

LANDFIRE Biophysical Setting Model

Biophysical Setting 3811490

Western Great Plains Shortgrass Prairie

- ☐ This BPS is lumped with:
☐ This BPS is split into multiple models:

General Information

Contributors (also see the Comments field)

Date 2/2/2007

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Modeler 3 Harvey Sprock many and many more- see comments **Reviewer**

Vegetation Type

Upland
Grassland/Herbaceous

Dominant Species

BOGR2
PASM

Map Zone

38

Model Zone

- ☐ Alaska ☒ Northern Plains
California N-Cent.Rockies
☐
☐ Great Basin ☐ Pacific Northwest
☐ Great Lakes ☐ South Central
☐ Hawaii ☐ Southeast
☐ Northeast ☐ S. Appalachians
☐ Southwest

General Model Sources

- ☒ Literature
☒ Local Data
☒ Expert Estimate
SPCR
ATCA2
KRLA2
HECO26
BUDA
ARPU9

Geographic Range

The range of this system is essentially limited to the Central Shortgrass Prairie and Southern Shortgrass Prairie ecoregions, although it may be peripheral in a few other ecoregions such as the Central Mixedgrass Prairie, Northern Great Plains Dry Steppe, and Osage Plains/Flint Hills Prairie (Comer et al. 2003).

This occurs in the southern Great Plains from northeastern to southeastern CO and south through western OK, eastern and northeastern NM, and west TX Panhandle. Historically, some stages of this type might have been less extensive than currently. This system probably didn't occur much throughout KS historically. But southeastern CO and the eastern 1/3 of CO, southwestern KS, and in southeastern WY, it did occur. It does not/did not occur in the center of NM, as that would be a desert grassland type. (However, it does occur on the western facing piedmonts of the central mountain chains of NM in the northern Rio Grande corridor.) Precipitation, grazing, and decadal fluctuations could have changed the historic distribution, and this is most likely to have occurred along the ecotone with the mixed grass prairie (Lauenroth et al. 1994).

Some feel that this type does not occur/extend into the westernmost areas of NM and the south / southwest corner of MZ27 such as portions of ECOMAP subsections 315Ad western half, 315Ab, M313Bd, M313Bb, M331Fh, 321Ad, M313Bf, M313Bg (Laurenroth and Milchunas 1991), which would

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be drier and desert grassland types. However, modelers from NM state that this type does occur and is dominant historically and currently throughout most of MZ27, except for the southern portions of subsections 315Ad and Ab. In MZ38, this BpS would occur as small areas in the extreme western edge of the zone (subsection 315Fb perhaps?)

Shortgrass occurs mostly west of KS border (although it also occurs in western KS)- see precipitation gradients. However, west of KS there is a mix of more productive shortgrass prairie and mixedgrass. West of I-25 border, is drier shortgrass. Some shortgrass however, is in southwest corner of KS. (Mixedgrass is in the northern portion of KS and NE.) There are north-south bands (isoclines) of productivity of shortgrass vegetation, corresponding to increased precipitation going east due to the rainshadow of the Rocky Mountains. See Lauenroth and Milchunas (1991).

The northern boundary is near the CO-WY border at the 41°N latitude, and extends south to latitude 32°N in western TX (Lauenroth and Milchunas 1991).

Biophysical Site Description

This system occurs primarily on flat to rolling uplands with loamy, ustic soils ranging from sandy to clayey. In NM, it is more aridic than ustic. This type typically occurs on loamy to clayey uplands (moderate to fine textures).

In NM and CO, elevations range from 1500-2000m. In KS, elevations can be 1000m.

Shortgrass prairie occurs dependent on precipitation gradients - long-term precipitation patterns and north-south bands or isoclines of productivity of shortgrass vegetation, corresponding to increased precipitation going east due to the rainshadow of the Rocky Mountains.

Mean annual precipitation is approximately 300-500mm (Lauenroth and Milchunas 1991) (ranges from 8-14in and might go up to 16-18in in MZ27 NM in the northeast), but there is a gradient into the mixedgrass prairie at the higher end, and there is a band against the Rocky Mountains that occurs in the approximate 350-375mm split, between drier versus wetter area; as you go east, it becomes wetter with higher precip and you move out of the shortgrass system. In rainshadow, probably lower end of 10in in MZ33.

Most precipitation occurs in the summer months.

The windiest areas of the US occur in the shortgrass steppe (Lauenroth and Milchunas 1991).

Vegetation Description

Historically, vegetation was dominated by short grass, and the subdominants were midgrasses and a small amount of shrubs. Dominant species include blue grama, western wheatgrass, needlegrasses (needle and thread more associated with sandier sites), buffalo grass (some question whether or not buffalo grass is more abundant currently versus historically in some areas; buffalo grass is the more sod-forming grass), with intermingled forbs. *Hesperostipa neomexicana* is more common on gravelly soils in NM.

Shrub species such as *Artemisia frigida* (prairie sagewort), *Gutierrezia sarothrae* (broom snakeweed, which is cyclical and often abundant following drought or heavy grazing) (*Artemisia filifolia* is not that common except on sandy sites), and *Chrysothamnus* (rabbitbrush) spp. may also be present. Other shrubs include four-wing saltbush, winterfat, with lesser amounts of rabbitbrush, broom snakeweed, fringed sage, and also plains prickly pear, in NM - walking stick cholla, yucca glauca, ring muhly, and mat

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muhly, which would occur on soils with coarser texture control section in NM. (Ring muhly and mat muhly are also grazing increasers.) (Some feel that today, however, there is lower diversity - with buffalo grass in CO, blue grama in NM, and cactus and snakeweed increasing since historic. However, this is not known for sure and is questioned by some.) Also - *Sphaeralcea coccinea* is a common forb in NM and the dominant forb in CO. Currently, there might be more mesquite widespread in the very southern end of NM and low-statured, although historically it might have been present but not as prominent.

