs from the Panspot Moist Grassland ecological site in that the root restricting layer (evidenced by columnar structure) is greater than 1 inch to 4 inches below the soil surface. Deep-rooted bunchgrasses are rare or absent.</p>



**Figure 1. Figure 3. Similar and associated sites diagram. Figure 3 shows a landscape cross section of a natric catena for similar and associated sites.**

**Table 1. Dominant plant species**

Tree	Not specified
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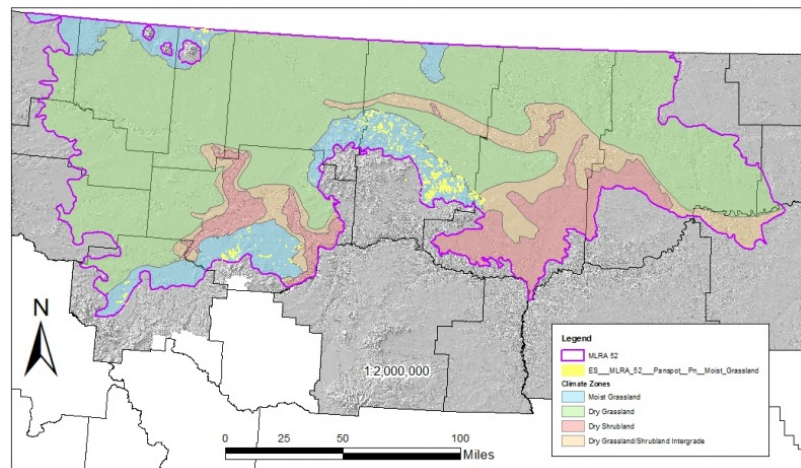
Shrub	Not specified
Herbaceous	Not specified

### Legacy ID

R052XY743MT

### Physiographic features

Panspot Moist Grassland is a somewhat extensive ecological site occurring in the moist areas of MLRA 52. The majority of MLRA 52 is covered by a broad till plain, and this ecological site largely occurs at higher elevations near the various mountain ranges and the Sweetgrass Hills. It mostly occurs on moraines (ground, recessional, or end) but can also occur on outwash fans or alluvial fans. In particular it occurs on moraines underlain by the Bearpaw Shale Formation. The till incorporated physical and chemical properties of the underlying shale, which in MLRA 52 tends to have appreciable amounts of sodium, magnesium, and calcium sulfates but little to no calcium carbonate. It is hypothesized that during and immediately after deglaciation, the combination of water-restricting bedrock underlying the sodium-rich clayey till at depths of 10 feet or less and the gentler slopes of the till plain, water could pond and, by matric potential, concentrate enough salts to create the natric horizon and its distinctive columnar structure (Miller and Brierly, 2011). The present-day hydrology of this site lacks a water table. As is the case with the Claypan and Thin Claypan ecological sites, complex micro-topography is typical on landforms dominated by natric soils. In relation to the Claypan and Thin Claypan ecological sites; the Panspot ecological site is found on microlows.



**Figure 2. Figure 1. General distribution of the Panspot Moist Grassland ecological site by map unit extent.**

**Table 2. Representative physiographic features**

Landforms	(1) Till plain > Moraine (2) Till plain > Outwash fan (3) Alluvial fan
Elevation	3,600–4,590 ft
Slope	0–8%
Aspect	Aspect is not a significant factor

### Climatic features

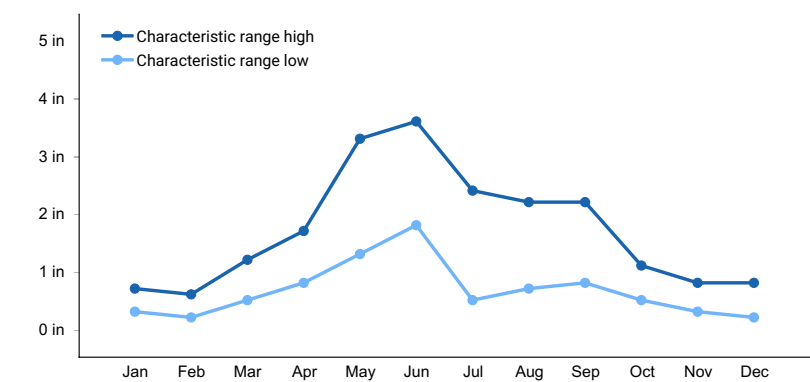
The Brown Glaciated Plains is a semi-arid region with a temperate continental climate that is characterized by frigid winters and warm to hot summers (Cooper et al., 2001). The average frost-free period for this ecological site is 110 days. The majority of precipitation occurs as steady, soaking, frontal system rains in late spring to early summer. Summer rainfall comes mainly from convection thunderstorms that typically deliver scattered amounts of rain in intense bursts. These storms may be accompanied by damaging winds and large-diameter hail and result in flash

