USDA Natural Resources
Conservation Service

Ecological site R108XA016IL
Sand Prairie

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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): 108X–Illinois and Iowa Deep Loess and Drift

The Illinois and Iowa Deep Loess and Drift, Eastern Part (MLRA 108A) encompasses the Grand Prairie physiographic division (Schewman et al. 1973). It spans two states – Illinois (97 percent) and Indiana (3 percent) – comprising about 11,145 square miles (Figure 1). The elevation ranges from 985 feet above sea level (ASL) in the northern part to 660 feet above sea level in the southern part. Local relief varies from 3 to 10 feet on most of the area which is on broad flat uplands. The maximum relief is about 160 feet along major streams. The northern part of this area is underlain by Ordovician and Silurian limestone and the southern part is underlain by Pennsylvanian shale, siltstone, and limestone. Except for some areas along streams where bedrock is exposed, glacial drift covers all the MLRA. The glacial drift consists of till and stratified outwash and is of Wisconsinan age. A moderately thin to thick layer of loess covers the entire area (USDA-NRCS 2006).

The vegetation in the MLRA has undergone drastic changes over time. At the end of the last glacial episode – the Wisconsinan glaciation – the evolution of vegetation began with the development of tundra habitats, followed by a phase of spruce and fir forests, and eventually spruce-pine forests. Not until approximately 9,000 years ago did the climate undergo a warming trend which prompted the development of deciduous forests dominated by oak and hickory. As the climate continued to warm and dry, prairies began to develop approximately 8,300 years ago. Another shift in climate that resulted in an increase in moisture prompted the emergence of savanna-like habitats from 8,000 to 5,000 years before present. Moisture continued to increase in the southernmost region 5,000 years ago, resulting in an increase of forested systems (Taft et al. 2009). Fire, droughts, and grazing by native mammals helped to maintain the prairies and savannas until the arrival of European settlers, and the forests were maintained by droughts, wind, lightning, and occasional fire (Taft et al. 2009; NatureServe 2018).

Classification relationships

USFS Subregions: Central Till Plains and Grand Prairies (251D) and Central Till Plains-Beech-Maple Sections; Northern Grand Prairie (251Dc), Eastern Grand Prairie (251Dd), Southern Grand Prairie (251De), and Entrenched Valleys (222Hf) Subsections (Cleland et al. 2007)

U.S. EPA Level IV Ecoregion: Illinois/Indiana Prairies (54a) and Glaciated Wabash Lowlands (72b) (USEPA 2013)

National Vegetation Classification – Ecological Systems: North-Central Interior Sand and Gravel Tallgrass Prairie (CES202.695) (NatureServe 2018)

National Vegetation Classification – Plant Associations: Schizachyrium scoparium – Sorghastrum nutans – Andropogon gerardii – *Lespedeza capitata* Sand Grassland (CEGL002210) (Nature Serve 2018)

Biophysical Settings: North-Central Interior Sand and Gravel Tallgrass Prairie (BpS 4214120) (LANDFIRE 2009)

Illinois Natural Areas Inventory: Dry-mesic sand prairie (White and Madany 1978)

Ecological site concept

Sand Prairies are located within the blue areas on the map (Figure 1). They occur on ground moraines and outwash plains. The soils are Mollisols that are somewhat poorly to well-drained and deep, formed in eolian sands. These coarse-loamy soils are droughty and low in nutrients and organic matter.

The historic pre-European settlement vegetation on this ecological site was dominated by drought-adapted herbaceous species. Little bluestem (Schizachyrium scoparium (Michx.) Nash) and flaxleaf whitetop aster (Ionactis linariifolius (L.) Greene) are the dominant and diagnostic species on the site, respectively (White and Madany 1978). Other grasses present can include Indiangrass (Sorghastrum nutans (L.) Nash), porcupinegrass (Hesperostipa spartea (Trin.) Barkworth), and big bluestem (Andropogon gerardii Vitman) (White and Madany 1978; NatureServe 2018). Forbs typical of an undisturbed plant community associated with this ecological site include tall blazing star (Liatris aspera Michx.), showy goldenrod (Solidago speciosa Nutt.), and birdfoot violet (Viola pedata L.) (Taft et al. 1997). Fire is the primary disturbance factor that maintains this ecological site, while sand blow outs, periodic drought and large mammal grazing are secondary factors (LANDFIRE 2009; Taft et al. 2009; NatureServe 2018).

