USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Ecological site R082AY368TX
Loamy Sand 25-32 PZ

Last updated: 9/19/2023
Accessed: 05/13/2025

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.

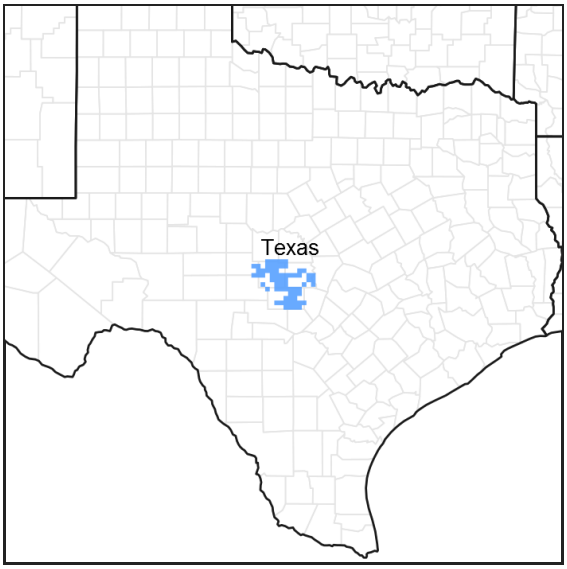

Figure 1. Mapped extent

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): 082A–Texas Central Basin

The 82A MLRA is underlain primarily by igneous, metamorphic, and sedimentary rocks. Igneous and metamorphic outcrops include the Valley Spring Gneiss, Packsaddle Schist, and Town Mountain Granite of Precambrian age. Sedimentary rocks include the Hickory Sandstone and Lion Mountain Sandstone of Cambrian Age and the Hensel Sand of Cretaceous age. Holocene alluvium is on flood plains.

Classification relationships

Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) and Land Resource Unit (LRU) (USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, 2006)

Ecological site concept

The Loamy Sand site has loamy sand or loamy fine sand surface texture less than 20 inches thick over a sandy clay or sandy clay loam subsoil. The slope ranges from 1 - 5 percent. The reference vegetation includes mid and tall grasses growing on an open type savannah with scattered stands of post oak and blackjack oak. Many contemporary plant communities are composed of three vegetative states: the Savannah, the Woodland, and a Converted State. Without periodic fire or brush management, woody species may increase and dominate the site.

Associated sites

R082AY366TX	**Granite Hill 25-32 PZ** The Granite Hill site is shallow over granite.
R082AY375TX	**Serpentine 25-32 PZ** The Serpentine site is shallow to serpentine parent material.
R082AY364TX	**Deep Sand 25-32 PZ** The Deep Sand site has a sandy surface greater than 40 inches thick.

Similar sites

R082AY364TX	**Deep Sand 25-32 PZ** The soils of the Deep Sand have sandy surface textures greater than 40 inches deep..
R082AY372TX	**Sandy 25-32 PZ** The Sandy ecological site has a sandy surface 20 to 40 inches thick.

Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	(1) *Quercus stellata* (2) *Quercus marilandica*
Shrub	(1) *Rhus copallinum* (2) *Smilax bona-nox*
Herbaceous	(1) *Schizachyrium scoparium* (2) *Sorghastrum nutans*

Physiographic features

This upland site occurs on hills sloping from 1 to 5 percent. The runoff on these sites is typically very low to medium because of the rapid infiltration and lower slopes. These sites typically occur on backslopes or footslopes of ridges on dissected plateaus or on stream terraces.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Landforms	(1) Plateau > Ridge (2) Hills > Hillslope (3) River valley > Stream terrace
Runoff class	Low to medium
Flooding frequency	None
Ponding frequency	None
Elevation	253–579 m
Slope	1–5%
Aspect	Aspect is not a significant factor

Climatic features

The climate for MLRA 82A is humid subtropical and is characterized by hot summers and relatively mild winters. The average first frost should occur around November 11 and the last freeze of the season should occur around March 21.

The average relative humidity in mid-afternoon is about 50 percent. Humidity is higher at night, and the average at dawn is about 80 percent. The sun shines 70 percent of the time possible during the summer and 50 percent in winter. The prevailing wind direction is from the south.

Approximately two-thirds of annual rainfall occurs during the April to September period. Rainfall during this period

generally falls as thunderstorms, and fairly large amounts of rain may fall in localized areas for a short period of time.

Table 3. Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (characteristic range)	210-240 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	240-280 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	635-813 mm
Frost-free period (actual range)	210-240 days
Freeze-free period (actual range)	240-280 days
Precipitation total (actual range)	635-813 mm
Frost-free period (average)	225 days
Freeze-free period (average)	260 days
Precipitation total (average)	711 mm

Climate stations used

- (1) MASON [USC00415650], Mason, TX
- (2) LLANO [USC00415272], Llano, TX

Influencing water features

These sites are in water shedding upland positions. However, they may also receive some run-on water from adjacent sites. The presence of adequate ground cover and deep-rooted tallgrass species can help facilitate water infiltration into the soil profile.