flooding along low-order streams. Severe drought occurs on average in 2 out of 10 years. Annual precipitation ranges from 13 to 17 inches, 70 to 80 percent of which occurs during the growing season (Cooper et al., 2001). Extreme climatic variations, especially droughts, have the greatest influence on species cover and production (Coupland, 1958, 1961; Biondini et al., 1998).

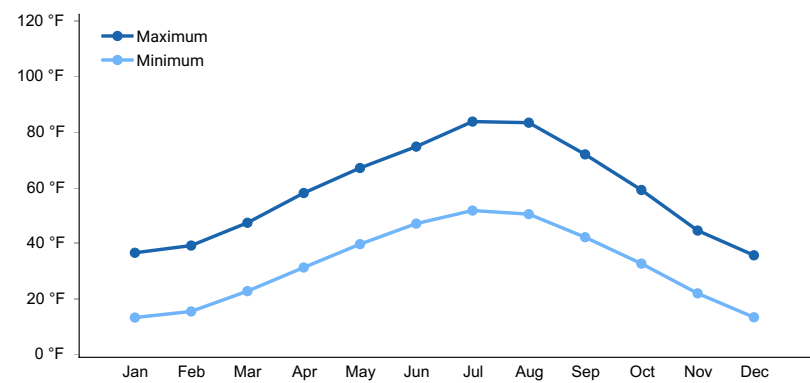
During the winter months, the western half of MLRA 52 commonly experiences chinook winds, which are strong west to southwest surface winds accompanied by abrupt increases in temperature. The chinook winds are strongest on the western boundary of the MLRA near the Rocky Mountain foothills and decrease eastward. In addition to producing damaging winds, prolonged chinook episodes can result in drought or vegetation kills due to a reaction of plants to a “false spring” (Oard, 1993).

**Table 3. Representative climatic features**

Frost-free period (average)	110 days
Freeze-free period (average)	135 days
Precipitation total (average)	15 in



**Figure 3. Monthly precipitation range**



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

## Climate stations used

- (1) GERALDINE [USC00243445], Geraldine, MT
- (2) GOLDBUTTE 7 N [USC00243617], Sunburst, MT

## Influencing water features

This is a semi-arid, upland ecological site, but it has unique hydrology because infiltration is severely limited by the dense natric horizon which is 1 inch or less below the soil surface. Infiltration rates on this site are approximately 0.04 inch per hour. In typical precipitation events, most of the moisture is lost through evapotranspiration before it can infiltrate. Evapotranspiration exceeds precipitation on this site, and a state of moisture deficit persists for the majority of the year. Abnormally wet years or very intense precipitation events can cause very brief (less than 2 days) ponding and lateral flow via surface runoff into adjacent sites. Lateral water movement is typically limited to a localized area due to the flat topography. Frequency and duration of saturation are not sufficient for the

development of hydric soil features.

## Soil features

The soil series that best represents the central concept of this ecological site is Absher with a typic ustic moisture regime. The Absher soil is in the Natrustalfs great group and is characterized by a surface horizon that lacks enough organic matter to have a mollic epipedon and by a dense, root-limiting, non-cemented restrictive layer 1 inch or less below the soil surface. This restrictive layer is referred to as a natric horizon and is essentially an argillic horizon that has been affected by sodium salts. The natric horizon exhibits distinctive columnar structure that is especially visible when the soil is dry. The Absher soil has smectitic mineralogy and is in the fine family, meaning that it could contain between 35 and 60 percent clay in the particle-size control section. Clayey till (28 to 42 percent clay) is the typical parent material for this series but the Panspot Moist Grassland ecological site can also occur on soils derived from glaciofluvial deposits, or till over residuum. The soil moisture regime for this and all soils in this ecological site concept is typic ustic, which means that the soils are moist in some or all parts for either 180 cumulative days or 90 consecutive days during the growing season, but are dry in some or all parts for over 90 cumulative days. These soils have a frigid soil temperature regime (Soil Survey Staff, 2014).

