16282

North American Arctic-Subarctic Shrub-Tussock Tundra – Infrequent Fire

BpS Model/Description Version: Nov. 2024

Reviewer: Robin Innes, Blaine Spellman

Vegetation Type

Shrubland

Map Zones

67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77

Model Splits or Lumps

This Biophysical Setting (BpS) was split into frequent and infrequent fire variants so regional differences in fire frequency could be represented. For mapping BpS 16282 should apply across the range of the BpS except in level 2 ecoregions (Nowacki et al. 2001): Intermontane Boreal and Bering Tundra.

Geographic Range

This BpS occurs in lowland through subalpine zones of the boreal and boreal transition (northern portion and higher elevation) regions of Alaska and throughout arctic Alaska, from the Bristol Bay lowlands in southwestern Alaska to the North Slope on the Arctic Ocean.

Biophysical Site Description

Tussock communities occur on gentle slopes, terraces, and old alluvial deposits. These sites are cold, poorly drained, and underlain by mesic, silty mineral soils with a surface peat layer 10 to 40 cm thick surrounding the tussocks. Soils may be neutral to slightly acidic, poorly drained, gleyed, and often with a poorly decomposed organic horizon at the surface, which may constitute most of the active layer. Permafrost is usually present at depths of 30-65 cm. Frost scars are common (Viereck et al 1992). See [Gushdoiman](https://soilseries.sc.egov.usda.gov/OSD_Docs/G/GUSHDOIMAN.html) soil series description.

Vegetation Description

This is a common lowland system dominated by tussock sedges and low shrubs. Tussock shrub tundra is common in valleys and slopes throughout arctic Alaska. Tussock shrub tundra has >35% cover of sedges in a tussock growth form, and the combined cover of dwarf- and low- shrubs is >25%. *Eriophorum vaginatum* is the primary tussock-former in most stands, but *Carex bigelowii* may be the dominant tussock sedge on some sites. *Betula nana*, *Betula glandulosa*, *Salix pulchra*, and *Chamaedaphne calyculata* can dominate the low-shrub layer. Other species include *Ledum palustre* ssp. *decumbens*, *Ledum groenlandicum*, *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*, *Vaccinium uliginosum*, *Empetrum nigrum*, and *Carex* spp. Grasses, including *Calamagrostis canadensis* and *Arctagrostis* spp., may also be present. Lichens are scarce (with the possible exception of *Peltigera canina*). There are also distinctions between acidic and non-acidic tussock tundra. Acidic sites have more ericaceous shrubs and *Sphagnum,*less *Eriophorum* spp., *Betula nana*, and *Carex bigelowii*, and have more organic matter buildup and the tussocks tend to be larger. *Aulacomnium palustre* and other moss species may be more common on less acid sites.

BpS Dominant and Indicator Species

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

Disturbance Description

In 2013 an extensive search was done by FEIS staff to locate information for a synthesis on fire regimes of Alaskan tundra communities (Innes 2013). The literature reviewed at that time reported mean fire return interval estimates for tussock-shrub tundra ecosystems in Alaska during the late Holocene of:

* 260 years (range 30-840; Higuera et al. 2011) in Noatak National Preserve,
* 142 years (range 115-174; Higuera et al. 2011) in Noatak National Preserve,
* 263 years (range 175-374; Higuera et al. 2011) in Noatak National Preserve, and
* >5000 years on the North Slope (Jandt et al. 2008).

Jennifer Allen (personal communication) reported a fire-return interval of approximately 240yrs for tundra on the Seward Peninsula and 1,000yrs+ on the Beaufort Coastal Plain based on lake-core records. Charcoal sediment-based estimates of fire frequency in the Brook Range and to the north report fire frequencies of well over 1000 years (Sae-Lim et al. 2019). In the Yukon Flats, 13 of 31 sample plots were thought to be in some stage of fire succession, and the presence of *Betula neoalaska* in the plots was interpreted as a fire sere (Spellman pers. comm. 2022).

On interior and southcentral Alaska Tussock Tundra sites, the thaw pond cycle (disturbance leads to thawing of permafrost and ponding) and paludification (Sphagnum layer buildup and saturation) are important disturbances. On the Seward Peninsula and western Alaska, frost action creates polygonal ground and other periglacial features and is a widespread, small-scale and continuous disturbance.

Change in the arctic and subarctic climate is another source of disturbance that is currently affecting tundra ecosystems.

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

Vegetation found in large patches to matrix forming.

Adjacency or Identification Concerns

Issues or Problems

Most of the fire regime literature available for tundra ecosystems in Alaska is from the Seward Peninsula and Noatak River Watershed where fire occurs more frequently than other regions of the state (Innes 2013). Little is known about fire history in arctic tundra communities in northern and northwestern Alaska (Innes 2013).

Native Uncharacteristic Conditions

Innes 2013 provides information about climate change and Alaska tundra communities.

Comments

1/2023 Kori Blankenship split the BpS model and description into frequent and infrequent fire model variants based on feedback from participants in the virtual Tundra Work Session held in the winter 2022. It is difficult to select a fire frequency for the model because studies report frequencies of ~1600 to 6000 years for tundra ecosystems in and north of the Brooks Range and in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta ecoregion (Sae-Lim et al. 2019). Because fire is so infrequent, fire related successional dynamics are not modeled. Reviewer feedback is needed to refine the geographic range of the frequent and infrequent fire model variants.

This BpS is similar to the [Boreal Tussock Loamy Frozen Terraces Ecological Site Description](https://edit.jornada.nmsu.edu/catalogs/esd/232X/XA232X01Y209) (ESD XA232X01Y209).

In 2021 NatureServe merged Western North American Boreal Low Shrub-Tussock Tundra (BpS 1628) and Alaska Arctic Shrub-Tussock Tundra (BpS 1693) into one Ecological System: North American Arctic and Subarctic Shrub-Tussock Tundra. BpS 1693 was not previously modeled as a distinct system (it was lumped with 16941 and 16942). Pat Comer and Kori Blankenship revised the 1628 description to reflect the new Ecological System concept.

During LANDFIRE National, this model was based on the FRCC Guidebook PNVG model for Tussock Tundra 1 (TT1; Murphy and Witten 2006) and input from the experts who attended the LANDFIRE Fairbanks (Nov. 07) modeling meeting and was refined by Jennifer Allen. Much of the text in the Disturbance Description and Scale Description portion of this report were taken from the TT1 description (Murphy and Witten 2006). This model was created for the boreal region of AK and did not receive review for other parts of the state.

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 100 Mid Development 1 - All

Indicator Species

Description

This state represents the relatively stable shrub-tussock tundra BpS.

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