14720

Central Interior and Appalachian Riparian Systems

BpS Model/Description Version: Aug. 2020

Update: 3/18

Vegetation Type

Mixed Upland and Wetland

Map Zones

61, 62, 63

Geographic Range

This systems group encompasses small stream riparian systems over much of the eastern US, from southern New England south to Georgia, and west to Illinois and eastern Oklahoma (NatureServe 2007). This description relates to the Central Appalachian region into New York.

Occurs near small streams and includes adjoining floodplains, terraces, and lower slopes affected by small stream flooding. This model encompasses the small stream forests of the Piedmont and Southern Appalachian regions. It does not include the broad vegetated floodplains of these and similar large, low gradient rivers and immediate tributaries, nor the high gradient, narrow small streams of the Appalachian Mountains.

NatureServe (2007) describes this as an aggregated system including the following standard ecological systems:

• Central Appalachian Stream and Riparian (CES202.609)

• Cumberland Riverscour (CES202.036)

• Ozark-Ouachita Riparian (CES202.703)

• South-Central Interior Small Stream and Riparian (CES202.706)

• Southern Piedmont Small Floodplain and Riparian Forest (CES202.323)

In mapzone (MZ) 62, this Biophysical Setting (BpS) occurs in all Subsections: 222Ia, 222Ha, 222Hb, 221Eg, 221Ef, 221Ee, 221Ed, 221Ec, 221Ea, 221Eb, 211Ga, and M221Ca. However, some of the characteristic species (e.g., *Betula nigra,* *Liquidambar styraciflua)* are largely limited to the unglaciated Subsections of this map zone.

Biophysical Site Description

These river scour-influenced systems occur on moderately to very high-gradient streams over a wide range of elevations. It develops on small floodplains and shores along river channels that lack a broad, flat floodplain due to steeper side slopes, higher gradient, or both (NatureServe 2007).

The fluvial features (river terraces, oxbows, alluvial flats, point bars, and streamside levees) typical of river floodplains occur less frequently and on a smaller scale along these small streams. Fine-scale alluvial floodplain features are abundant. In pre-European settlement forests, community diversity in these streamside systems was much more complex than in the modified landscapes of today. Fire, beaver activity, and flooding of varied intensity and frequency created a mosaic whose elements included canebrake, grass and young birch/sycamore beds on reworked gravel or sand bars, beaver ponds, and grass-sedge meadows in abandoned beaver clearings, as well as the streamside zones and mixed hardwood and/or pine forests that make up more than 95% of the cover that exists today. Creighton omits the reference to “pine forests” in the last sentence.

These systems have little to no floodplain development (i.e., floodplains, if present, are not differentiated into levees, sloughs, ridges, terraces, and abandoned channel segments) and are typically higher gradient than larger floodplains, experiencing periodic, strong flooding of short duration (NatureServe 2007).

Vegetation Description

Most of the system is forest vegetation. The succession of woody plants (particularly trees) is retarded by the force of "flashy," high-velocity water traveling down the stream channels (NatureServe 2007). The canopy is usually dominated by hardwoods, with conifers a small component. Species may include sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*), river birch (*Betula nigra*), box elder (*Acer negundo*), silver maple (*A. saccharinum*), eastern cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*), green ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica*), sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), black walnut (*Juglans nigra*), hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*), and occasionally, hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*).

Successional areas of MZs 61 and 62 are often dominated by sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*) or box elder (*Acer negundo*).

Sub-canopy species include red mulberry (*Morus rubra*), ironwood (*Carpinus caroliniana*) and hop hornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*). Shrubs such as spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*), cane (*Arundenaria gigantea*) and other grasses, and false nettle (*Boehmeria cylindrica*) may be present. Caric sedges may dominate some areas.

Forbs are diverse and variable from occurrence to occurrence. Characteristic forbs are often those of the surrounding forest matrix. Some examples are dominated by prairie-like vegetation, which may include big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*), cordgrass (*Spartina pectinata*), dropseed (*Sporobolus asper*), little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), bush-clover (*Lespedeza violacea*), Indian hemp (*Apocynum cannabinum*), and blue false-indigo (*Baptisia australis*) (Fike 1999, NatureServe 2007).

Periodically reworked gravel bars may be dominated by young black willow (*Salix nigra*), sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*), or infrequently river birch (*Betula nigra*), or they may have sparse vegetation of a wide variety of annual and perennial herbs of weedy habits.

Canebrakes occurred in particular locations that had easy access for fire (i.e. bottomlands bordered by upland flats as opposed to steep slopes) and where the uplands experienced frequent fire as the result of a combination of lightning and Native American ignitions.