Surface horizon textures found in this site are most frequently loam but can range from fine sandy loam to silty clay loam and typically contain between 15 to 30 percent clay. The underlying natric horizons typically contain 35 to 45 percent clay and have clay, clay loam, or silty clay loam textures. Organic matter content in the surface horizon typically ranges from 1 to 2 percent, and moist colors vary from olive brown (2.5Y 4/3) to very dark grayish brown (2.5Y 3/2). The surface horizon of these soils does not typically react with hydrochloric acid. Depth to secondary carbonates and soluble sulfate salts is typically about 5 inches below the soil surface. Calcium carbonate equivalent is typically less than 5 percent in the upper 5 inches and less than 10 percent in lower horizons. In the upper 20 inches, electrical conductivity is at some point more than 4 but less than 16, and the sodium absorption ratio is typically less than 15. These salts lower the amount of plant-available water. Soil pH classes are moderately acid to slightly alkaline in the surface horizon and neutral to strongly alkaline in the subsurface horizons. The soil depth class for this site can be moderately deep (between 20 and 40 inches to bedrock) where bedrock is present, but is typically very deep (greater than 60 inches to bedrock). Content of coarse fragments is less than 35 percent in the upper 20 inches of soil and is typically less than 15 percent. Some areas have more than 35 percent gravel on the surface.

**Table 4. Representative soil features**

Parent material	(1) Till (2) Glaciofluvial deposits
Surface texture	(1) Loam (2) Fine sandy loam (3) Silty clay loam
Drainage class	Well drained
Depth to restrictive layer	0–1 in
Soil depth	20–72 in
Available water capacity (0-40in)	2.9–3.4 in
Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-5in)	0–4%
Electrical conductivity (0-20in)	4–15 mmhos/cm
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-20in)	0–14
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-40in)	5.6–9
Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (0-20in)	0–34%

Subsurface fragment volume >3" (0-20in)	0–34%
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## Ecological dynamics

The information in this ecological site description, including the state-and-transition model (STM) (Figure 2), was developed based on historical data, current field data, professional experience, and a review of the scientific literature. As a result, all possible scenarios or plant species may not be included. Key indicator plant species, disturbances, and ecological processes are described to inform land management decisions.

The Panspot Moist Grassland provisional ecological site in MLRA 52 consists of four states: The Reference State (1), the Altered State (2), the Cropland State (3), and the Post-Cropland State (4). Plant communities associated with this ecological site evolved under the combined influences of climate, grazing, and fire. Extreme climatic variability results in frequent droughts, which have the greatest influence on the relative contribution of species cover and production (Coupland, 1958, 1961; Biondini et al., 1998). Due to the dominance of cool-season graminoids, annual production is highly dependent upon mid- to late-spring precipitation (Heitschmidt and Vermeire, 2005; Anderson, 2006).

Native grazers also shaped these plant communities. Bison (*Bison bison*) were the dominant historic grazer, but pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*), elk (*Cervus canadensis*), and deer (*Odocoileus* spp.) were also common. Additionally, small mammals such as prairie dogs (*Cynomys* spp.) and ground squirrels (*Urocitellus* spp.) influenced this plant community (Salo et al., 2004). Grasshoppers and periodic outbreaks of Rocky Mountain locusts (*Melanoplus spretus*) also played an important role in the ecology of these communities (Lockwood, 2004).

The historic ecosystem experienced periodic lightning-caused fires with estimated fire return intervals of 6 to 25 years (Bragg, 1995). Historically, Native Americans also set periodic fires. The majority of lightning-caused fires occurred in July and August, whereas Native Americans typically set fires during spring and fall to correspond with the movement of bison (Higgins, 1986). Generally, the mixedgrass ecosystem is resilient to fire and the primary effects of the historic fire return interval are reduction of litter and short-term fluctuations in production (Vermeire et al., 2011, 2014). However, it is not known how significant fire was on the Panspot Moist Grassland ecological site, and further investigation of fire dynamics is needed to better assess this concept.

