10850

Northwestern Great Plains Shrubland

BpS Model/Description Version: Aug. 2020

Vegetation Type

Shrubland

Map Zone

20

Geographic Range

This type should be confined to ephemeral drainages, mesic sites, and north-facing slopes within mountain ranges and hillsides around the Little Rockies in map zone (MZ) 20. Found in northeastern and southeastern Montana, western North Dakota and South Dakota, northeastern Wyoming and western Nebraska. This ecological system ranges from South Dakota into southern Canada on moderately shallow to deep, fine to sandy loam soils. In MZ30, this would occur in section (Cleland et al. 2007) 331.

Biophysical Site Description

Occur as small patches within northern mixedgrass prairie occupying microsites associated with higher available moisture or moderately steep slopes, north and south aspects. Occupies slope shoulders and drainage ways and draws, sites where moisture is more available. Skunkbrush more associated with south aspect slopes. Chokecherry and serviceberry and snowberry associated with drainages and draws. Horizontal juniper associated with north aspect slopes. Buffaloberry associated with north aspect slopes. Each of the shrub species is associated with its own habitat type and moisture gradient. Skunkbrush is in the dry end, and snowberry/ chokecherry is in the wet end. Snowberry is also found along seep areas, riparian areas, and mountain hillsides. This Biophysical Setting (BpS) is capturing a broad moisture regime from dry to mesic.

Elevations range from 1,300-4,000ft and up to 4,500ft east side of the Judiths and 5,000ft south side of the Snowies. Temperatures range between extremes of hot summers and cold winters that are typical of a continental climate. Precipitation increases from west (11in) to east (16in). Two-thirds of the precipitation occurs during the growing season (April-June).

Soils vary but are generally entisols in the west and mollisols in the east. Soils in the northern Great Plains, west of the Missouri River in the Dakotas, northwestern Nebraska, northeastern Wyoming, and Montana are formed from sedimentary sandstone and shales, especially the badlands-type topography. These soils range from clayey, fine-loamy, to fine silty soils of mixed origin on level and undulating lands with minor contributions from loess, alluvium, and mountain outwash.

Many of these shrubland types occur on moderate to steep slopes (west- to northwest-facing) at least in the badlands -- grazing is not likely a factor. They occur on southwest- and northwest-facing slopes and moderate to steep slopes. The skunkbrush, however, is more associated with the southerly aspects.

These sites are typically more mesic than most of the surrounding area. This system may be located along upper terraces of rivers and streams, gently inclined slopes near breaklands, and upland sandy loam areas throughout its range.

Vegetation Description

This vegetation type is characterized by the dominance of snowberry, chokecherry, serviceberry, skunkbrush, buffaloberry, and horizontal juniper. There is an understory of cool-season grasses such as western wheatgrass, needlegrasses, Sandberg bluegrass, little bluestem, threadleaf sedge, and forbs.

(Silver sage was also an important component historically; however, silver sage is covered in 1162 Floodplains Systems and 1148 Western Great Plains Sand Prairie. Silver sage associated with valley bottom/terraces along streams and drainageways.)

This melds into 1141 needle-and-thread/western wheatgrass.

Each of the shrub species in this BpS is associated with its own habitat type and represents a broad moisture gradient from dry to mesic. Skunkbrush is in the dry end, and snowberry/ chokecherry and buffaloberry is in the mesic end. All of these species don't occur together necessarily.

BpS Dominant and Indicator Species

Species names are from the NRCS PLANTS database. Check species codes at http://plants.usda.gov.

Disturbance Description

The northern mixedgrass prairie and shrublands are strongly influenced by wet-dry cycles. Fire, grazing by large ungulates and small mammals such as prairie dogs, and soil disturbances (i.e., buffalo wallows and prairie dog towns) are the major disturbances in this vegetation type. In MZ30, many of these shrubland types occur on moderate to steep slopes (west- to northwest-facing).

From instrumental weather records, droughts are likely to occur about 3 in every 10yrs. Historically, there were likely close interactions between fire and grazing since large ungulates tend to be attracted to post-fire communities. Conversely, fire presumably was less likely in areas recently heavily grazed by herbivory -- thus contributing to spatial and temporal variation in fire occurrence.

Average fire intervals are estimated at 8-25yrs, although in areas with very broken topography fire intervals may have been >30yrs. The model for MZ20 reflects a 30yr fire return interval (FRI). This system's FRI should be very similar to 1141 mixedgrass prairie, since this system is just inclusions within 1141. It might be a little less frequent because of moisture; however, it should be similar.