Wetland description

N/A

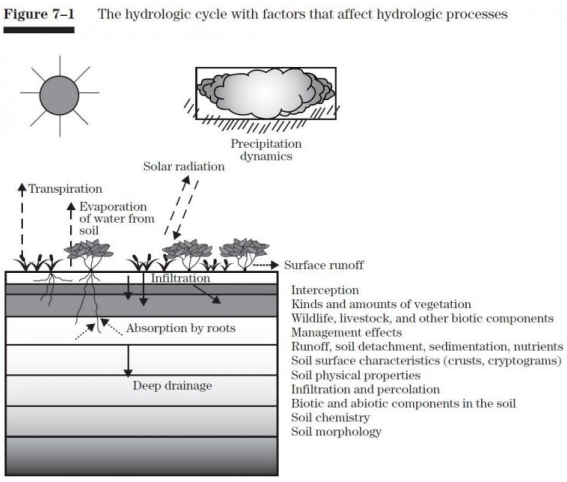

Figure 8.

Soil features

In a representative profile for the Loamy Sand ecological site, the soils are moderately deep to very deep over weakly or moderately cemented sandstone. The soil profile typically has a light yellowish brown to brown loamy sand or loamy fine sand surface that is less than 20 inches thick with a sandy clay loam or clay loam subsoil. The permeability of the soil is moderate to moderately slow. The water holding capacity of these soils is low to high depending on depth of soil.

Because of the scale of mapping, there are inclusions of minor components of other soils within these mapping units. Before performing any inventories, conduct a field evaluation to insure the soils are correct for the site.

The representative soil series associated with the Loamy Sand ecological site is:

Campair
Bastrop

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Residuum–sandstone (2) Alluvium–sandstone
Surface texture	(1) Loamy sand (2) Loamy fine sand
Family particle size	(1) Fine-loamy
Drainage class	Well drained
Permeability class	Moderately slow to rapid
Depth to restrictive layer	51–203 cm
Soil depth	51–203 cm
Surface fragment cover <=3"	0–5%
Surface fragment cover >3"	0–5%
Available water capacity (0-101.6cm)	7.87–15.75 cm
Calcium carbonate equivalent (0-101.6cm)	0%
Electrical conductivity (0-101.6cm)	0–2 mmhos/cm
Sodium adsorption ratio (0-101.6cm)	0
Soil reaction (1:1 water) (0-101.6cm)	5.1–7.3
Subsurface fragment volume <=3" (10.2-101.6cm)	0–5%
Subsurface fragment volume >3" (10.2-101.6cm)	0–1%

Ecological dynamics

The Texas Central Basin (MLRA 82A) is a unique geological region within Texas. It is composed largely of Pre-Cambrian granite, gneiss and schist (Bureau of Economic Geology 1981). Depending upon the parent material and topography, a great variety of soils have developed that vary from shallow, fissured, rocky outcrops with minimal soil development to relatively deep, well-developed soils with textures that vary from fine sandy loams to sands to gravelly clay loams to cobbly clay loams and stony clay loams (Goerdel 2000).

Precipitation patterns are highly variable. Long-term droughts, occurring three to four times per century, cause shifts in species composition by causing a die-off of seedlings, less drought-tolerant species, and some woody species. Droughts also reduce biomass production and create open space that is colonized by opportunistic species when precipitation increases. Wet periods allow little bluestem, sideoats grama, and hardwoods to increase in dominance. The site also tends to have many opportunistic plants such as three-awns (Aristida spp.) and annuals that take advantage of the short flush of available water.

The vegetation of the region developed under a humid, subtropical climate. Weather variation is great; precipitation is highly variable with seasonal, annual, and multi-year droughts (3-6 years) common as well as seasons and years

with well above average precipitation; average conditions rarely exist. Typically the spring and fall are periods of highest precipitation while mid to late summer is usually a hot, droughty period. Winters are moderate with scattered precipitation sometimes in the form of short-lived snow and ice storms (Carr 1969, Bomar 1983).

Climatic variation and topographic variability interact to influence vegetation responses to disturbances such as fire and grazing. The herbaceous savannah species adapted to fire and grazing disturbances by maintaining below-ground perennating tissues. Prior to European settlement, fires would likely have been frequent (approximately every 7-12 years) (Scifres and Hamilton 1993, Frost 1998) and burned any time of year as long as there were ample fuels, dry conditions, and an ignition source.

Fire was a major influence on vegetation structure and composition prior to settlement. Lightning and Native Americans were primary ignition sources, and the latter is considered to have increased the frequency and extent of fire as their populations increased. Fires occurred at all seasons but those that occurred during the hot, dry, late-summer season following fine fuel (grass) accumulation in the spring and early summer were perhaps the most intense and had the greatest influence on the character of the vegetation. Fires were frequent, and any area may have burned once within each 7-12 year interval (Scifres and Hamilton 1993, Frost 1998). Fire generally favors the herbaceous component of the community and hinders the establishment and growth of woody species under intense hot, dry conditions. Some trees (e.g. oak species) and resprouting shrubs (e.g. mesquite) were able to escape fires, and as they matured, they became fire-resistant components of the vegetation except for infrequent stand-replacing crown fires. These woody species became effectively uncoupled from the herbaceous and shrub layer even if the herbaceous species composition was substantially altered by grazing or other factors. If, however, the oaks were killed or removed it is very difficult for them to reestablish into mature single-stemmed trees due to the resprouting nature of the tree, particularly under current land use conditions. While fire had influenced these communities for millennia, as the land was settled with homesteads and crops were established, fires were purposely prevented or stopped. Most of the remaining rangeland was overgrazed, which reduced fuel loads and hence effectively fire-proofed the plant communities from the effect of fires. This was a primary factor in the increase of woody species within the Central Basin.