Improper grazing of this site can result in a reduction in the cover of the perennial grasses and an increase in bare ground, cactus, and annual species. Improper grazing practices include any practices that do not allow sufficient opportunity for plants to physiologically recover from a grazing event or multiple grazing events within a given year and/or that do not provide adequate cover to prevent soil erosion over time. These practices may include, but are not limited to, overstocking, continuous grazing, and/or inadequate seasonal rotation moves over multiple years. Periods of extended drought (approximately 3 years or more) may have similar effects (Coupland, 1958, 1961). Further degradation of the site due to improper grazing can result in a community dominated by cactus and annual forbs. This site is also susceptible to invasion by non-native species. Non-native annual brome grasses may become common in this state, but invasive species dynamics are largely unknown at the time of this writing. Further investigation of invasive species dynamics is needed prior to incorporating an invaded state into the state-and-transition model (STM) (Figure 2).

Due to the presence of a sodium-affected natric horizon, this ecological site is not generally regarded as productive cropland. Regardless, many acres have been cultivated and planted to cereal grain crops, such as winter wheat, spring wheat, and barley. When taken out of production, this site is either allowed to revert back to perennial grassland or is seeded back to perennial grass. Such seedings may be comprised of introduced grasses and legumes or a mix of native species. Sites left to undergo natural plant succession after cultivation are unlikely to return to the Reference State (1) in a reasonable amount of time. Studies have not been conducted on the Panspot Moist Grassland ecological site specifically, but is likely to take much longer than more productive sites such as the Loamy Moist Grassland ecological site, due to the unfavorable physical and chemical soil properties. Natric chemical properties near the soil surface tend to cause these soils to crust following cultivation, therefore making it difficult for vegetation to reestablish naturally. Reestablishment of perennial vegetation may be more successful if the site is reseeded; however, studies have not been conducted on this site specifically. On more productive ecological sites, non-native seedings may persist indefinitely (Christian and Wilson, 1999). Stand vigor is expected to be less on the Panspot Moist Grassland ecological site, but stand longevity is unknown at the time of this writing.

The state-and-transition model (STM) diagram (Figure 2) suggests possible pathways that plant communities on this site may follow as a result of a given set of ecological processes and management. The site may also support states not displayed in the STM diagram. Landowners and land managers should seek guidance from local professionals before prescribing a particular management or treatment scenario. Plant community responses vary across this MLRA due to variability in weather, soils, and aspect. The reference community phase may not necessarily be the management goal. The lists of plant species and species composition values are provisional and are not intended to cover the full range of conditions, species, and responses for the site. Species composition by dry weight is provided when available and is considered provisional based on the sources identified in the narratives associated with each community phase.

#### State 1: Reference State

The Reference State (1) contains two community phases characterized by shortgrasses and rhizomatous wheatgrasses. This state evolved under the combined influences of climate, grazing, and fire with climatic variation having the greatest influence on cover and production. In general, this state was resilient to grazing although this could influence species composition in localized areas. Fire dynamics require further investigation, but it is believed that this site was resilient to fire as well. Lesser spikemoss, also known as dense clubmoss (*Selaginella densa*) may be present and may constitute significant ground cover. Its dynamics are not well understood, however, and its abundance varies greatly from site to site without discernable reason.

#### Phase 1.1: Shortgrass - Rhizomatous Wheatgrass Community Phase

The Shortgrass - Rhizomatous Wheatgrass Community Phase (1.1) is dominated by shortgrasses with a subdominant component of rhizomatous wheatgrasses. Shortgrasses comprise about 15 to 20 percent foliar cover and the predominant species are prairie Junegrass and blue grama. Rhizomatous wheatgrasses comprise approximately 10 to 15 percent cover. Western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*) is the predominant species, however thickspike wheatgrass (*Elymus lanceolatus*) may also occur and becomes more common in the northern extent of this site. Common forbs are desert biscuitroot (*Lomatium foeniculaceum*), stiffstem flax (*Linum rigidum*), and woolly plantain (*Plantago patagonica*). Shrubs and subshrubs include prairie sagewort (*Artemisia frigida*) and Gardner saltbush (*Atriplex gardneri*). Plains pricklypear (*Opuntia polyacantha*) commonly occurs at low cover in this phase. The approximate species composition of the reference plant community is as follows:

##### Percent composition by weight\*

Shortgrasses 40%  
Prairie Junegrass (15-25%)  
Blue grama (5-10%)  
Sandberg Bluegrass (10-15%)