Fires were most common in July and August but probably occurred from about April to September. Seasonality of fires influences vegetation composition. Early-season fires (April-May) tend to favor warm-season species, while late-season fires (August-September) tend to favor cool-season species. Replacement fire in our model does remove 75% of the above-ground cover as assumed in the literature. However, we don't think loss of the above-ground cover by the replacement fire will necessarily induce a retrogression back to an earlier seral stage from the late stage because the main component of dominant grasses remains unharmed to insure the continuity of the seral stage. The shrub species, however, are sprouters. Fire would remove them, and they would resprout. The exception would be horizontal juniper and skunkbrush, which would not resprout. It would take longer for them to become reestablished.

We used different levels of native ungulate grazing intensities. We assumed that light grazing would not alter the community enough to change classes, but increasing grazing intensity would move the community back to earlier stages. Grazing return interval probably occurred every 7-10yrs, but grazing would only result in a class change maybe once every 80-100yrs. Overall, the grazing frequency was modeled at every 20yrs -- that includes grazing just occurring with no transition resulting, as well as grazing taking the stage back to an earlier class. Overall, the drought plus grazing impact frequency was modeled as every 70yrs -- that includes the no-transition plus transition to early stage.

In his review of the Rapid Assessment (RA) model, Ortmann suggested that in addition to fire, drought and grazing and insect outbreaks (Rocky Mountain locust) would have impacted all classes.

Fire Frequency

Fire interval is expressed in years for each fire severity class and for all types of fire combined (All Fires). Average FI is the central tendency modeled. Percent of all fires is the percent of all fires modeled in that severity class. Minimum and Maximum FIs show the relative range of fire intervals as estimated by model contributors, if known.

Scale Description

Fires would generally range from 1,000-10,000ac or up to 100,000ac through BpS 1141. Based on topography, wind speed, fine-fuel loading, and fuel arrangement, the fires would burn in a mosaic pattern. Extent of weather influences (wet-dry cycles) would have been very widespread.

Small patches on landscape ~1ac to maybe 10ac in size/mapped by plot, not imagery. Note that 1ha would be a large patch. Very small.

Adjacency or Identification Concerns

Inclusions within the mixedgrass prairie. The Northwestern Great Plains Shrubland might be a subcomponent of the Northwestern Great Plains Mixedgrass Prairie BpS that was historically limited to predominantly sedimentary soil types and local microsites, resulting in a similar ecological model but with a longer fire cycle. This 1085 might therefore be difficult to map differently from the grassland sites. Spectrally, however, this BpS will have a unique signature -- especially snowberry. The sites dominated by skunkbrush might be harder to differentiate from the grasses. This melds into needle-and-thread/western wheatgrass 1141.

Rabbitbrush may be better to fit with sagebrush BpS. They tend to occur together.

Small patches on landscape ~1ac to maybe 10ac in size -- mapped by plot, not imagery. This should probably encompass only 1% of the historical landscape.

This BpS's shrub component may be increasing within the 1141 mixedgrass prairie due to the longer current-day FRIs.

We should not be mapping a lot of this historically; most should be in 1141. This should be very, very infrequent for MZs 29, 30, and 20. Should be <10% of landscape historically.

Maybe some Kentucky bluegrass in this BpS. Maybe annual bromes such as Japanese brome.

This system might appear departed currently due to increase of shrubs (mostly snowberry) in Class C due to missed FRIs. See Class C comments.

This may not be a separate system from the prairie matrix. Those areas that have increased shrub cover due to fire suppression should be considered part of Northwestern Great Plains Mixedgrass Prairie (CES303.674).

Issues or Problems

Native Uncharacteristic Conditions

Comments

This model for MZ20 was originally adopted from the RA model R4PRMGn Northern Mixedgrass Prairie created by Cody Wienk and Lakhdar Benkobi and reviewed by David Engle (dme@mail.pss.okstate.edu) and John Ortmann (jortmann@tnc.org). Descriptive changes were first made for MZ20 by BJ Rhodes (bj\_rhodes@blm.gov), John Carlson (john\_carlson@blm.gov), Bill Volk (william\_volk@blm.gov), Rich Adams (rich\_adams@blm.gov), and Amanda Keefer (akeefer@mt.blm.gov). These reviewers, however, did not feel they had a sufficient grasp or concept of the system to change the model. Some errors were found in the original RA model that violated modeling rules and were therefore changed by Regional Lead for MZ20. Brian Martin then reviewed the model and made quantitative changes. It was changed from the original five-box model to a three-box model. The changes and model were sent back out to the original reviewers to receive their input and get their consensus. After further review, it was decided that the model from MZs 29 and 30 for this type should be adopted for MZ20. Therefore, Jeff DiBenedetto's model was adopted. Reviewers' names for original MZ20 model were removed: Shannon Downey, BJ Rhodes, and Steve Barrett.