While shrublands within MRLA 82 have traditionally been viewed as “degraded” relative to livestock production, it is important to recognize that they are not necessarily degraded from the ecological perspective of primary productivity, biomass accumulation, nutrient cycling, and biodiversity. The productivity of shrublands may be equal to or greater than that of the grassland they replaced. In addition, shrubs help modify soils and microclimate to increase levels of organic matter and nutrients in the upper soils horizons (Boutton et al. 2009, Boutton & Liao 2010). This nutrient enhancement by shrubs can offset grazing-induced losses of soil nutrients and contribute to enhance grass production when shrub cover is reduced. While shrub communities may have adverse impacts on grasses and grassland fauna, other plants and animals may benefit (Archer & Smeins 1991, Bestelmeyer et al. 2003). Thus, while ecosystem biodiversity certainly changes, it does not necessarily decrease with a shift from grass to woody dominance on these sites.

Soil and topographic variation interact with weather variation and land use to produce diverse plant communities across the Central Basin and on the Loamy Sand Site. Accounts of earlier explorers and settlers suggest the Central Basin was likely a mosaic of grassland, savannah, and woodlands (Foster 1917). In the historic plant community, midgrasses dominated the shortgrasses due to their ability to capture the sunlight and shade as well as being favored by the frequent fires. Plant communities vary from open grassland to savannah/parkland to shrubland/woodland to nearly closed canopy forest. Almost all sites have a two or three-layered structure of over-story trees, mid-story shrubs and a ground layer of grasses and forbs.

Historical photographs suggest the nature of the vegetation structure depending on topography, soil properties, and time since the last major disturbances (such as drought or fire). However, the occurrence of extensive grasslands and grassland fauna (pronghorn, for example) is mentioned in numerous historical accounts.

Grasses that historically dominate Central Basin sites include little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*), meadow dropseed (*Sporobolus compositus*), plains lovegrass (*Eragrostis intermedia*), plains bristlegrass (*Setaria vulpiseta*), Arizona cottontop (*Digitaria californica*), and sand dropseed (*Sporobolus cryptandrus*). Locally abundant tallgrasses include Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) and switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*). Shortgrasses that occur in the understory of mid- and tallgrasses or on shallow soils or disturbed areas include buffalograss (*Bouteloua dactyloides*), common curly-mesquite (*Hilaria belangeri*), hairy grama (*Bouteloua hirsuta*), and red grama (*B. trifida*) (Whitehouse 1933, Riskind and Diamond 1988). The

composition and productivity of grassland communities would have varied with annual rainfall, soil depth, and the extent of argillic horizon development.

Historically, overstory species composition consisted of post oak (*Quercus stellata*), blackjack oak (*Q. marilandica*), live oak (*Q. virginiana*), honey mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa* var. glandulosa), Texas hickory (*Carya texana*), elm species (Ulmus spp.) and others. The shrub layer was potentially diverse with saplings of the tree layer along with whitebrush (*Aloysia gratissima*), lotebush (*Ziziphus obtusifolia*), algerita (Mahonia trifoliata), Texas persimmon (*Diospyros texana*), prickly pear cactus (Opuntia spp.) and others.

With the exception of Ashe juniper, all native woody species found in the Central Basin readily resprout following fire. This trait has frustrated managers and played an important role in driving sites towards the Woodland State. High numbers of fire sprouting shrubs make shrubland communities very resilient.

An important aspect of this site is the relationship of mature hardwood trees to each of the communities. Mature hardwoods are very resilient and remain constant whether surrounded by reference community grasslands, degraded grasslands, native-dominated shrublands, or invasive-dominated shrublands. Their presence or absence is not driven by grazing management and generally only slightly by prescribed fire. They remain relatively stable over a short management period (5-10 years) unless removed by mechanical or chemical means. Throughout this ecological site, mature oaks can occur in any of the communities if they were not historically removed. They are most likely to occur in mottes and remain relatively constant regardless of what is occurring in the rest of the community, particularly in the understory. Communities will have an absence of hardwoods if the hardwoods were harvested, burned, chained, or sprayed at some point. Once the hardwoods are removed, it is not easy to return to the Savannah State due to the difficulty, expense, and time involved.

Hardwoods were frequently removed from this site during the European settlement period due to their high value for construction and firewood. Additionally, many examples exist where hardwoods were removed as part of a broad scale brush removal program. This was done with chaining, herbicides, root plowing, and other general means.

Oak mottes on this site formed under different conditions than currently found. This may be due to climate shift or increased competition from aggressive shrub species. However, while reestablishment is slow, there are many examples of second-growth hardwood woodlands on this site. Hardwoods eventually reestablish when there is a lack of fire or tree clearing.