Rhizomatous Wheatgrass 25%  
Other Native Grasses 15%  
Native Forbs 15%  
Shrubs/Subshrubs 5%

##### Estimated Total Annual Production (lbs/ac)\*

Low - Insufficient data  
Representative Value - 375  
High - Insufficient data

\* Estimated based on current data – subject to revision

#### Phase 1.2: Shortgrass Community Phase

The Shortgrass Community Phase (1.2) is characterized by the elimination or near elimination of rhizomatous wheatgrasses. Shortgrasses such as prairie Junegrass and blue grama are the dominant species. Plains pricklypear is increasing in this phase as well as various annual forbs. Perennial forbs may also increase, but ecological dynamics of perennial forbs are largely unknown at the time of this writing. The amount of bare ground also begins to increase. As a result, the site is subject to increased erosion and the soil is exposed to increased solar heating.

#### Community Phase Pathway 1.1a

Drought, improper grazing management, or a combination of these factors can shift the Shortgrass - Rhizomatous Wheatgrass Community Phase (1.1) to the Shortgrass Community Phase (1.2). These factors favor an increase in shortgrasses such as blue grama and a decrease in midgrasses (Coupland, 1961; Shay et al., 2001). Cactus is also



likely to increase on this site.

#### Community Phase Pathway 1.2a

Normal or above-normal spring precipitation and proper grazing management transitions the Shortgrass Community Phase (1.2) back to the Shortgrass - Rhizomatous Wheatgrass Community Phase (1.1).

#### Transition T1A

Prolonged drought, improper grazing practices, or a combination of these factors weaken the resilience of the Reference State (1) and drive its transition to the Altered State (2). The Reference State (1) transitions to the Altered State (2) when perennial grasses become rare and contribute little to production. Plains pricklypear and annual forbs dominate the plant community.

#### Transition T1B

Tillage or application of herbicide followed by seeding of cultivated crops, such as winter wheat, spring wheat, and barley, transitions the Reference State (1) to the Cropland State (3).

#### State 2: Altered State

The Altered State (2) consists of one community phase. This state occurs due to long-term drought, improper grazing management, or a combination of these factors. The dynamics of this state are not well understood. This state has a high amount of bare ground. It is hypothesized that this results in increased heating of the soil by solar radiation. The increased heating exacerbates the already dry site conditions and creates a self-perpetuating condition of extreme drought. These extremely dry and hot conditions make it very difficult for perennial species to persist or establish. This hypothesis has not been tested and requires further investigation. Non-native annual bromes are also known to persist in this state. Preliminary observation indicates that their abundance is highly variable and dependent on precipitation patterns and fall germination conditions. It is not known if the annual brome grasses alter the site properties sufficiently to transition it to an Invaded State.

#### Phase 2.1: Cactus/Annual Forb Community Phase

The Cactus/Annual Forb Community Phase (2.1) occurs when site conditions decline due to long-term drought or improper grazing. In this phase, perennial grasses, such as prairie Junegrass and rhizomatous wheatgrasses, have been largely eliminated and replaced by plains pricklypear and annual forbs, such as woolly plantain. Some perennial forbs may also persist, but ecological dynamics of perennial forbs are largely unknown at the time of this writing. The amount of bare ground is high, and the soil is exposed to erosion and solar heating.

#### Transition T2A

Tillage or application of herbicide followed by seeding of cultivated crops, such as winter wheat, spring wheat, and barley, transitions the Altered State (2) to the Cropland State (3).

#### Restoration Pathway R2A

It is hypothesized that solar heating creates a self-perpetuating condition of extreme drought that suppresses establishment of perennial species. A reduction in livestock grazing pressure alone may not be sufficient to restore the Altered State (2) to the Reference State (1). Intensive management treatments may be necessary (Hart et al., 1985). However, it is not known how well this site responds to practices such as mechanical treatment of grazing land and range seeding. Therefore, returning the Altered State (2) to the Reference State (1) will likely require considerable energy and cost and may not be feasible within a reasonable amount of time.

#### State 3: Cropland State

The Cropland State (3) occurs when land is put into cultivation. Major crops in MLRA 52 include winter wheat, spring wheat, and barley.

#### Transition T3A

The transition from the Cropland State (3) to the Post-Cropland State (4) occurs with the cessation of cultivation. The site may also be seeded to perennial forage species. Such seedings may be comprised of introduced grasses and legumes, or a mix of native species.