Associated sites

R108XA006IL	**Loess Upland Prairie** Deep loess parent material on uplands including Arrowsmith, Catlin, Chenoa, Dana, Danabrook, Flanagan, Graymont, Harco, La Rose, Lisbon, Mona, Normal, Parr, Raub, Rooks, Rutland, Saybrook, Varna, Wenoa, and Wyanet
F108XA017IL	**Terrace Woodland** Alluvial parent material on stream terraces that are rarely flooded including Camden, Kendall, Martinsville, and St. Charles
R108XA012IL	**Outwash Prairie** Shallow loess over outwash on outwash plains including Blackberry, Brenton, Clare, Elburn, Kishwaukee, Penfield, Plano, Proctor, Rodman, Shipshe, and Waupecan

Similar sites

R108XA012IL	**Outwash Prairie** Outwash Prairies are in a similar landscape position, but parent material is shallow loess over outwash

Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	Not specified
Herbaceous	(1) *Schizachyrium scoparium* (2) *Ionactis linariifolius*

Physiographic features

Sand Prairies occur on ground moraines and outwash plains. They are situated on elevations ranging from approximately 443 to 1020 feet ASL. The site does not experience flooding but rather generates runoff to adjacent, downslope ecological sites (Table 1).

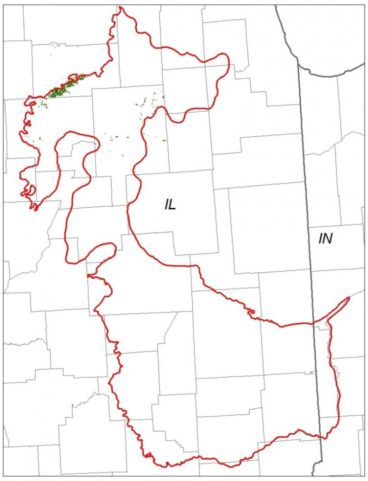


Figure 1. Figure 1. Location of Sand Prairie ecological site within MLRA 108A.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Slope shape across	(1) Convex
Slope shape up-down	(1) Convex
Landforms	(1) Upland > Ground moraine (2) Outwash plain
Runoff class	Low to medium
Elevation	443–1,020 ft
Slope	0–10%
Water table depth	80 in
Aspect	Aspect is not a significant factor

Climatic features

The Illinois and Iowa Deep Loess and Drift, Eastern Part falls into the hot-summer humid continental climate (Dfa) and the humid subtropical continental climate (Cfa) Köppen-Geiger climate classifications (Peel et al. 2007). The two main factors that drive the climate of the MLRA are latitude and weather systems. Latitude, and the subsequent reflection of solar input, determines air temperatures and seasonal variations. Solar energy varies across the seasons, with summer receiving three to four times as much energy as opposed to winter. Weather systems (air masses and cyclonic storms) are responsible for daily fluctuations of weather conditions. High-pressure systems are responsible for settled weather patterns where sun and clear skies dominate. In fall, winter, and spring, the polar jet stream is responsible for the creation and movement of low-pressure systems. The clouds, winds, and precipitation associated with a low-pressure system regularly follow high-pressure systems every few days (Angel n.d.).

The soil temperature regime of MLRA 108A is classified as mesic, where the mean annual soil temperature is between 46 and 59°F (USDA-NRCS 2006). Temperature and precipitation occur along a north-south gradient, where temperature and precipitation increase the further south one travels. The average freeze-free period of this ecological site is about 179 days, while the frost-free period is about 140 days (Table 2). The majority of the precipitation occurs as rainfall in the form of convective thunderstorms during the growing season. Average annual precipitation is approximately 36 inches, which includes rainfall plus the water equivalent from snowfall (Table 3). The average annual low and high temperatures are 40 and 60°F, respectively.

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

Table 3. Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (characteristic range)	136-144 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	172-185 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	36 in
Frost-free period (actual range)	135-145 days
Freeze-free period (actual range)	169-188 days
Precipitation total (actual range)	36 in
Frost-free period (average)	140 days
Freeze-free period (average)	179 days
Precipitation total (average)	36 in