Infection of live oak by oak wilt (Ceratocystis fagacearum) has led to the death of many individuals and mottes. An increase in tree density and the grafting of roots amongst individuals has facilitated the spread of the pathogen, which is transmitted primarily through root connections (Appel 1995).

Ashe juniper (*Juniperus ashei*), which is very abundant on the surrounding limestone derived soils of the Edwards Plateau, is relatively uncommon in the Central Basin, but it is found scattered across the Central Basin as infrequent individuals or mottes. Observation indicates that it has been increasing in population and extent within the Central Basin during the past two decades (Walter and Wyatt 1982). Juniper has the ability to take over large tracts of land as near monocultures, known as “cedar breaks.”

Even reference sites show the influence of introduced species. King Ranch bluestem (*Bothriochloa ischaemum*) has become almost ubiquitous, occurring on sites where it has not been seeded. It tends to replace little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) and can function similarly in the community as far as structure, size and soil-holding capacity. However, unlike little bluestem, King Ranch bluestem acts like an invader and moves to unoccupied areas.

The large ungulate fauna of the region prior to settlement consisted of bison (Bos bison), pronghorn antelope (Antilocarpa americana) and white-tailed deer (Odocoileus virginianus). Bison and pronghorn occasionally occurred in large numbers and may have intensively grazed the rangelands for short periods. However, they were largely migratory and free-roaming, so that when the forage became limited they moved on, often not to return for long periods. Their long-term impacts on the plant communities were considered to be relatively minor and may have had positive influences on production and diversity (Knapp et al. 1999, Fuhlendorf and Engle 2001).

While archeological evidence indicates that bison occurred in the region, there is also evidence of centuries of absence (Dillehay 1974). In addition, their numbers may have varied seasonally as herds migrated. When present,

bison may have grazed certain areas heavily and then moved on. The infrequent but intense, short-duration grazing by these species suppressed woody species and invigorated herbaceous species (Eidson and Smeins 1999). After a burn, they would intensely graze the burn until no forages remained. Then, they moved off, probably not returning until the next fire cycle, which could have been five to ten years. This suggests heavy short-term grazing followed by long rest periods. Activities of other native herbivores (termites, cutter ants, soil nematodes, kangaroo rats) also influenced vegetation productivity and dynamics.

Currently, white-tailed deer are the primary native large herbivores. At settlement, large numbers of deer occurred, but as human populations increased (with unregulated harvest) their numbers declined substantially. Eventually, laws and restrictions on deer harvest were put in place which assisted in the recovery of the species. Females were not harvested for several decades following the implementation of hunting laws, which helped create population booms. In addition, suppression of fire favored woody plants which provided additional browse and cover for the deer. Due to their impacts on livestock production, large predators (red wolves (Canis rufus), mountain lions (Felis concolor), black bears (Ursus americanus) and eventually coyotes (Canis latrins)) were reduced in numbers or eliminated (Schmidly 2002).

The screwworm (Cochilomyia hominivorax) was essentially eradicated by the mid-1960s, and while this was immensely helpful to the livestock industry, this removed a significant control on deer populations (Teer, Thomas & Walker 1965, Bushland 1985).

Recent increased management of the deer herd, because of their economic importance through lease hunting, has decreased deer populations with the objectives of improving individual deer quality and improving habitat. High fences, controlled harvest based on numbers, sex ratios, and condition and monitoring of habitat quality have been effective in managing the deer herd on individual properties. However, across the Central Basin, excess numbers still exist which may lead to habitat degradation and significant die-offs during stress periods such as extended droughts.

The Central Basin is home to a variety of non-indigenous (exotic) ungulates, mostly introduced for hunting (Schmidly 2002). These animals are important sources of income to some landowners, but as with the white-tailed deer, their populations must be managed to prevent degradation of the habitat for themselves as well as for the diversity of native wildlife in the area. Many other species of medium and small sized mammals, birds, and insects can have significant influences on the plant communities in terms of pollination, herbivory, seed dispersal, and creation of local disturbance patches, all of which contribute to the plant species diversity.

Supplemental feeding of deer and exotics can also contribute to range degradation if it allows survival of excess numbers of animals.

Feral hogs have become well established within the Central Basin. Hogs use all of the ecological sites within MLRA 82A. They cause considerable damage to soils and vegetation.

The faunal array of the Central Basin changed radically with the introduction of domestic species. Early on, wild mustangs released from early Spanish settlements roamed in large herds and had significant impacts on the vegetation. Later in the 19th century, cattle, sheep, goats, mules, and hogs were introduced. The pristine rangeland appeared to provide unlimited forage but as the ranges were fenced and overstocked they were degraded. Productivity of the rangeland began to decline, carrying capacity was reduced, and periodic die-offs of livestock occurred. Generally, the mid and taller grasses were replaced by short grasses and perennial grasses, and forbs were replaced by annuals. These changes not only reduced production but also in many instances caused permanent alteration of the ecological sites due to soil erosion, organic matter loss, compaction, moisture regime change, and other factors which altered many soil and hydrologic processes. This often precluded their recovery to pre-European conditions (Smith 1899, Smeins, Fuhlendorf and Taylor 1997). Not only did livestock overgraze the forage, but they also contributed to seed dispersal of some woody plants, particularly honey mesquite, which exacerbated its increase on the rangelands.