Succession Classes

**Mapping Rules**

Succession class letters A-E are described in the Succession Class Description section. Some classes use a leafform distinction where a qualifier is added to the class letter: Brdl (broadleaf), Con (conifer), or Mix (mixed conifer and broadleaf). UN refers to uncharacteristic native or a combination of height and cover that would not be expected under the reference condition. NP refers to not possible or a combination of height and cover which is not physiologically possible for the species in the BpS.

**Description**

Class A 34 Early Development 1 - Open

Indicator Species

Description

Grasses such as little bluestem, western wheatgrass, stipa, bluebunch wheatgrass, sideoats grama, and upland sedges dominate this class. This class is a combination of grasses and very short-stature vegetation resulting also from prairie dog disturbance (maybe only in draws -- snowberry).

A variety of forb species such as fetid marigold, scarlet globemallow, scarlet gaura, skeleton weed, and dotted gayfeather tend to dominate this class.

Some sprouting of snowberry, chokecherry, and serviceberry (0-10% shrub cover).

The fuel in this class would be initially too sparse to carry fire, but then fuel increases.

This class succeeds to a mid-open state.

Replacement fire occurs and sets this class back to its beginning stage.

Grazing, the combination of drought and grazing, and drought modeled as wind/weather/stress all occur and maintain this class but don't set it back to its beginning state.

Prairie dog impact occurs and returns this class to its beginning. The only shrub that prairie dogs might impact in this BpS would be the snowberry sites and draws/drainageways.

*Maximum Tree Size Class*  
no data

Class B 26 Mid Development 1 - Open

Indicator Species

Description

More open community than late stage. Seedling shrubs. Dominant shrubs coming in -- snowberry, chokecherry, skunkbrush, creeping juniper, and buffaloberry.

Western wheatgrass, needlegrasses, little bluestem, and upland sedges are common grasses -- same as in Class A. Bluebunch wheatgrass can be locally common with skunkbrush. Common forbs include scurfpea, prairie coneflower, Rocky Mountain beeplant, scarlet globemallow, and dotted gayfeather. Herbaceous cover is ~30-70% and ~0.5m in height.

This class succeeds to the late development stage.

Replacement fires occur.

Grazing and the combination of drought and grazing occur and cause a transition back to the early stage. Grazing, the combination of drought and grazing, and drought modeled as wind/ weather stress can also occur while maintaining this class in this stage.

Prairie dog impact occurs.

*Maximum Tree Size Class*  
None

Class C 40 Late Development 1 - Closed

Indicator Species

Description

Denser, higher canopy cover. Mature canopy. Vegetation community is similar to previous class. Forbs are present still. Litter layer tends to be relatively continuous. Herbaceous cover 50-65% and 0.5m in height.

Snowberry average cover could be 65% (DiBenedetto). Maximum up to 75%, minimum ~45%. Skunkbrush cover average ~25%. Horizontal juniper average 44%, range of 25-65% cover. Each of the shrub species associated with own habitat type with moisture gradient. Skunkbrush is dry end, and snowberry/chokecherry is wet end.

Replacement fire occurs.

The combination of grazing and drought takes this class back to either an early state, a mid-open state, or maintains this class.

Grazing alone causes a transition back to an early stage, a mid stage, or maintains this class.

Drought modeled as wind/weather stress also maintains this class.

It is thought that historically this class probably occupied even <15% of the landscape. It probably occupied ~5-10% of the landscape due to the frequency of fire in the adjacent mixedgrass prairie. Currently, however, there is probably much more of this class on the landscape due to missed FRIs -- especially an increase in the snowberry shrubs on more mesic drainageways, draws, and depressions -- areas of higher available moisture.

*Maximum Tree Size Class*  
no data

Model Parameters

Deterministic Transitions

Probabilistic Transitions

Optional Disturbances

Optional 1: prairie dog disturbance

Optional 2: drought + grazing

References

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