For the dominant species list, it covers mostly MZ33-CO; (NAVI4 was initially listed, but questioned by some, so it was removed and replaced by ARPU9).

For NM, other cool season species includes NM feathergrass

(<http://lib.nmsu.edu/subject/agnic/introduction.html>). Other elements in NM: *Artemisia frigida*, *Yucca glauca*, *Mulenbergia wrightii*, *Eragrostis intermedia*, *Pleuraphis jamesii*, *B. curtipendula*, *Hesperostipa neomexicana*.

For MZ27-NM, HENE5 might replace HECO26. ARFI2 might replace ARPU9.

Disturbance Description

Large-scale processes such as climate, fire and grazing influence this system. The often dry, semi-arid climate conditions can decrease the fuel load and thus the relative fire frequency within the system. However, historically, fires that did occur were often very expansive.

There is debate as to the MFRI for this shortgrass system. Because of the lack of long-lived trees, and trees that do exist are in relatively productive sites, there is absolutely no way to reconstruct a reliable historic fire return interval. All estimates of historic fire return intervals must be based on those for surrounding vegetation types that do have means for reconstruction, and then extrapolating based on differences in primary production and herbivore removal of fuel loads. Therefore, there is no means to directly obtain the estimate, and the range is varied. It depends on many factors - portions will be drier, and portions will vary in frequency over time and there will be decadal variation. There is a wide variability of MFRI across this system, based on precipitation and fuel.

One camp feels that the MFRI was historically approximately 25-35yrs (Harvey Sprock, Terri Schulz, Rich Sterry, Este Muldavin, et al. pers comm). Bison grazing created patchy fuels, and therefore small fires at times. So return interval to one spot was longer than expected - i.e.: a fire can burn somewhere on the landscape often, but it may not necessarily return to the same spot for 25-50yrs or more (Chris Pague, Terri Schulz, Harvey Sprock, pers comm).

However, another camp feels it was shorter. It is thought that some of the differences and suggestions for a longer MFRI could come from present range management applications. It is thought that the range of MFRI in shortgrass for MZ27/33 is between 5-20yrs, dependent on the precipitation gradient east to west (David Augustine, USFS, pers comm). Some feel, however, that five years is too short, as that is more similar to a tallgrass system (multiple MZ27/33 reviewers).

An arbitrary precipitation gradient between drier versus wetter somewhere around approximately 350-375mm annual precipitation delineates a change in fuels and fire behavior across the west to east gradient in precipitation / aboveground primary productivity. While there is no precise line, we may make a general rule-of-thumb that prescribed burns below 375mm are generally more difficult to burn. Farther east, with a higher precip, it is easier to burn. At generally around 470mm, fire easily burns through the landscape (David Augustine, USFS, pers comm), especially where some growing season deferment occurs.

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Some feel that in the western portion of MZ27/33, the MFRI would be a little longer, in the 15-20yr range, whereas in the eastern portion, it would be shorter, in the 5-10yr range. It is a gradient. It is thought that the areas intergrading with mixedgrass would be even shorter as one goes further east into western Kansas - approximately five years (David Augustine, USFS, pers comm).

Also - both lightning-induced fire and spring fires set by Native Americans are recognized as important pre-European components of the fire regime (Williams 2003). The rates of lightning ignitions are high in both the wet and drier areas of the shortgrass. The shortgrass prairie also probably burned more frequently with Native Americans (Williams 2003).

Some studies from other systems have inferred a short historical fire return interval for the shortgrass (David Augustine, USFS, pers comm). The MFRI should be somewhere between the frequency from mixedgrass prairie to desert grassland. A review of the role of fire in desert grasslands indicated that the natural frequency of fire was probably on the order of every 7 to 10yrs (McPherson 1995). Even though this is a shortgrass system we're describing, production in the shortgrass is higher, and so MFRI should be similar, even though historical grazing would have affected the MFRI in portions of the shortgrass more than others (David Augustine, USFS, pers comm). Studies on mixed-grass prairies indicate variable fire return intervals that typically range from three to five years (Bragg and Hulbert 1976, Bragg 1986, Umbanhowar et al. 1996). Given rainfall on the shortgrass prairie that is intermediate between desert grasslands and mixed-grass prairie, historic fire frequency may have been between these estimates, i.e. on the order of 5 to 10yrs (David Augustine, USFS, pers comm). There are also good arguments for shortgrass having a higher MFRI either than desert or mixed grass, primarily because 1) the shortgrass region gets more dry lightning storms (higher ignition probability) than mixed grass and has more times of the year when fuels are dry and "ignitable" than mixed grass. The eastern 2/3 of 27/33 shortgrass map zones also has much more continuous fuels than the desert grasslands, hence greater probability of large fires than the desert grasslands (David Augustine, USFS, pers comm.). This is contested by others.

A counter-argument does not feel that shortgrass should be in between the desert grassland and mixedgrass intervals and should rather be longer. Both of those systems are more productive and less variable in terms of precipitation and therefore production compared to shortgrass. This argument states that sandhills and bluestem (the references listed above re: short MFRI in mixedgrass) are very productive special areas within the mixedgrass, not really mixed grass and not the drier mixedgrass. Also note that in Zak et al. (1994), the productivity for desert grasslands is actually greater than that for shortgrass. This could be due to a variety of factors, some of which being timing, event size and longer growing season, or even methodology. Also, evidence from the Sevilleta suggests the desert grasslands may burn more readily than shortgrass, but they may not be as resilient (Este Muldavin, pers comm).