Historical accounts prior to the 1800s also identify grazing by herds of wild horses, followed by heavy grazing by sheep and cattle as settlement progressed. Grazing on early ranches changed natural graze-rest cycles to continuous grazing and stocking rates exceeded the carrying capacity. By the early 1800s cattle, sheep, and goat numbers appear to have been quite high in the Central Basin, resulting in heavy, year-round grazing (Lehman 1969). Sheep numbers peaked at 10.8 million head in 1943 and stood at about 1.2 million in 2000. Goat numbers in

Texas around 1900 were around 100,000. They peaked in 1965 at 4.6 million and were 345,000 in 2000 (Texas Online). The Central Basin and Edwards Plateau region, because of its climate and diverse vegetation, was the mainstay of the Texas sheep and goat industry.

Today, beef cattle and horses are the primary grazers in the area. Goats used primarily for meat production are locally important, and their numbers have increased. Sheep remain a minor but still important part of livestock grazing in the Central Basin. White-tailed deer, wild turkey, bobwhite quail, and doves are major commercial wildlife species, and hunting leases are a major source of income for many landowners. While the Central Basin ecological sites have changed in many ways since settlement, opportunities exist to produce products and provide income while conserving and sustaining the long-term stability and productivity of the area.

Homesteads and communities developed along with ranching, and many ecological sites within MLRA 82A were converted to cropland for wheat (Triticum spp.), oats (Avena spp.), forage, and peanuts (*Arachis hypogaea*), and other products needed for local consumption or for cash crops. This conversion effectively eliminated the native plant communities due to land clearing and the harvest of larger trees, used for building construction among other uses.

Over time, as many of the croplands became degraded, and along with the rangeland that had been overused, introduced forages were brought in to assist with soil and water conservation and to increase productivity. Coastal bermudagrass (*Cynodon dactylon*), Kleingrass (*Panicum coloratum*), Wilman lovegrass (*Eragrostis superba*), and King Ranch bluestem were widely planted on many acres of old cropland and in areas with deeper soils. The latter, while effective as a soil stabilizer, has become invasive in many areas, including sites with shallower soils. It is difficult to control.

In the 1940s, mechanical and herbicide treatments began to replace fire as a control of increasing density of woody plants on the rangeland. This activity was common practice for several decades until the 1980s, when these treatments became less cost-effective. It was clear that brush management practices were treating symptoms rather than underlying problems in addition to their undesirable environmental and wildlife consequences. Sites cleared of brush regenerated rapidly and often formed thickets that were denser and of lower diversity than the original stands. This realization coupled with the fact that brush management treatments were typically expensive and short-lived, lead to the development of Integrated Brush Management Systems (Scifres et al. 1985). This approach takes a holistic, large-scale, long-term, socioeconomic, ecosystem-based approach to brush management and recognizes multiple-use options for rangeland resources including alternate classes of livestock, lease hunting, exotic game ranching, carbon credits and ecotourism.

Grazing and fire are two factors that critically influence the relative abundance of grasses and woody plants through time. The resulting reduction in abundance of late seral grasses lead to a decline in soil organic matter, a reduction in fire frequency/intensity (due to lack of fine fuels), and a shift in dominance from midgrasses (little bluestem and sideoats grama) to shortgrasses (hooded windmillgrass (*Chloris cucullata*) and buffalograss) and forbs (Mexican sagewort (*Artemisia ludoviciana* ssp. mexicana) and croton (Croton spp.)). These changes would have favored woody plants, most of which are unpalatable to livestock, and enabled them to establish and maintain dominance.

Mesquite, whitebrush, juniper, lotebush, algerita, persimmon, prickly pear, and lime pricklyash (Zanthoxylum fagar) now dominate much of the Central Basin. These woody plants are not ‘new arrivals’ but rather, are native to the region and have increased in size and abundance within their historic ranges. Factors promoting their increase in abundance since European settlement are the subject of active debate. Such factors may involve an interactive combination of changes in climate, intensification of grazing; follow up brush management and reductions in fire frequency/intensity accompanied by increases in atmospheric CO2 concentrations and nitrogen deposition since the industrial revolution (Archer 1994).

State and Transition Model Diagram:

A State and Transition Model diagram for the Loamy Sand Ecological Site is depicted in Figure 1. Thorough descriptions of each state, transition, plant community, and pathway follow the model. Experts base this model on available experimental research, field observations, professional consensus, and interpretations. It is likely to change as knowledge increases.

Plant communities will differ across the MLRA due to the naturally occurring variability in weather, soils, and aspect. The Savannah State is the reference state for this site. It is not necessarily the management goal but can be. Other vegetative states may be desired plant communities as long as the Range Health assessments are in the moderate and above category. The biological processes on this site are complex. Therefore, representative values are presented in a land management context. The species lists are representative and are not botanical descriptions of all species occurring, or potentially occurring, on this site. They are not intended to cover every situation or the full range of conditions, species, and responses for the site.

Both percent species composition by weight and percent canopy cover are used in this ESD. Most observers find it easier to visualize or estimate percent canopy for woody species (trees and shrubs). Canopy cover drives the transitions between communities and states because of the influence of shade and interception of rainfall. Species composition by dry weight is used for describing the herbaceous community and the community as a whole. Woody species are included in species composition for the site. Calculating similarity index requires the use of species composition by dry weight.

