11170

Southern Rocky Mountain Ponderosa Pine Savanna

BpS Model/Description Version: Aug. 2020

Vegetation Type

Steppe/Savanna

Map Zone

33

Geographic Range

The occurrence is in the ECOMAP (Cleland et al. 2007) subsections 331Fk, 331Ha, 331Fr, 331Hf, and 332Cf. This Biophysical Setting (BpS) also occurs in scattered areas within Subsections M331Ib, 331Id, 331Ih, and 331He -- but may be better represented by comparing to Model 2810540. Also in subsection 331Hb. It occurs in little forest pockets in Chalk Bluffs in Nebraska and some Wyoming pockets and along the extreme edge of map zone (MZ) 33 in Colorado -- the northern edge of Colorado north of Castle Rock. This version starts in subsection M331Ii and goes north.

Biophysical Site Description

In MZs 27 and 33 northern version, 900-2,100m in elevation on a variety of topographic features, including ridges, mesas, and canyons.

Mean annual precipitation ranges from ~12-18in in northern version of MZs 27 and 33. BpS is best described as a savanna that has widely spaced (>150yrs old) *Pinus ponderosa*.

Soils are moderate (loams to heavy sandy loams) to moderately fine (includes clay loams and light clays).

Growing season moisture is through monsoonal (mid-July through mid-September) thunderstorms. Also has winter snowpack. So moisture is bimodal -- some in summer, some in winter.

Vegetation Description

Overstory canopy of ponderosa pine with a grassy understory, predominantly composed of the bunchgrasses green needlegrass or Letterman's needlegrass (generic form ACHNA retained for dominant spp. list), needle-and-thread, little bluestem, or mountain muhly. It is thought that some shrub component of soapweed yucca and/or mountain-mahogany might occur, but that might occur in current conditions and not historically.

This system is best described as a savanna that has widely spaced (<25% tree canopy cover) (>150yrs old) *Pinus ponderosa* (primarily var. *scopulorum* and var. *brachyptera*) as the predominant conifer. A healthy occurrence often consists of open and park-like stands dominated by *Pinus ponderosa*. Understory vegetation in the true savanna occurrences is predominantly fire-resistant grasses and forbs that resprout following surface fires; shrubs, understory trees, and downed logs are uncommon. Important species include: *Festuca arizonica*, *Andropogon gerardii*, *Schizachyrium scoparium*, *Festuca* spp., *Muhlenbergia* spp., *Nasella viridula,* and *Bouteloua gracilis*.

Presently, many stands contain understories of more shade-tolerant species, such as *Pseudotsuga menziesii* and/or *Abies* spp., as well as younger cohorts of *Pinus ponderosa*. This is an encroachment, fire-suppression state -- not occurring historically.

BpS Dominant and Indicator Species

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

Disturbance Description

Mean surface fire intervals are estimated to be 10-30yrs (Brown and Shepperd 2001; Sherriff 2004; Kauffmann et al. 2006). Infrequent stand-replacement fire on the order of several hundred years possible.

In the southern version of MZs 27 and 33 BpS 1117, fire does not carry as much due to less productive, sparser understory. However, modeled nearly identically to this system and actually more frequent. As fire moves through, the system could even move to a more juniper stand.

Drought and other weather events (e.g., blowdown), parasites, and disease may play a minor to major role, depending on the period, and have very long rotations.

Climate forcing (drought) and insects are more important for large-scale mortality events than fire.

In a dry series of years during drought, at the lower elevation limit of this BpS, pinyon-juniper will move upslope.

Drought causes trees to be susceptible to insect outbreak. Inappropriate tree spacing (due to lack of fire in current conditions) allows beetles to move from tree to tree.

Insects may be a significant, frequent but largely patchy (individual tree to small patch) occurrence.

Native grazing in form of large ungulates likely affected the understory components of these areas.

This system is maintained by a fire regime of frequent, low-intensity surface fires.

Fire is more frequent in the northern version of MZs 27 and 33 BpS 1117 due to higher production in the understory than the southern version.

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

This BpS occurs as broad, long bands in 100s to few 1,000s acres.

The disturbances occur in a patchier distribution.

Adjacency or Identification Concerns

The northern MZs 27 and 33 version of this BpS 1117 has higher production in the understory. The southern version is drier, sparser. If a fire goes through the northern version, it is likely to go to a grass community, whereas the southern version has more of an issue with pinyon-juniper encroachment. However, fire was modeled identically for both versions.

A century of anthropogenic disturbance and fire suppression has resulted in a higher density of *Pinus ponderosa* trees, altering the fire regime and species composition.