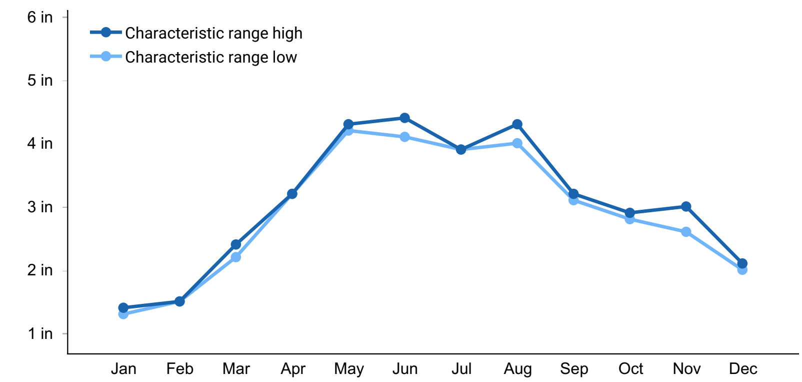


Figure 2. Monthly precipitation range

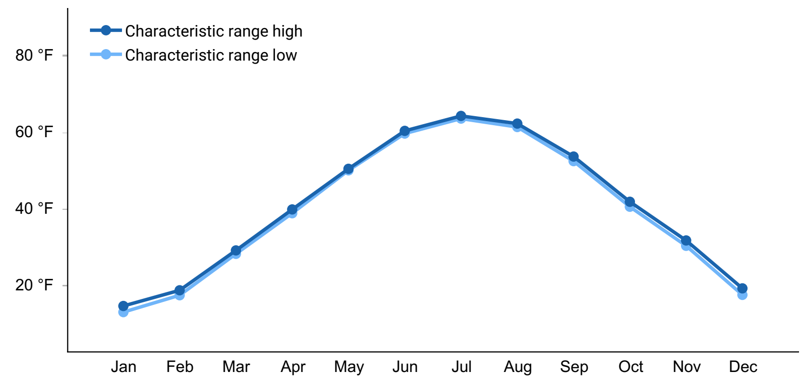


Figure 3. Monthly minimum temperature range

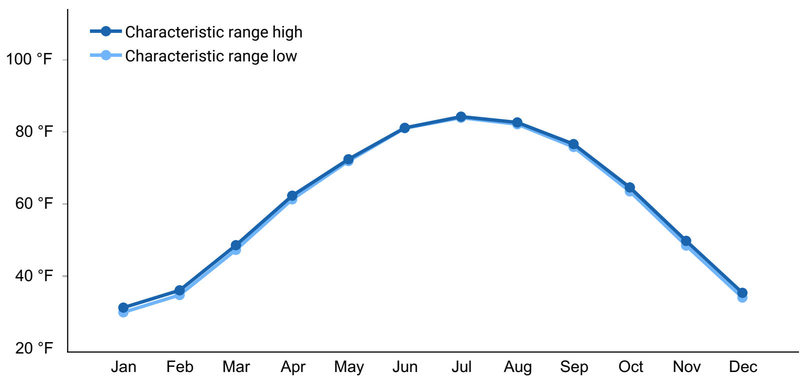


Figure 4. Monthly maximum temperature range

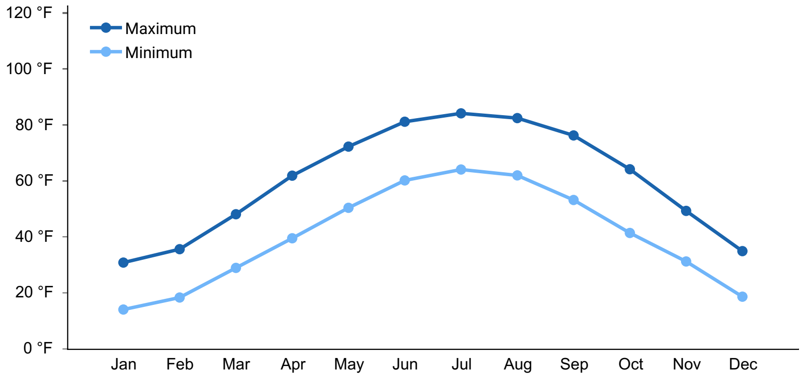


Figure 5. Monthly average minimum and maximum temperature

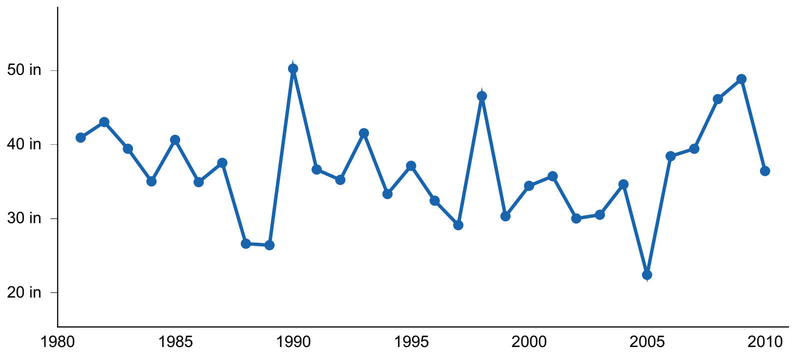


Figure 6. Annual precipitation pattern

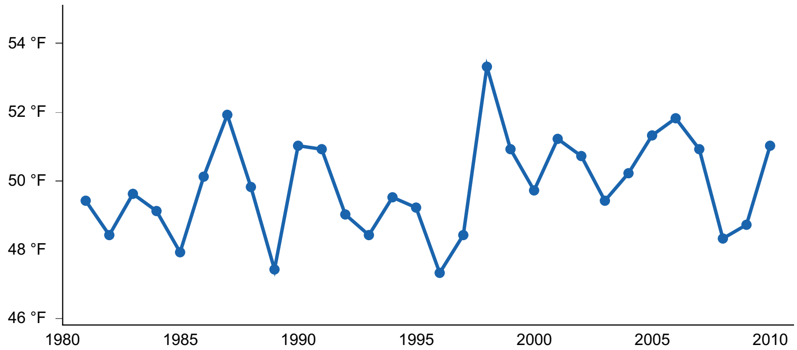


Figure 7. Annual average temperature pattern

Climate stations used

- (1) WALNUT [USC00118916], Walnut, IL
- (2) OTTAWA 5SW [USC00116526], Ottawa, IL