The following diagram suggests some pathways that the vegetation on this site might take. There may be other states not shown in the diagram. This information is intended to show what might happen in a given set of circumstances; it does not mean that this would happen the same way in every instance. Local professional guidance should always be sought before pursuing a treatment scenario.

State and transition model

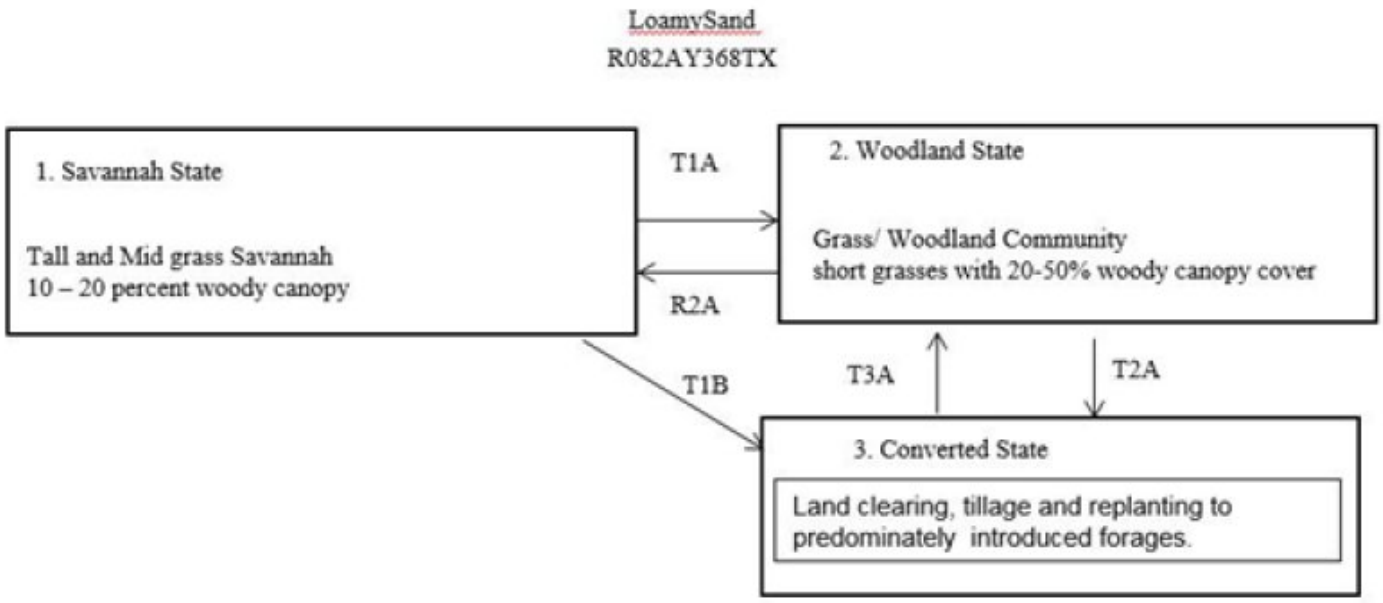

Figure 9. State and Transition Model diagram

State 1
Savannah State

Prior to settlement, the Loamy Sand sites had a savannah appearance with open areas dominated by tall and midgrasses interspersed with scattered mottes of oaks. The Savannah State may have up to 20 percent canopy cover. Relatively frequent fires (7-12 year mean fire return interval) (Frost 1998) maintained the open areas by minimizing shrub cover that was not yet to a fire resistant height. Mature single stemmed hardwoods found in the mottes were long-lived and resistant to ground fires. Fires were natural or human-induced. When fires were frequent on the savannah, most fires burned only the understory, leaving mottes of trees. Even with proper grazing and favorable climate conditions, lack of fire for 7-12 years will allow trees and shrubs to increase in canopy to reach the 20 percent level that indicates the shift to the Woodland State. This transition is not so much dependent on the degradation of the herbaceous community as on the lack of some form of brush control and the reduction in fire. A major role of grazing management is to build and preserve fine fuel to carry maintenance fires. Shrub species would increase within the grassland portion of the savannah and within the understory of the mottes following fire. Fine fuels were continuous and of sufficient quantity to allow fire minimizing cover of young brush and trees but not of sufficient quantity to create crown fires that would single stemmed mature trees. Therefore, the savannah would be

