

LANDFIRE Biophysical Setting Model

Biophysical Setting: 5214210

Central Tallgrass Prairie

☐ This BPS is lumped with:

☐ This BPS is split into multiple models:

General Information

Contributors (also see the Comments field)

Date 11/26/2007

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Vegetation Type

Upland
Grassland/Herbaceous

Dominant Species

ANGE
SONU2

Map Zone

52

Model Zone

☐ Alaska
California

☐ Northern Plains
N-Cent.Rockies

General Model Sources

- ☒ Literature
☐ Local Data
☒ Expert Estimate

PAVI2
DECA7
RAPI
SITE
MOFI
HEGI

☐
☐ Great Basin
☒ Great Lakes
☐ Hawaii
☐ Northeast

☐
☐ Pacific Northwest
☐ South Central
☐ Southeast
☐ S. Appalachians
☐ Southwest

Geographic Range

Central Tallgrass Prairie is characteristic of much of the central plains states, ranging from eastern KS and NE to northwestern IN, with outlying occurrences in MI and OH. This BpS is local in MZ52, where it is concentrated in two general areas within the Eastern Corn Belt Plains Ecoregion of west-central OH: the Darby Plains west of Columbus and the Sandusky Plains, concentrated in Marion County (Woods et al. 1998). Prairies occurring in the Huron/Erie Lake Plains Ecoregion of northwest OH are referred to BpS 1411, Great Lakes Wet-mesic Lakeplain Prairie. Elsewhere in MZ52, Central Tallgrass Prairie occupied small patches, often associated with oak savanna and oak-hickory forest, sometimes in a broader matrix of beech-maple forest.

Biophysical Site Description

Within MZ52, Central Tallgrass Prairie occupied areas of level to gently undulating, often seasonally wet, ground moraines in the Darby Plains west of Columbus, the Sandusky Plains in Marion, Crawford, and Wyandot Counties, and locally elsewhere in the Eastern Corn Belt Plains Ecoregion. Mesic prairies occurred on flat and rolling topography including some on glacial outwash with porous subsoil of sand and gravel. Rolling areas were characterized by glacial till of recessional moraines or on residual aeolian loess deposits. Soil profiles consist of a black surface layer rich in organic material with high water-holding capacity. Within the Darby Plains, these soils are classified as mesic to aquic Mollisols. This BpS often graded into wet prairie, oak savanna, and oak-hickory forest in these regions. Lowland prairies were in and along waterways or in areas subject to frequent inundation. Soils are rich in organic matter and show evidence of inundation in a gleying layer 3-4' below the surface. While the region is influenced by dry

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continental air flow patterns and periodic drought, historic fire frequency determined the prairie-forest boundary with much variation based on topography, fuel breaks, ignition sources, and climate (Whitney 1994, Anderson and Bowles 1999). Much has been written concerning these systems and excellent reviews can be found in Curtis (1959), Whitney (1994) and Anderson, Fralish and Baskin (1999). The region is strongly influenced by dry continental air flow patterns and periodic drought (Whitney 1994).

Vegetation Description

Vegetation of this BpS within MZ52 is largely based on Anderson (1981). Dominant grasses are big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) and switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*). Secondary species such as little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) and porcupine grass (*Stipa spartea*) occupied the drier portions of these uplands and soil types and varied in importance. Characteristic forbs are tick-trefoil (*Desmodium canadense*), Sullivan's milkweed (*Asclepias sullivantii*), wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), Virginia mountain-mint (*Pycnanthemum virginianum*), New England aster (*Aster novae-angliae*), giant sunflower (*Helianthus giganteus*), saw-toothed sunflower (*H. grosseserratus*), prairie coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*), black-eyed susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), prairie dock (*Silphium terebinthinaceum*), whorled rosinweed (*S. trifoliata*) and purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*). In poorly drained areas and along streams, BpS 1488 (Eastern Great Plains Wet Meadow, Prairie, and Marsh) characterized by prairie cordgrass (*Spartina pectinata*) and bluejoint grass locally occurred.

Disturbance Description

Frequent fires impacted this prairie system every 1-3yrs, maintaining grass and forb vegetation. Insect and small mammal herbivory impacts composition and dominance. Large mammals were present in low densities, main grazers were elk and deer, but impacts were likely minimal. Fire played an important role in the maintenance of the tallgrass prairie (Curtis 1959, Vogl 1964, Anderson 1990). Fire could occur throughout the year with larger, less frequent fires occurring during the dormant season and smaller, more frequent fires occurring during the growing season. Native American burning, essential to maintaining the eastern tallgrass prairie, was bimodal in distribution, peaking in April and October with lightning ignition occurring primarily during July and August (Higgins 1986). Bison grazing as a major disturbance was likely much more limited than prairies further west. Elk probably contributed to the impact of grazing and browsing as well but it is assumed that the total contributions of these two species was still considerably less than to the west. The elk may have contributed to the reduction of young woody saplings invading prairie adjacent to protected woody areas.

Drought would have set back woody species invasion and would have increased fire intensity. Lack of winter snowfall would have also reduced (will reduce?) woody species due to desiccation of soils (citation pending).

Adjacency or Identification Concerns

Central tallgrass prairie would be adjacent to north-central interior oak savanna, north-central oak barrens, north central interior sand and gravel prairie, and sedge meadows and wet prairie.

Synonymous names for this system include: mesic prairie, wet prairie, deep soil prairie, and blacksoil prairie.