Natural levee forests form on ridges of silt and sand deposited on stream margins during flood conditions. A levee's width is related to the abundance of ground vegetation present to re-enforce sediment in future deposition events. They receive more light and may be dominated by stream margin specialists such as sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*), willows (*Salix nigra*), river birch (*Betula nigra*), box elder (*Acer negundo*), and Eastern cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*). Streamside levees support a diverse flora of other bottomland graminoids and forbs.

Distinctive shoals with *Justicia americana* may be present as well. Small seeps and fens can often be found within these habitats, especially at the headwaters and terraces of streams. These areas are typically dominated by primarily wetland obligate species of sedges (*Carex* spp.), ferns (*Osmunda* spp.), and other herbaceous species such as *Impatiens capensis* (NatureServe 2007).

BpS Dominant and Indicator Species

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

Disturbance Description

FLOODING is the major process affecting the vegetation, with the substrate more rapidly drained than in flat floodplain areas. The distinctive dynamics of stream flooding and protected topographic position dominate the forming of the distinctive vegetation of this system. Not all the factors are well known. Gradients of most of these rivers limit floods to fairly short duration. Flooding is most common in the winter, but may occur in other seasons particularly in association with hurricanes, tornados, or microbursts from thunderstorms. The sorting of plant communities by depositional landforms of different height suggest that wetness or depth of flood waters has significance. Flood waters have significant energy. Scouring and reworking of sediment make up an important factor in bar and bank communities. In addition to disturbance, floods bring nutrient input, deposit sediment, and disperse plant seeds. Most floods do not lead to canopy tree mortality. Flooding can act as a replacement disturbance in areas where beavers impounded a channel or in rare years with severe prolonged flood events. The most significant disturbance along small streams was wind. Two types of floods were modeled: occasional catastrophic floods due to beaver activity or other severe, prolonged floods, and more frequent repeated minor flooding (i.e., several minor floods within a 10yr period).

WINDS affect streamside forests because of wet soils, less dense soil, and trees that are shallow-rooted. Canopy tree mortality from more common windstorms would have resulted in tree by tree or small group replacement. Wind throw formed the primary cause of mortality in bottomlands. Major storms or even hurricanes occurring at approximately 20yr intervals would have impacted whole stands. Tornado tracks can be found passing across uplands and bottomlands (see one such indicated on a map of Umstead State Park, Raleigh, North Carolina), leaving narrow swaths of felled trees. Most of wind throw in MZs 54/59 seems to have been the result of hurricanes and hurricane-spawned tornadoes. Following Hurricane Fran in 1996, even though the Piedmont is removed from the coast by 25 to over 100 miles, extensive wind throw occurred in middle-aged and old growth trees in Piedmont bottomlands. Bottomland oaks, even though seemingly more sheltered, were much more heavily affected than hardwoods on adjacent uplands. Gaps as large as one hectare were seen intermixed in areas with extensive single tree wind throw. Windthrow may also occur because of thunderstorm microbursts or tornados.

Ice damage is an infrequent but potentially catastrophic disturbance, especially in MZs57 and 61 and the lower elevation portions of MZ59.

FIRE: Fire regime group III (conspicuous and most frequent in stands with canebrake). Fire return interval varied highly. Except in canebrake, most fires were very light surface fires, creeping in hardwood or pine litter with some thin, patchy cover of bottomland grasses. Flame lengths were mostly 6-12in. Even so, fire-scarred trees can be found in most small stream sites except in the wettest microsites. Stand replacement fires are almost unknown in this type. Except where Native American burning was involved, fires likely occurred primarily during drought conditions and then often only when fire spread into bottomlands from more pyrophytic uplands. Trees may be partially girdled by fire in duff, followed by bark sloughing. While fire rarely killed the tree, this allowed entry of rot, which, in the moist environment, often resulted in hollow trees, providing nesting and denning habitat for many species of birds and animals. Surface fires occurred on a frequency ranging from about three to eight years in streamside canebrake, streamside hardwood/canebrake, or pine, to 25yrs or more in hardwood litter. Low areas having a long hydroperiod, islands, and areas protected from fire by back swamps and oxbows were virtually fire free. Fire effects were largely limited to top kill of shrubs and tree saplings less than two inches in diameter, and formation of hollow trees.

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

Narrow bands or isolated pockets occur along small streams. Width depends strongly on topography.

Adjacency or Identification Concerns

This Bps does not include the broad vegetated floodplains of these and similar large, low gradient rivers and immediate tributaries, nor the high gradient, narrow small streams of the Appalachian Mountains. This BpS is likely to grade into 1471 (Central Interior and Appalachian Floodplain Systems).

NatureServe (2007) lists this as an aggregated system which includes the following standard ecological systems:

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Issues or Problems

Native Uncharacteristic Conditions

The widespread introduction of Chinese privet (*Ligustrum sinense*) and other invasives has dramatically reduced native diversity in the understory.