There is probably moderate departure in this northern version of MZs 27 and 33 BpS 1117 from historical conditions, due to logging in the 1800s and current grazing, reducing the understory grass composition. There is not as much of a mix of structure and dynamics today; therefore, when a fire goes through this landscape, it causes dramatic changes today.

Presently, many stands contain understories of more shade-tolerant species, such as *Pseudotsuga menziesii* and/or *Abies* spp., as well as younger cohorts of *Pinus ponderosa*. This is an encroachment, fire-suppression state -- not occurring historically.

Drought causes trees to be susceptible to insect outbreak. Inappropriate tree spacing (due to lack of fire in current conditions) allows beetles to move from tree to tree.

Fire suppression has allowed the canopy of ponderosa pine to close, causing a decline in understory herbaceous vegetation.

Livestock grazing has also been removing much of the fine fuels in this system currently and has been since the late 1800s.

This system can easily be mistaken for BpS 1054 PIPO Woodland. There will be more of a shrub component in BpS 1054 (though this is questioned). Tree spacing should be wider in this system historically; however, presently you might not be able to distinguish because it's more closed due to fire suppression.

This BpS is adjacent to Douglas-fir BpS 1051 and 1052. In limited spots, could have aspen 1011 adjacent. And could have 1146 Southern Rocky Mountain Subalpine Grassland adjacent.

Issues or Problems

It is questionable whether we need a separate model for the south versus north. The northern version is the version most similar to other PIPO models.

Fire was modeled almost identically in both systems after review incorporated. And it is thought that these physiographic features do not control but only modify the vegetation conditions and disturbance regimes across local scales. It is questionable as to whether this split is relevant or necessary for these BpSs.

Native Uncharacteristic Conditions

Comments

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 8 Early Development 1 - All Structures

Indicator Species

Description

Bunchgrass-dominated (<60% canopy cover and height of 0.4m). Some ponderosa pine individuals also becoming established. Establishment of ponderosa has been historically episodic in many locations around the West, and there are likely lags in timing of recruitment (Teague 2004). Typically, 2-3yrs of above-average moisture will get the seedlings started.

Based on reviewer comments, NAVI4 was removed from the indicator species list and replaced with ACLE9. NAVI4 might also occur.

This class succeeds to a mid-development open stage. Alternatively, succession could occur toward a mid-closed stage with a low probability. (Although this could be considered advancing age, it's modeled with a low enough probability.)

*Maximum Tree Size Class*  
Seedling <4.5ft

Class B 19 Mid Development 1 - Open

Upper-layer lifeform is not the dominant lifeform. Dominant lifeform will be herbaceous, with canopy cover of 80-90% and height of 0.6 m.

Indicator Species

Description

Small and medium-sized ponderosa pine, with moderate bunchgrass cover. Open canopy defined as 10-49%.

Based on reviewer comments, NAVI4 was removed from the indicator species list and replaced with ACLE9. NAVI4 might also occur.

Native grazing effect attributed to understory but not significant to transition overstory into another class.

*Maximum Tree Size Class*  
Pole 5-9" DBH

Class C 4 Mid Development 1 - Closed

Indicator Species

Description

Small and medium-sized ponderosa pine, still with moderate bunchgrass cover. Closed canopy defined as >50%. Influence from Native American use attributed to pole harvesting and removal of dead and down woody material.

Based on reviewer comments, NAVI4 was removed from the indicator species list and replaced with ACLE9. NAVI4 might also occur.

Native grazing effect.

*Maximum Tree Size Class*  
Pole 5-9" DBH

Class D 65 Late Development 1 - Open

Indicator Species

Description

Large and very large old ponderosa pine (>149yrs), with medium to high cover of bunchgrasses. Old growth attributes include occasional down wood, snags, diseased trees.

Based on reviewer comments, NAVI4 was removed from the indicator species list and replaced with ACLE9. NAVI4 might also occur.

This class was originally modeled with shorter trees, but due to mapping rules, reviewers for MZs 27 and 33 raised height to 10-25m so that there was no overlap. If possible in mapping, you can distinguish on DBH.

*Maximum Tree Size Class*  
Medium 9-21" DBH

Class E 4 Late Development 1 - Closed

Indicator Species

Description

Large and very large old growth ponderosa pine, with medium cover of bunchgrasses. Old growth attributes include occasional down wood, snags, and diseased trees.

Based on reviewer comments, NAVI4 was removed from the indicator species list and replaced with ACLE9. NAVI4 might also occur.

This class was originally modeled with shorter trees, but due to mapping rules, reviewers for MZs 27 and 33 raised height to 10-25m so that there was no overlap. If possible in mapping, you can distinguish on DBH.

*Maximum Tree Size Class*  
Medium 9-21" DBH

Model Parameters

Deterministic Transitions

Probabilistic Transitions

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