11600

Rocky Mountain Subalpine/Upper Montane Riparian Systems

BpS Model/Description Version: Aug. 2020

Vegetation Type

Woody Wetland

Map Zones

12, 17

Geographic Range

Higher elevations of the Great Basin, California, northern Rockies, and Pacific Northwest

Biophysical Site Description

This ecological system represents the combination of numerous riparian types occurring in the upper montane/subalpine zones. Found at 1,500-3,500m (4,920-11,500ft). This ecological system exists as relatively small, linear stringers.

Vegetation Description

This ecological system encompasses a broad array of riparian species. These systems are highly variable and generally consist of one or more of the following five basic vegetation forms: (1) cottonwood, (2) willow and other shrubs, (3) sedges and other herbaceous vegetation, (4) aspen, and (5) conifer (primarily spruce and subalpine fir).

BpS Dominant and Indicator Species

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

Disturbance Description

Flooding events and availability of water during drier periods are the major influences to this system. Five-year flood events maintain vegetation but do not scour it, whereas 100-yr events scour and reset succession to early development.

The moisture associated with riparian areas promotes lower fire frequency compared to adjacent uplands, and rapid recovery from fire events. Wet-meadow types seldom burn. In riparian systems, the pre-burn herbaceous plant community is not permanently destroyed and it recovers rapidly. Recovery is possible within a single growing season. Woody species (i.e., aspen, *Salix* spp., and occasionally cottonwood species) can be top-killed, but generally resprout within a short period. In systems with conifer, post-fire establishment is from seed. Older vegetation experienced fire when replacement fire burned the uplands (mean fire return interval [MFRI], 100yrs). Surface fire (MFRI, 50yrs) affected the Early-Development class through a combination of replacement fire from uplands and occasional native burning.

In addition, beaver (*Castor canadensis*) were historically important in many of these systems.

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

These systems are small, linear features on the landscape.

Adjacency or Identification Concerns

This biophysical setting (BpS) includes narrow meadows, shrublands, and woodlands of conifer and aspen.

Overgrazing and irrigation use have had major impacts on some of these systems. This ecological system occurs at scales below 30m of resolution of LANDFIRE.

Issues or Problems

There is a paucity of fire information on this system, and the very heterogeneous nature of the system is challenging for model building.

Native Uncharacteristic Conditions

Comments

BpS 1160 for map zones (MZs) 12 and 17 was adopted as-is from MZ16. The model for MZ16 was developed by Charles Kay (ckay@hass.usu.edu) and Don Major (dmajor@tnc.org). Fire behavior in these systems is strongly influenced by the adjacent uplands. Hydrologic processes (e.g., flooding) are the determining factors in these systems.

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 63 Early Development 1 - All Structures

Indicator Species

Description

Immediate post-fire responses in this ecological system are dependent on pre-burn vegetation form. Post-burn condition is sensitive to scouring and blowout from floods. This class is shrub or grass dominated. Composition varies both within/among stream reaches. In general, this class is expected to occur for a few years post-disturbance.

Flooding disturbances (modeled as weather-related stress) include frequent events that do not scour and larger flood events that reset the vegetation to age zero. Beaver reset succession by moving along the river with tree depletion. Replacement fire was typically rare and not included, whereas surface fire was more frequent and was a combination of upland-driven fire and native burning. Succession is highly variable due to high moisture levels and high species variability.

*Maximum Tree Size Class*  
None

Class B 37 Mid Development 1 - Closed

Indicator Species

Description

Highly dependent on the hydrologic regime. For example, could include any combination of the five vegetation forms listed earlier. Composition of adjacent uplands is the determining factor for future fire events. Conifer establishment at these higher elevations causes some fire to occur in this BpS.

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

Model Parameters

Deterministic Transitions

Probabilistic Transitions

Optional Disturbances

Optional 1: Beaver

Optional 2: One Hundred-Year Flood Events

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