Augustine (pers comm.) cites evidence of large fires historically as evidence of the shorter interval. Older examples include from Wright and Bailey (1982): "In the semiarid areas, big prairie fires in the past usually occurred during drought years that followed one to three years of above average precipitation, because of the abundant and continuous fuel. Consequently, wildfires traveled for many kms when the winds and air temperatures were high and relative humidity was low. An example is an account of a fire (Haley 1929) that started in the fall of 1885 in the Arkansas River country of western Kansas. It jumped the Cimarron River, burned across the North Plains of Texas, and did not stop until it reached the rugged Canadian River Breaks, a distance of 282 km (175 miles). About 0.4 million ha (1.0 million ac) of the XIT Ranch alone burned in TX

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However, some feel that there is little reason to believe that fires swept the shortgrass so often (5-10yrs) due to high variability. There may be a discrepancy about MFRI and the occurrence or records of some large fires. Some large fires occurred and that probably is not rare. However, there is scant to no evidence in much of the shortgrass prairie that large fires are frequent in the same locations. Even the evidence stated above only reports on some fires -- all in different locations. Really small fires might also have been common, but rarely occurred in the spot that another fire struck. Patchiness, lack of probability, and lack of opportunity were all players. We do not know how often fires occurred in the same location. We do not even know exactly how bison grazed the landscape nor how indigenous people used fire in the shortgrass. Most of the myths of these practices are myths indeed. In 15yrs in Colorado there have been few repeat fires in shortgrass, i.e., at the same place. This may indicate that the return interval is long while fire itself is not particularly rare. This would match the rainfall pattern as well, i.e., rainfall is not easily predictable (Chris Pague, TNC, pers comm.).

Some feel that the ecological reasons for a shorter interval might not be evident until near the mixed grass.

Overlap in agreement between the long-vs-short-interval perspectives probably occurs in the eastern edge of the shortgrass zone (i.e., Baca County and east as well as NE Colorado). There are likely to be more consistent fuels -- and probably a shorter MFRI. There are also probably more dry strikes in shortgrass (but not consistently more fuel). The Palmer Divide might also have more fuels in most years.

However, there is also other evidence for a shorter interval in northeast New Mexico. Ford and Johnson (2006) found that a 6-year dormant-season fire (i.e. burned once in six years) as a fire treatment shows the potential for increased site production relative to 'reference condition' unburned grassland, which might imply that shortgrass might have had a similarly short return interval. However, there is a question as to whether or not this would be similar to historic conditions, considering the prevalence of heavy grazers pre-settlement.

It was also thought that the MFRI in MZ27/33 should be similar to that for shortgrass in MZ34, which is approximately 10-15yrs. The MFRI for shortgrass in RA model R3PGRs, which covered this same area, was 10 MFRI. The MFRI for southern plains grassland in the FRCC model PGRA4 was approximately 10yrs varying due to effects stated in this MZ27/33 description. The MFRI for the original model from the MZ27 NM modelers was 15 MFRI. In terms of having consistency across mapzones and between mapzones, and between all sources of information, and weighing all factors and resources, Regional Lead (RL) chose a similar interval of approximately 20-25yrs to account for the west to east gradient for these mapzones and the confounding evidence and opinions. All modelers/reviewers informed.

Note that changing the MFRI from 22 to 15 or 10 only slightly altered percentages in each of the successional stages to where approximately 5% more was in A and 5% less in C. Also, FRG 2 is consistent.

Note that large fires might be currently rare in some areas due to several factors, including aggressive suppression action, fuels reduction due to continuous grazing being more uniform across the landscape, heavy stocking, presence of roads, and discontinuous land ownership (checkerboard effect). In recent years, the combined extent of prescribed and wildland fires on the Grasslands has varied annually but has been approximately 0.5 - 2% of the total area, or a fire return interval of >50yrs (Coarse filter analysis of habitat conditions on the grasslands).

Return interval for fire could be extended (longer return interval) by continuous ungulate grazing. Fire

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return intervals are now occurring more infrequently - over 50yrs (Harvey Sprock, Terri Schulz, Rich Sterry, pers comm).

The short grasses that dominate this system are extremely drought- and grazing-tolerant. These species evolved with drought and large herbivores and, because of their stature, are relatively resistant to overgrazing. The shortgrass system adapted evolutionarily with historical heavy grazing (Milchunas et al. 1988). The return intervals for grazing varied. There were probably areas distant from water sources that were not grazed as heavily as those near water. However, the shortgrass steppe is probably the system with the highest intensity of grazing than other systems historically (Milchunas 2006, Lauenroth et al. 1994).

Black-tailed prairie dogs (BTPD) are an ecologically important component of the grazing regime in shortgrass prairie and would have occurred extensively. (Prairie dogs were less important both historically and currently in sandhills prairie, canyonlands, and riparian habitats due to edaphic and topographic limitations on burrow construction). There were some very large towns, but there were also areas without any towns. Quantitative historical estimates of BTPD abundance are difficult to obtain, but the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that about 160 million ha (395 million acres) of potential habitat historically existed in the U.S, and about 20% was occupied at any one time (Gober 2000). (Coarse filter analysis of habitat conditions on the grasslands). Shortgrass has most of the suitable soil types for prairie dogs. In general, they need loamy or clay soil.

In historic times, there was frequent and broad-scale grazing by bison, elk, deer, pronghorn. Through growing season, bison might have been there for relatively short periods in some years; however, they might have been there longer on other years. There were also resident herds of bison in areas of Colorado. Historically, such areas would also have been populated by bison in sufficient numbers to support populations of wolves. Bamforth (1987) suggested that bison herds under relatively undisturbed conditions (<1846) most often ranged in size from several hundred to several thousand.