Influencing water features

Sand Prairies are not influenced by wetland or riparian water features. Precipitation is the main source of water for this ecological site. Infiltration is moderate or very slow (Hydrologic Groups B and D), and surface runoff is low to medium. Surface runoff contributes some water to downslope ecological sites (Figure 4).

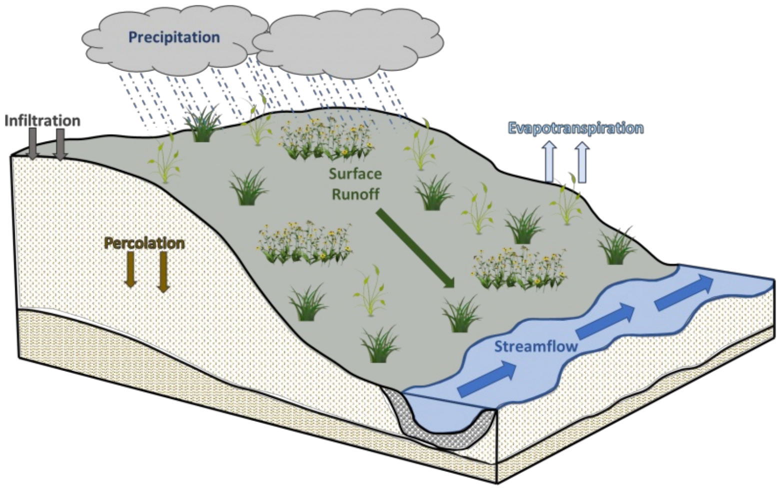


Figure 8. Figure 4. Hydrologic cycling in Sand Prairie ecological site.

Soil features

Soils of Sand Prairies are in the Mollisols order, further classified as Arenic Argiudolls and Aquic Argiudolls with moderate or very slow infiltration and low to medium runoff potential. The soil series associated with this site includes Ayr and Ridgeville (Figure 5). The parent material is eolian sands or deposits, and the soils are somewhat poorly to well-drained and deep. Soil pH classes are strongly acid to neutral. No rooting restrictions are noted for the soils of this ecological site (Table 5).

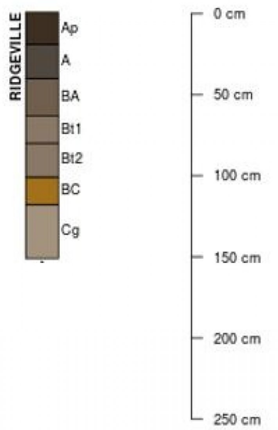


Figure 9. Figure 5. Profile sketches of soil series associated with Sand Prairie.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Eolian deposits (2) Eolian sands
Family particle size	(1) Coarse-loamy
Drainage class	Somewhat poorly drained to well drained
Permeability class	Moderately slow to moderate
Soil depth	80 in

Ecological dynamics

The information in this Ecological Site Description, including the state-and-transition model (STM), 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 MLRA lies within the tallgrass prairie ecosystem of the Midwest. The heterogeneous topography of the area results in variable microclimates and fuel matrices that in turn support prairies, savannas, and forests. Sand Prairies form an aspect of this vegetative continuum. This ecological site occurs on ground moraines and outwash plains on somewhat poorly to well-drained coarse-textured soils. Species characteristic of this ecological site consist of drought-adapted herbaceous vegetation.