Widespread placement of dams has extensively altered flood frequency and duration in some areas.

Comments

See comments below. The combined model by C. Szell was modified by B. Slaughter for MZ62; the geographic range and vegetation sections were tailored to this MZ.

Barker, Reese, and Ryan created this model based on BpS model 4614740 -- Gulf and Atlantic Coastal Plain Small Stream Riparian Systems, with substantial changes to the disturbance pathways. The modelers were most familiar with piedmont North Carolina and suggest review is needed for other areas. Literature listed is carried over from the previous model (BpS 4614740).

Subsequently, during the workshop for MZs 53, 57, 61 and 62, Jerre Creighton (jerre.creighton@dof.virginia.gov) reviewed the Barker et al. model and had some species composition changes, but Creighton’s model descriptions, class descriptions, class parameters (VDDT parameters) closely matched Barker et al. with slight changes to wind/weather/stress and options 1 & 2 frequencies.

However, the differences between the Creighton and Barker et al. model doesn’t affect class percent outcome or fire frequency values. Both models are identical with an overall fire frequency of 169yrs.

Therefore, the BpS model descriptions provided were those of Barker et al. work with Creighton noted as a reviewer.

Jim Smith suggests, however, that this model as combined by C. Szell be used for all map zones listed.

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 17 Early Development 1 - All Structures

Indicator Species

Description

Tree fall gaps with saplings and small trees up to 30cm DBH. Potential canopy species are typically mixed with subcanopy species and herbs, and an occasionally short-lived early successional species such as willow (*Salix nigra*) or river birch (*Betula nigra*). This can include areas disturbed by flooding from drained wetlands when beaver dams fail. Also included are other disturbed areas such as windthrow and effects of tornados, hurricanes, thunderstorm microbursts, or ice events. Major (stand-replacing) floods (Optional 1) would occur from beaver activity or a major storm event. Repeated minor flooding (Optional 2) that would open up the midstory would occur. Stand-replacing wind and/or ice damage (hurricanes, tornados, and ice storms) would occur. Light, creeping surface fire is likely. Replacement fire is likely only in extremely dry years.

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

Class B 22 Mid Development 1 - Closed

Indicator Species

Description

Old tree fall gaps and other disturbed areas with closed canopy and ranging from 30-70cm DBH. Shade tolerant species in the understory. Occasionally with a pine dominated overstory. Major (stand-replacing) floods (Optional 1) would occur from beaver activity or a major storm event. Repeated minor flooding (Optional 2) that would open up the midstory would occur. Stand-replacing wind and/or ice damage (hurricanes, tornados, and ice storms) would occur. Light, creeping surface fire is likely. Replacement fire is likely only in extremely dry years.

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

Class C 13 Mid Development 1 - Open

Indicator Species

Description

Similar overstory as B but more open and without a well-developed midstory or understory. Grasses will also be present. Occasionally with a pine dominated overstory. Major (stand-replacing) floods (Optional 1) would occur from beaver activity or a major storm event. Repeated minor flooding (Optional 2) that would open up the midstory would (reversed in the VDDT model). Stand-replacing wind and/or ice damage (hurricanes, tornados, and ice storms) would occur. Light, creeping surface fire is likely. Replacement fire is likely only in extremely dry years.

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

Class D 39 Late Development 1 - Open

Indicator Species

Description

More of a closed canopy than C with trees ranging from 70 to > 300yrs in age with minimal midstory and understory shrubs and grasses. More shrubs and less grass than C. Major (stand-replacing) floods (Optional 1) would occur from beaver activity or a major storm event. Repeated minor flooding (Optional 2) that would open up the midstory would occur. Stand-replacing wind and/or ice damage (hurricanes, tornados, and ice storms) would occur. Light, creeping surface fire is likely. Replacement fire is likely only in extremely dry years.

*Maximum Tree Size Class*  
None

Class E 9 Late Development 1 - Closed

Indicator Species

Description

Closed hardwood canopy with trees ranging from 70 to >300yrs in age. Extensive shade tolerant shrub understory and midstory. Major (stand-replacing) floods (Optional 1) would occur from beaver activity or a major storm event. Repeated minor flooding (Optional 2) that would open up the midstory would occur. Stand-replacing wind and/or ice damage (hurricanes, tornados, and ice storms) would occur. Light, creeping surface fire is likely. Replacement fire is likely only in extremely dry years.

*Maximum Tree Size Class*  
Large 21-33"DBH

Model Parameters

Deterministic Transitions

Probabilistic Transitions

Optional Disturbances

Optional 1: Major stand replacing floods

Optional 2: repeated minor flooding

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