Shaw and Lee (1997) reviewed diaries of European travels in the southern Great Plains from 1806 to 1857. Organized by historical period and biome type, the authors suggest populations of three major large herbivores—bison, elk and pronghorn—changed in the first half of the nineteenth century; bison were most numerous on the shortgrass prairie prior to 1821, pronghorn were most abundant on the shortgrass prairie between 1806 and 1820, again in the 1850s.

In drier areas in the western portion of MZ27/33, distance from water was probably a factor in grazing gradients. Individual herds were probably tied to river drainages and migrations from those drainages.

The dry half of the Great Plains has high interannual rainfall variability, so historically, the population declined faster in dry years. This resulted in a time lag or temporal variability, in which density could be reduced greatly. Bison historically moved nomadically in response to vegetation changes associated with rainfall, fire and prairie dog colonies. The time lag for return movements provided deferment during the regrowth period for which according to both historic and archeological records may have ranged from one to eight years (Malainey and Sherriff 1996 and others).

If there was a series of droughts followed by a wetter year, there would have been little grazing pressure, which would then result in a higher severity or frequency of fire. Drought and grazing were probably most important disturbances historically and greatly influenced fire frequency and extent. This is a drought tolerant system. However, extended drought (over three to four years) will reduce cover.

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Historic variability in bison grazing appears to have been on the temporal and spatial scales of years and tens to hundreds of square miles, while current variability in livestock grazing is at scales of weeks to months and acres to several square miles (David Augustine, USFS, comm).

Insects were also a natural disturbance agent on the landscape - grasshoppers, range caterpillars, Mormon crickets.

Note that we are also not modeling the white grub disturbance interaction, which could be an important disturbance. It can cause a shift in stages and could cause a large impact. It combined with drought could be highly impacting and could cause a similar impact as prairie dogs. However, it was not modeled.

A healthy shortgrass prairie system should support prairie dog complexes, viable populations of pronghorn, endemic grassland birds, and other Great Plains mammals.

However, currently in areas, there is overgrazing and continuous grazing, creating more areas heavily dominated by shortgrass (in areas where there might have been more mixedgrass) and increasing fire intervals (less fire).

Adjacency or Identification Concerns

This system is similar to Kuchler's (1964) "Bouteloua-Buchloe" vegetation type except at the northern border (Lauenroth and Milchunas 1991).

This system occurs in the area corresponding to Kuchler's Plains Grassland PNVG and the RA's R3PGRs Shortgrass Prairie and FRCC PGRA4 Southern Plains Grassland.

This system could be confused with mixedgrass prairie. Production is less in shortgrass versus mixedgrass prairie. They can be distinguished - higher occurrence of blue grama - thus shortgrass. If have more mixedgrasses, should be considered mixedgrass prairie. If have 50% or more midgrasses, would probably be mixedgrass.

Shortgrass occurs mostly west of the KS border; however, west of KS there is a mix of more productive shortgrass prairie and mixedgrass. Some shortgrass however, is in the southeast corner of KS. Mixedgrass is in the northern portion of KS and NE. There is a gradient into mixedgrass. West of approximately the I-25 border in CO, there is drier shortgrass. These boundaries are relevant to fuel loading. On the eastern border of 27, it also grades into mixedgrass prairie of small remaining quantities near TX (those areas of TX not in agriculture).

This system should not be confused with the desert grassland and plains mesa types occurring in the southern skewing west/southwest corners of MZ27. See RA's depiction of the plains mesa and desert grassland types versus this shortgrass type. See RA PNVGs and Kuchler types and Lauenroth and Milchunas (1991) for historic potential. The desert grassland types have more tobosa, galleta grasses. Consider BpS 1122 Gyp, 1504 Bottomland Swale/Tobosa Flats, 1503 Loamy Plains, 1147 Foothill/Piedmont.

Some (John Tunberg, NRCS et al. Este Muldavin, pers comm), however, state that shortgrass occurs in all sections/subsections of MZ27 in NM.

In MZ27 in NM, in the west end near Las Vegas, it grades into pinyon-juniper (PJ) and ponderosa pine, as

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it does in CO near Trinidad.

This system could be adjacent to Foothill/Piedmont Grassland. It is also adjacent to desert grasslands in the south - sand dune / mesquite dunelands in the south and east. It is also adjacent to tobosa plains in the south and gyp hills in the east end of MZ27 NM, east of Estancia. On the eastern edge of MZ27 in NM, it is adjacent to playas scattered throughout (closed depressional wetland systems).

Some (Harvey Sprock, Terri Schulz, Rich Sterry et al. pers comm) feel that there is more shortgrass now than historically in areas at the ecotone with mixedgrass prairie - due to management practices today. Shortgrass prairie has expanded currently due to continuous grazing. Central Mixedgrass Prairie has been greatly reduced currently due to agricultural conversion. In CO, some believe that historically had lower producing mixedgrass, but now it is shortgrass (Harvey Sprock, Terri Schulz, Rich Sterry et al. pers comm) and that even some of the shortgrass prairie today that would have existed historically, is departed. Much is continuously grazed.

In contrast, Milchunas et al. (1998) considers the shortgrass to be climatically determined, with large herbivores and aridity being convergent selection pressures. Grazing and climatic cycles do, however, result in shifts in the location of the mixedgrass-shortgrass ecotone (Lauenroth et al. 1994). Research on short duration grazing shows no difference with continuous grazing on plant community composition (Derner and Hart submitted). Long rest periods would be necessary to increase heterogeneity (Fuhlendorf and Engle 2001).