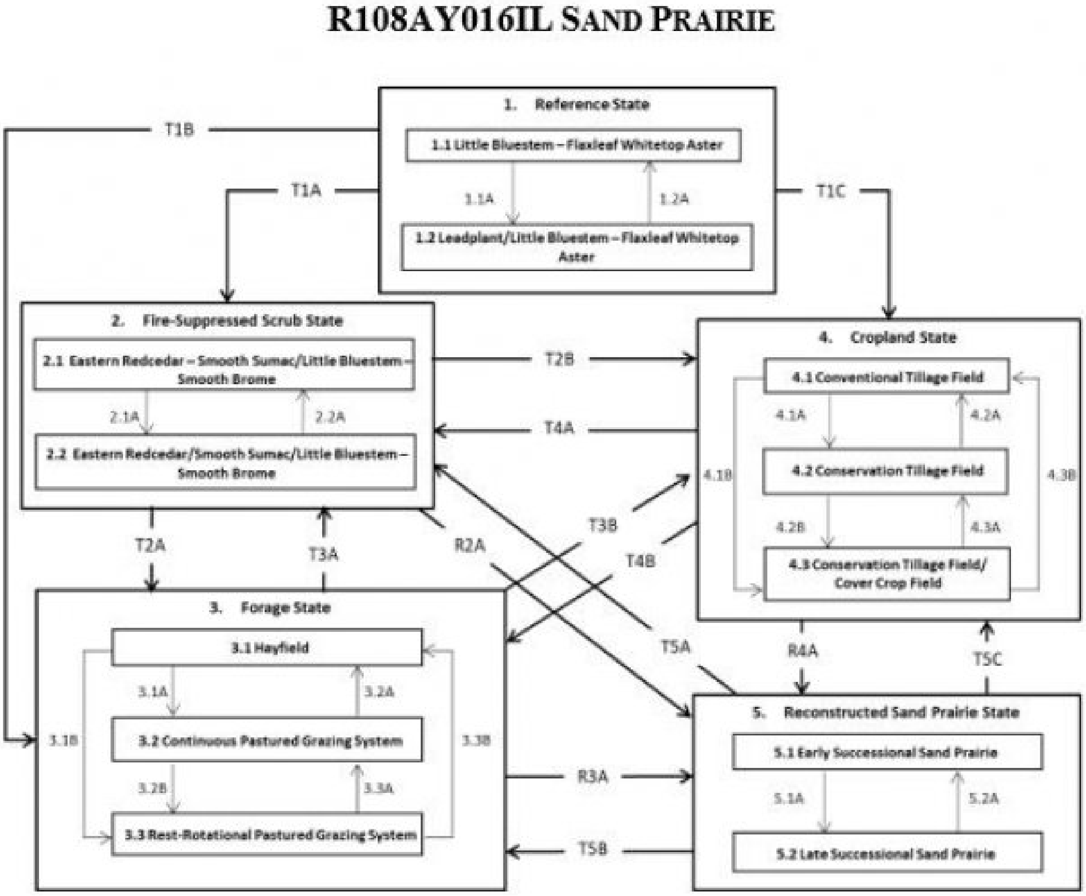
Fire is a critical disturbance factor that maintains Sand Prairies. Fire intensity typically consisted of periodic, low-intensity surface fires occurring every 1 to 5 years (LANDFIRE 2009). Ignition sources included summertime lightning strikes from convective storms and bimodal, human ignitions during the spring and fall seasons. Native Americans regularly set fires to improve sight lines for hunting, driving large game, improving grazing and browsing habitat, agricultural clearing, and enhancing vital ethnobotanical plants (Barrett 1980).

Sand blowouts are another disturbance factor that shape this ecological site. The high sand content coupled with increasing slopes allows for localized erosion and shifting from high wind events or following a recent fire. The resulting substrate exposures results in a temporarily reduced vegetative canopy cover, leaving a plant community that resembles a sand barren. Over time site stability increases and the community will shift back to sand prairie (NatureServe 2018).

Drought and grazing by native ungulates have also played a role in shaping this ecological site. The periodic episodes of reduced soil moisture in conjunction with the somewhat poorly to well-drained soils have favored the proliferation of plant species tolerant of such conditions. Drought can also slow the growth of plants and result in dieback of certain species. Large mammals, specifically prairie elk (Cervus elaphus), bison (Bos bison), and white-tailed deer (Odocoileus virginianus), likely occurred in low densities resulting in limited impacts to plant composition and dominance (LANDFIRE 2009). When coupled with fire, periods of drought and herbivory can greatly delay the establishment of woody vegetation (Pyne et al. 1996).

Today, Sand Prairies are limited in their extent, having been reduced as a result of land conversion to agricultural or livestock production. Remnants that do exist show evidence of indirect anthropogenic influence as woody species and non-native species are present in the community composition. A return to the historic plant community may not be possible following extensive land modification, but long-term conservation agriculture or prairie reconstruction efforts can help to restore some biotic diversity and ecological function. The state-and-transition model that follows provides a detailed description of each state, community phase, pathway, and transition. This model is based on available experimental research, field observations, literature reviews, professional consensus, and interpretations.