#### State 4: Post-Cropland State

The Post-Cropland State (4) occurs when cultivated cropland is abandoned and allowed to either re-vegetate naturally or is seeded back to perennial species for grazing or wildlife use. This state can transition back to the

Cropland State (3) if the site is put back into cultivation.

#### Phase 4.1: Abandoned Cropland Community Phase

The Abandoned Cropland Community Phase (4.1) occurs when cropland is abandoned. In the absence of active management, the site can re-vegetate naturally and, over time, potentially return to a perennial grassland community with Sandberg bluegrass and blue grama. The chemical properties of the soil surface layers tend to cause crusting on this site following cultivation. As a result, revegetation is likely to take much longer on this site than on a more favorable site, such as the Loamy Moist Grassland ecological site. The first species to establish after cropland is abandoned are typically annual and biennial forbs and annual brome grasses (Samuel and Hart, 1994). At this point, the site is extremely susceptible to erosion due to the absence of perennial species. Eventually, these pioneering annual species are replaced by perennial forbs and perennial shortgrasses, such as blue grama. Due to tillage breaking up the dense soil structure, it may be possible for perennial bunchgrasses, such as needle and thread, to return; however, this has not been fully evaluated on this site. Cover and production of cool-season rhizomatous wheatgrasses are low, even after several decades (Dormaar and Smoliak, 1985; Dormaar et al., 1994; Christian and Wilson, 1999). Invasion of the site by exotic species, such as crested wheatgrass, and annual bromes will depend upon the site's proximity to a seed source.

Fifty or more years after cultivation, these sites may have species composition similar to phases in the Reference State (1). However, soil quality is consistently lower than conditions prior to cultivation (Dormaar and Smoliak, 1985; Christian and Wilson, 1999) and a shift to the Reference State (1) is unlikely within a reasonable timeframe.

#### Phase 4.2: Perennial Grass Community Phase

The Perennial Grass Community Phase (4.2) occurs when the site is reseeded to perennial forage species. Reestablishment of perennial vegetation may be more successful if the site is reseeded; however, studies have not been conducted on this site specifically. In general, sites seeded to perennial forage species, particularly introduced perennial grasses, can persist in this cover type for several decades (Krzic et al., 2000; Henderson and Naeth, 2005). A mixture of native species may also be seeded, however, soil conditions have been substantially altered and will not return to pre-cultivation conditions within a reasonable timeframe (Dormaar et al., 1994). It is possible that tillage operations may have broken up the dense soil structure enough that the Perennial Grass Community Phase (4.2) is more productive than the Reference State (1), but specific data has not been collected. Chemical soil properties would likely still reduce stand vigor and production on this site compared to a Loamy Moist Grassland ecological site.

#### Transition 4A

The Post-Cropland State (4) transitions back to the Cropland State (3) when the site is converted to cropland.