Currently, fire suppression and certain grazing patterns in the region have likely decreased the fire frequency from historical regimes, and it is unlikely that these processes could occur at a natural scale today.

A large part of the range for this system (especially in the east and near rivers) has been converted to agriculture. Areas of the central and western range have been impacted by the unsuccessful attempts to develop dryland cultivation during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s.

There is also much residential development in this system.

Currently, there are some non-natives - cheatgrass, kochia, but not a big invasive problem.

Some mesquite hummocks might also occur currently in MZ27 NM more than historically. Currently, there might be more mesquite widespread and low-statured, although historically, it might have been present but not as prominent. If mesquite is over three feet high, it's a different BpS. There might be more mesquite, cholla, prickly pear currently - which is uncharacteristic. There is little data on this, however.

There is also some encroachment of juniper into these grasslands currently in MZ27 NM. If there is over 10% juniper canopy cover in grasslands, that would be uncharacteristic.

In MZ27 in SE CO, this system might have been former prairie chicken habitat.

There are conflicting views about what this landscape looked like historically versus currently.

One viewpoint states that currently, today, most of the landscape is in class B. The departure in this system would be in the lack of the classes A and C on the landscape today (Daniel Milchunas, CSU and

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David Augustine, USFS, pers comm). This is because cattle have been evenly distributed throughout the landscape. Historically, there were a mix of heavily grazed, heavily disturbed areas, moderately grazed areas more distant from water, and lightly grazed areas even more distant from water, during low population cycles of bison, or where bison had not returned recently. Management today, together with water improvements on the range, results in a relatively greater amount of the middle class. Management today is also removing prairie dogs and fire. Therefore, historically, there were more disturbed areas (class A) and undisturbed areas (class C).

Another view, however (Harvey Sprock, Terri Schulz, Rich Sterry et al. pers comm), states that currently, continuous, heavy grazing practices have turned class B stage more into class A, the sod portion - which didn't happen often historically. This opposing view also states that there is not much of the class B, historic climax plant community, today. This opposing view also states that the sod class class A, that would have been a very small, localized condition historically. However, today, it would be very prevalent. Historically, the landscape would have just had small areas of continuous grazing or migration corridors.

Another similar viewpoint states that the go-back-cropland would be in class A, and today there are extensive areas of abandoned dust bowl cropland that now have blue grama sod with low cover and productivity. The surface soil horizon is eroded by wind and is no longer apparent. Bedrock is exposed in some areas (John Tunberg, Rex Pieper, Clarence Chavez, pers comm). This viewpoint also states that most would be in the sod class today.

Grazers, combined with prairie dogs and fire, would allow the native bison grazers to beat up an area. That stage no longer exists today, which is in part why some of those shortgrass prairie grassland birds are in such significant decline today (Herkert 1994, Knopf 1994, Peterjohn and Sauer 1999).

Note that there is a difference in cover amounts between southern NM MZ27 and northern NM MZ27; however, the model and probabilities are the same. Also note some species order differences between southern and central shortgrass.

Native Uncharacteristic Conditions

If grass is over one half meter, it would be uncharacteristic because it would be in a different BpS. Please see Adjacency/Identification Concerns for more issues and uncharacteristics.

Scale Description

This is a matrix community - small to large patches. Disturbances can also occur within a matrix - small to large, huge patches. Driving variable is climate (drought, low rainfall, etc), grazing, and to a lesser extent fire.

In portions of the Western Great Plains, this system occurs in very large contiguous areas, and its resilience and resistance to large scale disturbances makes it function as a matrix-forming system (The Nature Conservancy, 1998).

Issues/Problems

This system was originally modeled with two models - one for Colorado MZ27/33 and one for New Mexico southern version of MZ27. Even though there are monsoonal and climatic differences/factors - differences in geography, moisture and function between the two areas, those factors were easily textually represented. Therefore, the southern and central versions were combined into a more all-encompassing model for all of MZs 27/33 which includes southern and central shortgrass. Cover will be different

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between the 2 (state line - NM vs CO Raton Pass, Mesa de Maya) and this is described textually in the successional class descriptions. Note that there is a difference in cover amounts between southern NM MZ27 and northern NM MZ27; however, the model and probabilities are the same. Also note some species order differences between southern and central shortgrass.

There is some disagreement about historical versus current manifestation of this system.

Also - Instead of calling the classes early, mid and late, which do not actually apply in shortgrass prairie and the different stages that we are describing, we are calling all of the stages “mid-development.” Succession in a grassland system does not abide by typical definitions as in a forested community. The stages of the grassland are created and/or maintained by disturbances or lack thereof.

Also - Please note that the covers in the dropdown boxes in this system are arbitrary and are only being used for LF mapping purposes. Please note that this system should be distinguished on-the-ground by biomass and not cover. These covers do not reflect reality on-the-ground.

Comments

For MZ38 this model was adopted from the same BpS in MZ33 by Randy Swaty (rsваты@tnc.org). Only minor editing of the description was done to fit the geographic range to MZ43 so modelership was not changed.