State and transition model



Code	Process
1.1A	Increased fire return interval
1.2A	Reduced fire return interval
T1A, T3A, T4A, T5A	Long-term fire suppression, land abandonment, and/or overgrazing
2.1A	Continued fire suppression
2.2A	Single fire event
T1B, T2A, T4B, T5B	Cultural treatments are implemented to increase forage quality and yield
3.1A	Mechanical harvesting is replaced with domestic livestock and continuous grazing
3.1B	Mechanical harvesting is replaced with domestic livestock and rest-rotational grazing
3.2A, 3.3B	Domestic livestock grazing is replaced by mechanical harvesting
3.2B	Implementation of rest-rotational grazing
3.3A	Implementation of continuous grazing
T1C, T2B, T3B, T5C	Agricultural conversion via tillage, seeding, and non-selective herbicide
4.1A	Less tillage, residue management
4.1B	Less tillage, residue management, and implementation of cover cropping
4.2B	Implementation of cover cropping
4.2A, 4.3B	Intensive tillage, remove residue, and reinitiate monoculture row cropping
4.3A	Remove cover cropping
R2A, R3A, R4A	Site preparation, non-native species control, and native seeding
5.1A	Invasive species control and implementation of disturbance regimes
5.2A	Drought or improper timing/use of management actions

State 1
Reference State

The reference plant community is categorized as a prairie community, dominated by herbaceous vegetation. The two community phases within the reference state are dependent on fire and sand blowouts. Short fire return intervals and occasional slope failures alters species composition, cover, and extent, while regular fire intervals keep woody species from dominating. Drought and grazing have more localized impacts on the reference phases, but do contribute to overall species composition, diversity, cover, and productivity.

Community 1.1
Little Bluestem - Flaxleaf Whitetop Aster

Sites in this reference community phase are dominated by a mix of grasses and forbs. Vegetative cover is patchy to continuous (61 to 100 percent) and plants can reach heights greater than 3 feet tall (LANDFIRE 2009). Little bluestem, Indiangrass, porcupinegrass, and big bluestem are the dominant grasses. Characteristic forbs include flaxleaf whitetop aster, roundhead lespedeza (*Lespedeza capitata*Michx), Carolina puccoon (*Lithospermum caroliniense* (Walter ex J.G. Gmel.) MacMill.), and white heath aster (*Symphyotrichum ericoides* (L.) G.L. Nesom) (NatureServe 2018). Replacement fires every 3 to 4 years or periodic sand blowouts will maintain this phase, but an extended fire return interval would shift the community to phase 1.2 (LANDFIRE 2009).

Dominant plant species

- little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), grass
- flaxleaf whitetop aster (*Ionactis linariifolius*), other herbaceous

Community 1.2
Leadplant/Little Bluestem - Flaxleaf Whitetop Aster

This reference community phase represents natural succession as a result an extended fire return interval. The lack of fire allows low shrubs, such as leadplant (*Amorpha canescens* Pursh), to develop. Shrubs are relatively sparse and scattered throughout the community. The understory remains relatively similar to community phase 1.1. Small replacement fires every 4 to 5 years will maintain this phase, but a large replacement fire would shift the community back to phase 1.1 (LANDFIRE 2009).

Dominant plant species

- leadplant (*Amorpha canescens*), shrub
- little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), grass
- flaxleaf whitetop aster (*Ionactis linariifolius*), other herbaceous

Pathway 1.1A
Community 1.1 to 1.2

Natural succession following an extended fire return interval.

Pathway 1.2A
Community 1.2 to 1.1

Natural succession following a large replacement fire.

State 2
Fire-Suppressed Scrub State

Long-term fire suppression can transition the reference sand prairie community into a woody-invaded shrub-prairie. This state is evidenced by a well-developed shrub layer and sparse trees (LANDFIRE 2009). Proximity to lands that have been altered provide opportunities for non-native invasive species to readily colonize this state, thereby reducing the native biodiversity and changing the vegetative community.

Community 2.1
Eastern Redcedar - Smooth Sumac/Little Bluestem - Smooth Brome

This community phase represents the early stages of long-term fire suppression. In the absence of fire, woody species encroach into the native sand prairie. Shrubs are less than 6 feet tall and can exceed 30 percent cover. Common shrubs likely to be encountered include eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*L.) and smooth sumac (*Rhus glabra*L.). These tall shrubs shade out the understory, reducing the biodiversity. The shade also promotes a moister soil environment, providing suitable condition for invasion by non-native species, such as smooth brome (*Bromus inermis* L.) (Howard 1996).

Dominant plant species

- eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), shrub
- smooth sumac (*Rhus glabra*), shrub
- little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), grass
- smooth brome (*Bromus inermis*), grass

Community 2.2
Eastern Redcedar/Smooth Sumac/Little Bluestem - Smooth Brome

Sites falling into this community phase have a well-developed shrub layer, and scattered trees begin to mature as a result of the continued lack of fire. Eastern redcedar continues to grow readily on the dry, nutrient-poor sandy soils, becoming the dominant tree on the site while the clonal smooth sumac continues to expand in the shrub layer (Carey 1992; Anderson 2003).