relatively open for a short period following a fire, shrubs would begin to reestablish reducing the savannah appearance, fire would return in 10 years or less. Occasionally a site would not burn for a period long enough for trees to grow to a fire resistant stage within the grassland portion of the savannah. As these trees matured, the fine fuel understory would decrease, reducing the ability of fires to grow large enough (and hot enough) to harm mature trees. This long-term lack of fire (25 - 50 years) would allow large trees to fill in open areas shifting the site to a woodland appearance. Once the site had dense tree cover, the site would be resistant to fires and a very resilient woodland community would develop. Grazing management alone cannot maintain the site in the Savannah State. It was rare that a dense woodland community would shift to a grassland or savannah community. In order to do so, something would have to cause a widespread die-off of mature trees. This could occur due to disease or to a very hot fire that spread to the tree, events that typically only occur every 300 to 1,000 years. Following a severe fire, the site would have a grassland appearance for a few years as shrubs and trees resprouted or grew from seed. The Savannah State always has the potential for shrub dominance without fire. Mann (2004) discussed the importance of human-induced fire as an important factor in maintaining open grasslands before European settlement. “Cool”, slow-burning natural fires have become basically non-existent, because they are relatively easy to put out using modern firefighting equipment and techniques. Without fire, the reference Savannah State becomes less resilient. Unless managers practice some method of brush control, shrub species will increase in the grassland portion of the savannah and in the understory of the oak mottes. Brush control can play the role that natural fires played pre-settlement. However, it is difficult to manage in an ecological and economic matter on a small scale, as this site is rapidly repopulated by shrubs and trees without fire or brush management. Brush control may be prescribed fire, mechanical, chemical or biological control, or targeted grazing (generally by goats, although some instances exist in the Central Basin where exotic wildlife species or overpopulated white-tailed deer reduce woody cover). There are examples of this site being maintained as a savannah with introduced hay meadows and mottes of trees.

Dominant plant species

- post oak (*Quercus stellata*), tree
- little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), grass
- Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), grass

Community 1.1
Savannah

Tall and Mid grass Savannah, 10 to 20 percent woody canopy.

Table 5. Annual production by plant type

Plant Type	Low (Kg/Hectare)	Representative Value (Kg/Hectare)	High (Kg/Hectare)
Grass/Grasslike	2242	3138	4035
Tree	280	392	504
Forb	140	196	252
Shrub/Vine	140	196	252
Total	**2802**	**3922**	**5043**

State 2
Woodland State

The Woodland State is characterized by trees, a significant shrub cover, and a shortgrass- understory. The Woodland State often occurs on lands that have been cleared of brush and trees at some point in the past and has regrown. Once invasive woody species begin to establish, returning fully to the native community is difficult, but it is possible to return to a similar plant community. One factor that creates overgrazing on this site is the failure to adjust the stocking rate downward as woody cover increases. Increased woody cover results in fewer grazeable acres and less forage being available. Unless stocking rates are reduced, the stocking pressure on the remaining forage increases, which increases the likelihood of palatable plants being overgrazed, losing vigor, and being grazed out of the community. At the same time, less palatable plants gain a comparative advantage and increase their representation in species composition. If retrogression is cattle induced, big and little bluestem, Indiangrass, sand lovegrass, and the more palatable forbs decrease. Silver bluestem, tall and sand dropseed, Texas wintergrass

and woody plants are the principal increasers. If the plant community continues to degenerate, fall witchgrass, hooded windmillgrass, red and tumble and gummy lovegrass, tumblegrass, and threeawns which originally occurred in trace amounts increase to dominating proportions. In lower successional stages, woody plants such as blackjack and post oak, greenbrier, and shinoak, may increase and dominate the site. Mesquite, juniper and catclaw invade the site.

Dominant plant species

- mesquite (*Prosopis*), tree
- juniper (*Juniperus*), tree

State 3
Converted

The information for this community comes from experienced field specialists. Abandoned cropland areas, or cleared areas, are often seeded to historic native species or exotic naturalized grass species such as bermudagrass (Cynodon spp.) or Kleingrass (*Panicum coloratum*). Herbage production on those seeded to adapted introduced grasses or native grasses reach peak production within a few years if a full stand is established. In this case, herbage production will equal the reference state if species such as big bluestem or switchgrass are seeded. Adapted introduced species plantings may surpass reference production. The practice of including adapted legumes or other forbs will enhance productivity and usefulness, especially for wildlife. Invasion of the seeded fields by brush species such as mesquite, pricklypear (Opuntia spp.), condalia (Condalia spp.), willow baccharis (Baccharis spp.), Texas persimmon and juniper is common. Drought and reduced soil cover due to cropping and grazing and a nearby seed source trigger the invasions. The shrub ‘seedlings’ that appear in seeded or abandoned fields are true seedlings established by seeds brought in by animals, water or wind. The invading brush must be controlled with grazing management, prescribed burning or other brush management methods or the woody invaders will again dominate. Many fields, however, have been abandoned and let ‘go back’ to native range or to invading exotic grasses for pasture.

Dominant plant species

- Bermudagrass (*Cynodon*), grass
- kleingrass (*Panicum coloratum*), grass

Transition T1A
State 1 to 2

Abusive harvest of herbaceous vegetation, loss of fire, no maintenance brush management cause the Savannah State to shift toward the Woodland State. Drought can hasten the process. Loss of herbaceous vegetation and an increase of woody canopy is an indicator of this shift.

Restoration pathway R2A
State 2 to 1

Prescribed grazing (528), prescribed burning (338), brush management (314), range planting (550)can be utilized to return the native plant component to the site to something closely resembling the historic State. Canopy reduction will allow sunlight energy to be captured by the re-established plants rather than the brush.