The draft model for MZ33 and MZ27 in Colorado was based on the model for the same BpS from MZ28 created by Galen Green, Wayne Robbie, Anne Bradley and reviewed by Vic Ecklund and Chuck Kostecka. Modelers for the draft MZ33 and MZ27 Colorado model were: Harvey Sprock havery.sprock@co.usda.gov, Terri Schulz tschulz@tnc.org, Rich Sterry richard_sterry@fws.gov, Dan Nosal, Keith Schulz. The model was changed significantly from MZ28 due to different climate, environment and evolutionary history with grazing. However, after through review by multiple experts, the model was again changed significantly and a new model was adopted by the Regional Lead (RL) due to reasons identified within the description. Modeler names also changed. All kept informed. Furthermore, this system was originally modeled with two models - one for Colorado MZs 27/33 and one for New Mexico southern version of MZ27. Even though there are monsoonal and climatic differences/factors - differences in geography, moisture and function between the two areas, those factors were easily textually represented. Therefore, the southern and central versions were combined into a more all-encompassing model for all of MZs 27/33 which includes southern and central shortgrass. Cover will be different between the two (state line - NM vs CO Raton Pass, Mesa de Maya) and this is described textually in the successional class descriptions. Modelers for the MZ27 NM draft version were Rex Pieper rpieper@nmsu.edu, John Tunberg john.tunberg@nm.usda.gov, Clarence Chavez clarence.chavez@nm.usda.gov, Lee Elliott lelliott@tnc.org. Other reviewer for new version was Steve Kettler. Other reviewers for new version were Este Muldavin, Keith Schulz, Paulette Ford.

For MZ33 reviewers were Chris Pague (cpague@tnc.org), Rex Pieper (rpieper@nmsu.edu) and Terri Schulz (tschulz@tnc.org).

The model for MZ28 was adapted from the RA model R3PGRS, which was reviewed by an anonymous reviewer. Minor edits made on 5/6/2005 by Mike Babler, mbabler@tnc.org, changed some species and classes.

The RA model was originally based on the FRCC model PGRA6. Review suggest combining all plains

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grasslands. Because of species composition differences, and class differences, 1147 and 1149 were not combined.

Vegetation Classes

Class A 21 %

Mid Development 1 Open

Upper Layer Lifeform

☒ Herbaceous

☐ Shrub

☐ Tree

Fuel Model

1

Description

Indicator Species and Canopy Position

BOGR2

Upper

BUDA

Upper

ARIST

Upper

VUOC

Upper

Structure Data (for upper layer lifeform)

	Min	Max
Cover	0 %	20 %
Height	Herb 0m	Herb 0.5m
Tree Size Class	None	

☐ Upper layer lifeform differs from dominant lifeform.

Please note that the covers in the dropdown boxes in this system are arbitrary and are only being used for LF mapping purposes. Please note that this system should be distinguished on-the-ground by biomass and not cover, since the cover in class A actually ranges from a low, mosaic-bare-ground cover to a high sod-cover, which includes litter too. Due to mapping constraints and past issues with mapping herbaceous cover and resultant errors, this Class A is being set at 0-20% even though it was originally suggested to be 0-70%. Either way, these covers do not reflect reality on-the-ground. Remote sensing will show part of this stage as litter plus veg.

Also - the NM draft older version had a cover of 0-20% for the prairie-dog-type-stage and the sod class with a cover of 41-50%.

Instead of calling the classes early, mid and late, which do not actually apply in shortgrass prairie and the different stages that we are describing, we are calling all of the stages "mid-development." Succession in a grassland system does not abide by typical definitions as in a forested community. The stages of the grassland are created and/or maintained by disturbances or lack thereof.

Class A is the low biomass (0-1" based on the Robel pole density / visual obstruction method), heavy disturbance dependent community. It combines two types of communities. One consists of the high cover blue grama buffalo grass sod that looks like a golf course (high cover in patches). The other is the low cover bare soil, Aristida, and forb stage, which could have taller grasses than the sod, but they are spaced apart due to bare soil between. See biomass in Milchunas et al. (1994) and Milchunas and Lauenroth (1989) and basal cover for sod class by point frame in Milchunas et al. (1989).

Please note that this system should be distinguished on-the-ground by biomass and not cover, since the cover in class A actually ranges from a low, mosaic-bare-ground cover to a high sod-cover, which includes litter too. Due to mapping constraints, we are defining dropdown boxes on cover; however this stage could go up to 70% cover, including litter, with very low biomass. Basal cover for high cover sod is approximately 45% or

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higher if including litter. Basal cover for low cover prairie dog area is approximately 20-25% cover. On-the-ground, this class should be distinguished by biomass.

There are relatively few cool season grasses in this stage. There is always blue grama in this stage, as in the others. Cactus is present (and could even be a dominant in the class A sod depending on soil type). Aristida is present, which increases with prairie dog colonies. Annual grasses - sixweeks fescue, Red three-awn, ragweed, annual forbs. [Currently, you would see non-native annuals in this class such as cheatgrass and kochia - only in the high biomass type. annuals and exotics are actually less abundant in the sod type than any other class (Milchunas et al. 1989; Milchunas and Lauenroth 1989; Milchunas et al. 1988); the landscape might also have non-natives of bindweed on prairie dog towns today, but not historically.] On loamier or sandier sites, there is sand dropseed. For the southern NM version, other indicator species are lemonweed, showy goldeneye, verbenia.

Original draft model indicator species for the prairie dog stage also included ARPUL, AMPS, SPCR. Original indicator species for the sod stage also included OPPO.

There are low intensity fires in the low biomass high cover sod and relatively rare fire in the low biomass low cover bare soil. Fires are spotty through here and not as frequent as in other stages. They do not cause a change in stages.

This stage is produced by heavy grazing, and long-term prairie dog colonies which will maintain this stage long-term. This stage can also be maintained by heavy continuous grazing if the area is near water. Also – if an area is burned and grazed, the high cover version of this stage will be reached if not continuously grazed.

Grazing that gives adequate plant recovery periods occurs in this stage.

If there is no fire and no prairie dog or heavy grazing maintaining this stage, then in approximately 5-10yrs, this stage will transition to the class B stage. This was modeled as "alternate succession" occurring as a probability of .1, for modeling purposes.