Dominant plant species

- eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), tree
- smooth sumac (*Rhus glabra*), shrub
- little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), grass
- smooth brome (*Bromus inermis*), grass

Pathway 2.1A
Community 2.1 to 2.2

Continued fire suppression.

Pathway 2.2A
Community 2.2 to 2.1

Single fire event with enough intensity to top-kill trees.

State 3
Forage State

The forage state occurs when the reference state is converted to a farming system that emphasizes domestic livestock production known as grassland agriculture. Fire suppression, periodic cultural treatments (e.g., clipping, drainage, soil amendment applications, planting new species and/or cultivars, mechanical harvesting) and grazing by domesticated livestock transition and maintain this state (USDA-NRCS 2003). Early settlers seeded non-native species, such as smooth brome (*Bromus inermis* Leyss.) and Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis* L.), to help extend the grazing season (Smith 1998). Over time, as lands were continuously harvested or grazed by herds of cattle, the non-native species were able to spread and expand across the landscape, reducing the native species diversity and ecological function.

Community 3.1
Hayfield

Sites in this community phase consist of forage plants that are planted and mechanically harvested. Mechanical harvesting removes much of the aboveground biomass and nutrients that feed the soil microorganisms (Franzluebbers et al. 2000; USDA-NRCS 2003). As a result, soil biology is reduced leading to decreases in nutrient uptake by plants, soil organic matter, and soil aggregation. Frequent biomass removal can also reduce the site’s carbon sequestration capacity (Skinner 2008).

Community 3.2
Continuous Pastured Grazing System

This community phase is characterized by continuous grazing where domestic livestock graze a pasture for the entire season. Depending on stocking density, this can result in lower forage quality and productivity, weed invasions, and uneven pasture use. Continuous grazing can also increase the amount of bare ground and erosion and reduce soil organic matter, cation exchange capacity, water-holding capacity, and nutrient availability and retention (Bharati et al. 2002; Leake et al. 2004; Teague et al. 2011). Smooth brome, Kentucky bluegrass, and white clover (*Trifolium repens* L.) are common pasture species used in this phase. Their tolerance to continuous grazing has allowed these species to dominate, sometimes completely excluding the native vegetation.

Community 3.3
Rest-Rotation Pastured Grazing System

This community phase is characterized by rotational grazing where the pasture has been subdivided into several smaller paddocks. Through the development of a grazing plan, livestock utilize one or a few paddocks, while the remaining area is rested allowing plants to restore vigor and energy reserves, deepen root systems, develop seeds, as well as allow seedling establishment (Undersander et al. 2002; USDA-NRCS 2003). Rest-rotation pastured grazing systems include deferred rotation, rest rotation, high intensity – low frequency, and short duration methods. Vegetation is generally more diverse and can include orchardgrass (*Dactylis glomerata* L.), timothy (Phleum pretense L.), red clover (*Trifolium pratense* L.), and alfalfa (*Medicago sativa* L.). The addition of native prairie species can further bolster plant diversity and, in turn, soil function. This community phase promotes numerous ecosystem benefits including increasing biodiversity, preventing soil erosion, maintaining and enhancing soil quality, sequestering atmospheric carbon, and improving water yield and quality (USDA-NRCS 2003).

Pathway 3.1A
Community 3.1 to 3.2

Mechanical harvesting is replaced with domestic livestock utilizing continuous grazing.

Pathway 3.1B
Community 3.1 to 3.3

Mechanical harvesting is replaced with domestic livestock utilizing rotational grazing.

Pathway 3.2A
Community 3.2 to 3.1

Domestic livestock are removed, and mechanical harvesting is implemented.

Pathway 3.2B
Community 3.2 to 3.3

Rotational grazing replaces continuous grazing.

Pathway 3.3B
Community 3.3 to 3.1

Domestic livestock are removed, and mechanical harvesting is implemented.

Pathway 3.3A
Community 3.3 to 3.2

Continuous grazing replaces rotational grazing.

State 4
Cropland State

The continuous use of tillage, row-crop planting, and chemicals (i.e., herbicides, fertilizers, etc.) has effectively eliminated the reference community and many of its natural ecological functions in favor of crop production. Corn and soybeans are the dominant crops for the site, and oats (Avena L.) and alfalfa (*Medicago sativa* L.) may be rotated periodically. These areas are likely to remain in crop production for the foreseeable future.