### State and transition model

**Panspot Moist Grassland  
R052XY743MT**

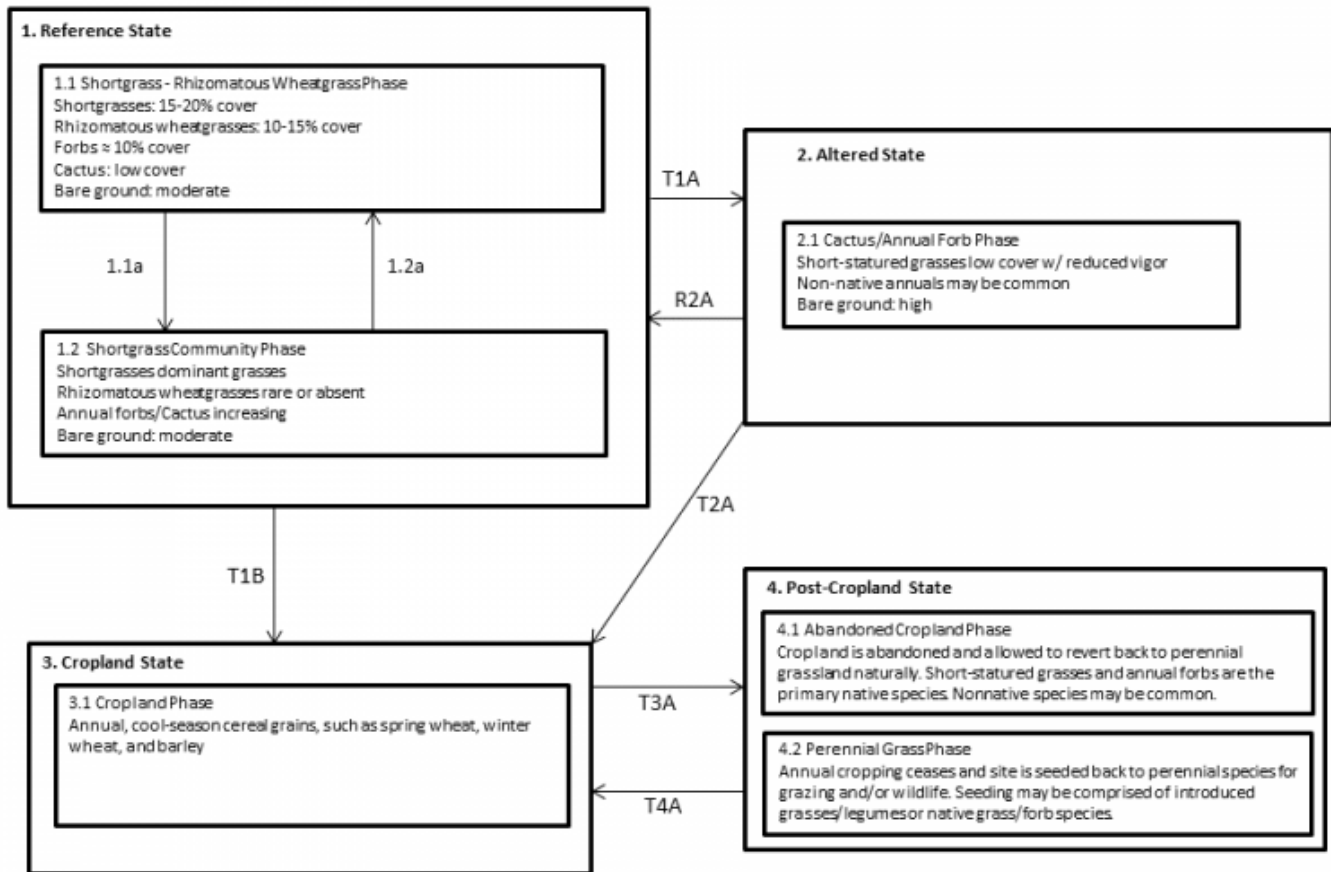


Figure 2. State-and-transition diagram

**Panspot Moist Grassland  
R052XY743MT**

**Legend**

- 1.1a drought, improper grazing management
- 1.2a normal or above-normal spring moisture, proper grazing management
- T1A prolonged drought, improper grazing, or a combination of these factors
- R2A range seeding, grazing land mechanical treatment, normal or above-normal moisture, proper grazing management (management intensive and costly)
- T1B, T2A, T3A tillage or herbicide followed by seeding of annual crops
- T4A cessation of annual cropping

## **Inventory data references**

One medium-intensity plot was available for this provisional ecological site. This plot was used in conjunction with a review of the scientific literature and professional experience to approximate the reference plant community. Information for remaining states was obtained from professional experience and a review of the scientific literature. All community phases are considered provisional based on these plots and the sources identified in this ecological site description.

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## **Contributors**

Scott Brady  
Stuart Veith

## **Approval**

Kirt Walstad, 12/28/2022

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Soil Concepts, Soils Information, and Field Descriptions  
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Josh Sorlie, USDI-BLM

NASIS Reports, Data Dumps, and Soil Sorts

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Pete Weikle, USDA-NRCS

Peer Review and Beta Testing  
Kirt Walstad, USDA-NRCS  
Kyle Steele, formerly USDA-NRCS  
Kelsey Molloy, USDA-NRCS  
Rick Caquelin, USDA-NRCS  
Josh Sorlie, USDI-BLM  
BJ Rhodes, USDI-BLM

Editing  
Ann Kinney, USDA-NRCS  
Jenny Sutherland, USDA-NRCS

Quality Control  
Kirt Walstad, USDA-NRCS

Quality Assurance  
Stacey Clark, USDA-NRCS

## 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:

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17. **Perennial plant reproductive capability:**

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