Drought occurs.

It is thought that there should be approximately 20-30% of this stage historically, based on historical prairie dog communities combined with bison grazing (Gober 2000; David Augustine, USFS, pers comm). However, the viewpoint which created this model feels that there is very little of this stage on the landscape today. Prairie dog plague today would also not allow this class to be maintained for long today.

Another opposing viewpoint feels that the sod portion of this class would have been a very small, localized condition historically and that today it would be very prevalent. This view states that historically, there would just have been small areas of continuous grazing or migration corridors.

This stage would also include buffalo wallows (Harvey Sprock, Terri Schulz, Rich Sterry et al. pers comm). (Today, it might be go-back-cropland.) It is also thought, however, that today there are extensive areas of abandoned dust bowl cropland that now have blue grama sod with low cover and productivity. The surface soil horizon is eroded by wind and is no longer apparent. Bedrock or subsoil/parent material is exposed in some areas (Harvey Sprock, Terri Schulz, Rich Sterry et al. pers comm). This view is questioned, however, by others.

****Fire Regime Groups are: I: 0-35 year frequency, surface severity; II: 0-35 year frequency, replacement severity; III: 35-100+ year frequency, mixed severity; IV: 35-100+ year frequency, replacement severity; V: 200+ year frequency, replacement severity.**

Class A was originally modeled in the draft model as the prairie dog stage lasting 20yrs, as it would take a long time to move out of this stage due to the prairie dog communities. Class C was originally modeled as the sod class.

Please note that the covers in the dropdown boxes in this system are arbitrary and are only being used for LF mapping purposes. Please note that this system should be distinguished on-the-ground by biomass and not cover, since the cover in class A actually ranges from a low, mosaic-bare-ground cover to a high sod-cover, which includes litter too. Due to mapping constraints and past issues with mapping herbaceous cover and resultant errors, this class A is being set at 0-20% even though it was originally suggested to be 0-60%. Either way, these covers do not reflect reality on-the-ground. Remote sensing will show part of this stage as litter plus veg.

Note that the NM southern version had a canopy closure of 0-20% for the prairie-dog-type stage class A and 41-50% for the sod class.

Class B 58 % Mid Development 2 Closed	<u>Indicator Species and Canopy Position</u> BOGR2 Upper	<u>Structure Data (for upper layer lifeform)</u> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>Min</th> <th>Max</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Cover</td> <td>21 %</td> <td>80 %</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Height</td> <td>Herb 0m</td> <td>Herb 0.5m</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tree Size Class</td> <td colspan="2">None</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Min	Max	Cover	21 %	80 %	Height	Herb 0m	Herb 0.5m	Tree Size Class	None	
	Min	Max												
Cover	21 %	80 %												
Height	Herb 0m	Herb 0.5m												
Tree Size Class	None													
<u>Upper Layer Lifeform</u> ☒ Herbaceous ☐ Shrub ☐ Tree	PASM Upper BUDA Upper STIPA Upper	☒ Upper layer lifeform differs from dominant lifeform. Scattered shrubs may be present (up to 15%, maybe up to 1 meter) - four wing, winterfat. There might be scattered cholla in MZ27, east of Colorado Springs. Once cholla gets thick, shifts to another BpS.												
<u>Fuel Model</u> 1 <u>Description</u>		Note that the draft NM southern version of the Historic Climax Plant Community (HCPC) class had a cover of 21-40%.												

Instead of calling the classes early, mid and late, which do not actually apply in shortgrass prairie and the different stages that we are describing, we are calling all of the stages “mid-development.” Succession in a grassland system does not abide by typical definitions as in a forested community. The stages of the grassland are created and/or maintained by disturbances or lack thereof.

Class B is the mid biomass (2-4” based on the Robel pole density / visual obstruction method), mid cover stage. See biomass in Milchunas et al. (1994) and Milchunas and Lauenroth (1989).

This stage again consists of blue grama. Cactus is often present and could even be the second dominant depending on soil type. There are less needle and thread and western wheatgrass than in class C. This also includes the “historic climax plant community” with blue grama, buffalograss, and western wheatgrass, galleta grass, green needle grass (not in NM much), fringed sage, New Mexico feather grass in the south. Historically, there would have been more midgrasses (Harvey Sprock, et al. pers comm). In NM, there would be scatterings of black grama, vine mesquite on heavier soils.

Fire does occur in this stage. If there is 1-2 years of no grazing or 4-10yrs of no fire, then 4-10yrs post-fire, this class would transition to the high biomass class C stage. This was modeled as "alternate succession"

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occurring as a probability of .05, for modeling purposes.

Prairie dogs could occur in this stage. If they do, the long-term prairie dog grazing causes a transition to class A.

Proper grazing that allows adequate plant recovery periods occurs but does not cause a transition. With heavy grazing, this class could transition to class A.

Drought was modeled with a probability of every 40yrs and causes no transition.

The current modelers (Augustine, et al) feel that today, most of the landscape is in class B. However, another viewpoint feels that there probably is not much of class B on the landscape today.

Please note that the covers in the dropdown boxes in this system are arbitrary and are only being used for LF mapping purposes. Please note that this system should be distinguished on-the-ground by biomass and not cover. Due to mapping constraints and past issues with mapping herbaceous cover and resultant errors, this class B is being set at 21-80% even though it was originally suggested to be 61-80%. Either way, these covers do not reflect reality on-the-ground.