Community 4.1
Conventional Tillage Field

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

Community 4.2
Conservation Tillage Field

This community phase is characterized by rotational crop production that utilizes various conservation tillage methods to promote soil health and reduce erosion. Conservation tillage methods include strip-till, ridge-till, vertical-till, or no-till planting systems. Strip-till keeps seedbed preparation to narrow bands less than one-third the width of the row where crop residue and soil consolidation are left undisturbed in-between seedbed areas. Strip-till planting may be completed in the fall and nutrient application either occurs simultaneously or at the time of planting. Ridge-till uses specialized equipment to create ridges in the seedbed and vegetative residue is left on the surface in between the ridges. Weeds are controlled with herbicides and/or cultivation, seedbed ridges are rebuilt during cultivation, and soils are left undisturbed from harvest to planting. Vertical-till systems employ machinery that lightly tills the soil and cuts up crop residue, mixing some of the residue into the top few inches of the soil while leaving a large portion on the surface. No-till management is the most conservative, disturbing soils only at the time of planting and fertilizer application. Compared to conventional tillage systems, conservation tillage methods can improve soil ecosystem function by reducing soil erosion, increasing organic matter and water availability, improving water quality, and reducing soil compaction.

Community 4.3
Conservation Tillage Field/Alternative Crop Field

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

Pathway 4.1A
Community 4.1 to 4.2

Tillage operations are greatly reduced, crop rotation occurs on a regular interval, and crop residue remains on the soil surface.

Pathway 4.1B
Community 4.1 to 4.3

Tillage operations are greatly reduced or eliminated, crop rotation occurs on a regular interval, crop residue remains on the soil surface, and cover crops are planted following crop harvest.

Pathway 4.2A
Community 4.2 to 4.1

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

Pathway 4.2B
Community 4.2 to 4.3

Cover crops are implemented to minimize soil erosion.

Pathway 4.3B
Community 4.3 to 4.1

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

Pathway 4.3A
Community 4.3 to 4.2

Cover crop practices are abandoned.

State 5
Reconstructed Sand Prairie State

Prairie reconstructions have become an important tool for repairing natural ecological functions and providing habitat protection for numerous grassland dependent species. Because the historic plant and soil biota communities of the tallgrass prairie were highly diverse with complex interrelationships, historic prairie replication cannot be guaranteed on landscapes that have been so extensively manipulated for extended timeframes (Kardol and Wardle 2010; Fierer et al. 2013). Therefore, ecological restoration should aim to aid the recovery of degraded, damaged, or destroyed ecosystems. A successful restoration will have the ability to structurally and functionally sustain itself, demonstrate resilience to the natural ranges of stress and disturbance, and create and maintain positive biotic and abiotic interactions (SER 2002). The reconstructed prairie state is the result of a long-term commitment involving a multi-step, adaptive management process. Diverse, species-rich seed mixes are important to utilize as they allow the site to undergo successional stages that exhibit changing composition and dominance over time (Smith et al. 2010). On-going management via prescribed fire and/or light grazing can help the site progress from an early successional community dominated by annuals and some weeds to a later seral stage composed of native, perennial grasses, forbs, and a few shrubs. Establishing a prescribed fire regimen that mimics natural disturbance patterns can increase native species cover and diversity while reducing cover of non-native forbs and grasses. Light grazing alone can help promote species richness, while grazing accompanied with fire can control the encroachment of woody vegetation (Brudvig et al. 2007).

Community 5.1
Early Successional Reconstructed Sand Prairie

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

Community 5.2
Late Successional Reconstructed Sand Prairie

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

Pathway 5.1A
Community 5.1 to 5.2

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

Pathway 5.2A
Community 5.2 to 5.1

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

Transition T1A
State 1 to 2

Long-term fire suppression transitions the site to the fire-suppressed scrub state (2).

Transition T1B
State 1 to 3

Cultural treatments to enhance forage quality and yield transitions the site to the forage state (3).

Transition T1C
State 1 to 4

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

Transition T2A
State 2 to 3

Cultural treatments to enhance forage quality and yield transition the site to the forage state (3).

Transition T2B
State 2 to 4

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

Restoration pathway R2A
State 2 to 5

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

Transition T3A
State 3 to 2

Land abandonment transitions the site to the fire-suppressed scrub state (2).

Transition T3B
State 3 to 4

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

Restoration pathway R3A
State 3 to 5

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

Transition T4A
State 4 to 2

Land abandonment transitions the site to the fire-suppressed scrub state (2).

Transition T4B
State 4 to 3

Cultural treatments to enhance forage quality and yield transition the site to the forage state (3).

Restoration pathway R4A
State 4 to 5

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

Transition T5A
State 5 to 2

Land abandonment transitions the site to the fire-suppressed state (2).

Transition T5B
State 5 to 3

Cultural treatments to enhance forage quality and yield transition the site to the forage state (3).

Transition T5C
State 5 to 4

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

Additional community tables

Inventory data references

No field plots were available for this site. A review of the scientific literature and professional experience were used to approximate the plant communities for this provisional ecological site. Information for the state-and-transition model was obtained from the same sources. All community phases are considered provisional based on these plots and the sources identified in this ecological site description.

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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	07/02/2024
Approved by	Suzanne Mayne-Kinney
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:**