Conservation practices

Brush Management
Prescribed Burning
Range Planting
Prescribed Grazing

Transition T2A
State 2 to 3

Land clearing, tillage, and replanting with typically exotic forage grasses cause the transition to the Converted State. The ecological processes that have changed include the alteration of energy flow to only introduced grasses and a loss of diversity.

Transition T3A
State 3 to 2

The Transition to the Woodland State is initiated by abandonment and a lack of brush management. A lack of forage management to maintain a competitive grass cover can be a contributing factor. However, even with the best of grass management, woody plant seeds can be introduced by wildlife and livestock. There will nearly always be residual woody plant seeds in the soils and a presence of shrubs and trees. This transition represents a redirection of energy flow from the grasses back to the woody species and a change in the water cycle.

Additional community tables

Table 6. Community 1.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production (Kg/Hectare)	Foliar Cover (%)
Grass/Grasslike					
1	**warm season perennials**			841–1211	
	little bluestem	SCSC	*Schizachyrium scoparium*	841–1211	–
2	**warm season tall grasses**			224–404	
	big bluestem	ANGE	*Andropogon gerardii*	168–336	–
	switchgrass	PAVI2	*Panicum virgatum*	168–336	–
	Indiangrass	SONU2	*Sorghastrum nutans*	168–336	–
3	**warm season mid grass**			224–404	
	sand lovegrass	ERTR3	*Eragrostis trichodes*	224–404	–
4	**perennial short and midgrasses**			701–1009	
	sideoats grama	BOCU	*Bouteloua curtipendula*	168–280	–
	plains lovegrass	ERIN	*Eragrostis intermedia*	168–280	–
	cane bluestem	BOBA3	*Bothriochloa barbinodis*	112–224	–
	purpletop tridens	TRFL2	*Tridens flavus*	112–224	–
	sand dropseed	SPCR	*Sporobolus cryptandrus*	56–112	–
5	**perennial cool season**			140–202	
	Heller's rosette grass	DIOL	*Dichanthelium oligosanthes*	56–112	–
	Canada wildrye	ELCA4	*Elymus canadensis*	56–112	–
	Texas wintergrass	NALE3	*Nassella leucotricha*	56–112	–
	Texas bluegrass	POAR	*Poa arachnifera*	56–112	–
Tree					
6	**Trees**			224–404	
	blackjack oak	QUMA3	*Quercus marilandica*	224–404	–
	post oak	QUST	*Quercus stellata*	224–404	–
Shrub/Vine					
7	**Shrubs vines**			140–404	
	hackberry	CELTI	*Celtis*	56–112	–
	winged sumac	RHCO	*Rhus copallinum*	56–112	–
	saw greenbrier	SMBO2	*Smilax bona-nox*	56–112	–
	lime pricklyash	ZAFA	*Zanthoxylum fagara*	56–112	–

Forb					
8	**Forbs**			140–202	
	Maximilian sunflower	HEMA2	*Helianthus maximiliani*	28–112	–
	Cuman ragweed	AMPS	*Ambrosia psilostachya*	28–84	–
	white sagebrush	ARLU	*Artemisia ludoviciana*	28–84	–
	prairie clover	DALEA	*Dalea*	28–56	–
	buckwheat	ERIOG	*Eriogonum*	28–56	–
	beeblossom	GAURA	*Gaura*	28–56	–
	dotted blazing star	LIPU	*Liatris punctata*	28–56	–
	sensitive plant	MIMOS	*Mimosa*	28–56	–
	puff	NEPTU	*Neptunia*	28–56	–
	evening primrose	OENOT	*Oenothera*	28–56	–
	fuzzybean	STROP	*Strophostyles*	28–56	–

Animal community

This site is suitable for livestock, white-tailed deer, quail, and other wildlife.

Hydrological functions

Smooth to gently sloping topography with moderately slow to slowly permeable soils may result in medium runoff. However good plant cover greatly reduces erosion potential, resulting in runoff relatively free to sediment.

Recreational uses

Colorful forbs dot the landscape during the spring and early fall when moisture is adequate. Brilliant red, orange and yellow hues of post oak, blackjack oak and flame-leaf sumac also help to make this a colorful site each autumn.

Other information

This rating system provides general guidance as to animal forage preference for plant species. It also indicates possible competition between kinds of herbivores for various plants. Grazing preference changes from time to time, especially between seasons, and between animal kinds and classes. Grazing preference does not necessarily reflect the ecological status of the plant within the plant community. For wildlife, plant preferences for food, and plant suitability for cover are rated. Refer to habitat guides for a more complete description of a species habitat needs.

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Contributors

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Approval

Bryan Christensen, 9/19/2023

Acknowledgments

Site Development and Testing Plan:

Future work, as described in a Project Plan, to validate the information in this Provisional Ecological Site Description is needed. This will include field activities to collect low, medium and high-intensity sampling, soil correlations, and analysis of that data. Annual field reviews should be done by soil scientists and vegetation specialists. A final field review, peer review, quality control, and quality assurance reviews of the ESD will be needed to produce the final document. Annual reviews of the Project Plan are to be conducted by the Ecological Site Technical Team.

QC/QA completed by:
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Rangeland health reference sheet

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

Author(s)/participant(s)	
Contact for lead author	
Date	05/13/2025
Approved by	Bryan Christensen
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:**