Class C 21 %		<u>Indicator Species and Canopy Position</u>	<u>Structure Data (for upper layer lifeform)</u>												
Mid Development 3 Closed		BOGR2	<table><tr><td></td><td><i>Min</i></td><td><i>Max</i></td></tr><tr><td><i>Cover</i></td><td>81 %</td><td>100 %</td></tr><tr><td><i>Height</i></td><td>Herb 0m</td><td>Herb 0.5m</td></tr><tr><td><i>Tree Size Class</i></td><td colspan="2">None</td></tr></table>		<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Cover</i>	81 %	100 %	<i>Height</i>	Herb 0m	Herb 0.5m	<i>Tree Size Class</i>	None	
		<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>												
	<i>Cover</i>	81 %	100 %												
	<i>Height</i>	Herb 0m	Herb 0.5m												
<i>Tree Size Class</i>	None														
<u>Upper Layer Lifeform</u> ☒ Herbaceous ☐ Shrub ☐ Tree	<u>Fuel Model</u> 2	HECOC8	☒ Upper layer lifeform differs from dominant lifeform. Scattered shrubs may be present - snakeweed, prickly pear cactus.												
		Upper													
		PASM													
		Upper													
		STIPA													
		Upper													

Description

Instead of calling the classes early, mid and late, which do not actually apply in shortgrass prairie and the different stages that we are describing, we are calling all of the stages “mid-development.” Succession in a grassland system does not abide by typical definitions as in a forested community. The stages of the grassland are created and/or maintained by disturbances or lack thereof.

Class C is the high biomass (4+” based on the Robel pole density / visual obstruction method), high cover stage. See biomass in Milchunas et al. (1994) and Milchunas and Lauenroth (1989) and basal cover in Milchunas et al. (1989).

The same grasses are present as the previous. However, there are also more C3 perennial cool season grasses. (However, some have questioned the increase in cool-season grasses with succession as being speculative. There are definite edaphic differences. Gravelly sites in NM often support *H. neomexicana* even under intense grazing regimes.) Blue grama is still present and dominant. Needle and thread, galleta grass and also western wheatgrass are more prominent. Note also that more annuals and exotics occur in the ungrazed than in the heavily grazed sod class (Milchunas et al. 1989; Milchunas et al. 1992).

This stage is arrived at through lack of fire and grazing, although while already in this stage, fire would be

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more likely to occur due to the increased biomass.

Fire does occur in this stage. If there is fire and then grazing, this will over time transition to class B, and with long-term heavy grazing to class A. Fire alone may not cause a transition, but can especially on coarser textured soils and also when fire occurs with heavy grazing. Regular grazing can just move the class to class B.

Prairie dogs are unlikely to occur in this class, but when they do, they will occur as a patch within the matrix and will cause a transition.

Drought occurs.

As per the current modelers (Augstine, et al), it is thought that there should be approximately 10-20% of this stage historically. However, there might be very little of this stage on the landscape today, although some feel that there might be a large amount of it on the landscape today in NM.

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Class D	0 %	<u>Indicator Species and Canopy Position</u>	<u>Structure Data (for upper layer lifeform)</u>												
[Not Used]	[Not Used]		<table border="1"><thead><tr><th></th><th>Min</th><th>Max</th></tr></thead><tbody><tr><td>Cover</td><td>%</td><td>%</td></tr><tr><td>Height</td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td>Tree Size Class</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr></tbody></table>		Min	Max	Cover	%	%	Height			Tree Size Class		
	Min	Max													
Cover	%	%													
Height															
Tree Size Class															
<u>Upper Layer Lifeform</u>			☐ Upper layer lifeform differs from dominant lifeform.												
☐ Herbaceous															
☐ Shrub															
☐ Tree	<u>Fuel Model</u>														

Description

Class E	0 %	<u>Indicator Species and Canopy Position</u>	<u>Structure Data (for upper layer lifeform)</u>												
[Not Used]	[Not Used]		<table border="1"><thead><tr><th></th><th>Min</th><th>Max</th></tr></thead><tbody><tr><td>Cover</td><td>%</td><td>%</td></tr><tr><td>Height</td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td>Tree Size Class</td><td colspan="2">None</td></tr></tbody></table>		Min	Max	Cover	%	%	Height			Tree Size Class	None	
	Min	Max													
Cover	%	%													
Height															
Tree Size Class	None														
<u>Upper Layer Lifeform</u>			☐ Upper layer lifeform differs from dominant lifeform.												
☐ Herbaceous															
☐ Shrub															
☐ Tree	<u>Fuel Model</u>														

Description

Disturbances

**Fire Regime Groups are: I: 0-35 year frequency, surface severity; II: 0-35 year frequency, replacement severity; III: 35-100+ year frequency, mixed severity; IV: 35-100+ year frequency, replacement severity; V: 200+ year frequency, replacement severity.

Fire Regime Group:** II

Historical Fire Size (acres)

Avg 0

Min 0

Max 0

Sources of Fire Regime Data

- ☒ Literature
- ☒ Local Data
- ☒ Expert Estimate

Additional Disturbances Modeled

- ☐ Insects/Disease
- ☒ Native Grazing
- ☒ Other (optional 1) prairie dogs
- ☒ Wind/Weather/Stress
- ☐ Competition
- ☒ Other (optional 2) heavy grazing and fire

Fire Intervals

	Avg FI	Min FI	Max FI	Probability	Percent of All Fires
Replacement	22.30			0.04484	100
Mixed					
Surface					
All Fires	22			0.04486	

Fire Intervals (FI):

Fire interval is expressed in years for each fire severity class and for all types of fire combined (All Fires). Average FI is central tendency modeled. Minimum and maximum show the relative range of fire intervals, if known. Probability is the inverse of fire interval in years and is used in reference condition modeling. Percent of all fires is the percent of all fires in that severity class.

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