This BpS might be confused with the north central interior sand and gravel prairie.

In the absence of historic fire invasive problems have increased dramatically, including gray dogwood, American plum, hazelnut. Exotics that have become invasive due to agricultural practices and roadside plantings include reed canary grass, leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula*), sweet clover (*Melilotus alba*), crown vetch, yellow parsnip, and birds foot trefoil. Domestic livestock grazing is also an issue.

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Today this system has a severely reduced native cover (approx. 99.9% loss) particularly for the mesic component of this type due to conversion to other uses such as agriculture. In addition to the massive reduction in extent of mesic prairie, the scale of its occurrence has also been sharply reduced. Currently this type occurs in fragmented small patches ranging from 1 to 10 acres. Altering of the type is due to grazing and reduced fire resulting in greater shrub and tree component and a variety of native and non native shrubs, and non native cool season grasses (brome, bluegrass, quackgrass, redtop) resulting in reduced diversity.

This system has mainly been converted to agriculture and other development. Invasion of cool season grasses and shrubs often mask the identification of this type. It may be difficult to determine the difference between old fields and native prairie patches by using aerial photos or remote sensing data.

Again, species composition and structure were dependent on local factors such as topography, soil conditions, fire regime, plant competition, and plant-animal interactions (Anderson and Bowles 1999).

As indicated this system interfaces and mingles on the east with Oak Savanna and on the west with Mixed Grass Prairie (in Nebraska and the Dakotas). On the east there would be limited woody invasion from protected areas during periods of increased precipitation. The woody component would be limited to the edge the prairie and would not exhibit any appreciable effect overall. Since Mixed Grass Prairie is to the west, there would be little effect except in periods of extended drought the percentage of the mixed grass species would increase.

This system differs functionally from North-Central Interior Sand and Gravel Tallgrass prairie due to fire intensity - heavier fuels leading to higher fire intensity and a stronger grass competition for trees and shrubs to come in; so it's more difficult for trees and shrubs to come into this system.

Native Uncharacteristic Conditions

Many small trees and shrubs would be uncharacteristic of this system historically but occurs today due to the lack of fire. Domestic livestock grazing has also severely degraded this system. Haying would also have altered the species composition, especially for forb species. Insects may not be as prevalent in modern times due to fragmentation (hypothesis by Tim Christiansen, pers. comm.).

Scale Description

Within regions of varied topography, type patches are typically large (>1000ac) most prevalent on flat to rolling topography. Most fires were stand replacement in nature. Once ignited, dormant season fires would have spread over a large area until reaching a major firebreak (e.g. previously burned area, major river, rugged terrain, etc.). Growing season fires may have been frequent but smaller in size than dormant season fires due to the greenness of the fuel and rain following lightning ignition. Growing season fires during drought years would have been much like dormant season fires. Mixed fires were probably limited to patchy grazed areas or areas where fuel was not uniformly cured.

Issues/Problems

The plant/animal interactions are not fully understood for this model and numerous studies of these phenomena are ongoing. Research exists for bison/fire interaction in detail in the western range of this system (i.e. Kansas and Nebraska). Also, there is possible overlap with the North Central Interior Oak Savanna model (BpS ID 1394, MZs 41, 50 and 51). There is variation in oak species composition across the broad region covered by this model (i.e., bur oak [*Quercus macrocarpa*] increases in prevalence in the western portion of the range). There is also great variation in prairie type across this region. Within the western ranges of this type there was a grazing and fire interaction. As one moves east in this region fire

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increases to where it is the major disturbance factor for this type and grazing drops out as an influence. The species composition also changes from east to west. Much of the literature on fire in the tallgrass prairie does not include interaction with herbivory (Engle and Bidwell 2001) thus interpreting effects must be qualified. In addition, little is known about native ungulate grazing in this area. It is generally accepted that bison grazing was less in this grassland than in grasslands to the west. Even within this type grazing likely played a larger role as one moves from east to west. Further, it has been recently suggested that elk populations may have been large enough to have an effect on vegetative composition. Some woody plant invasion may have occurred but it was limited to areas close to seed sources such as along the eastern interface with the savanna and around woody pockets and river valleys.

Comments

This model received additional review from Jim Drake (jim_drake@natureserve.org).

Suggested reviewers: Dave Borneman, see also sand and gravel parried reviewers. This model was reviewed at the Landfire Vegetation Modeling Workshop by Elena Conteras, Randy Swaty, Mike Kost, Chris Weber, Doug Cox, and Becky Schillo.

This model for GL was adapted from the Rapid Assessment model R4PRTGc Tallgrass Prairie - Central created by Daryl Smith daryl.smith@uni.edu and reviewed by Tom Bragg tom.bragg@mail.unomaha.edu and John Ortmann jortmann@tnc.org and an anonymous reviewer. Text adapted for MZ52 by B. Slaughter.

Vegetation Classes

Class A 40 %

Early Development 1 Open

Upper Layer Lifeform

- ☒ Herbaceous
☐ Shrub
☐ Tree

Fuel Model

3

Indicator Species and Canopy Position

ANGE

Upper

SONU2

Upper

PAVI2

Upper

Structure Data (for upper layer lifeform)

	Min	Max
Cover	0 %	70 %
Height	Herb 0m	Herb >1.1m
Tree Size Class		

☐ Upper layer lifeform differs from dominant lifeform.

Open refers to absence of tree or shrub canopy cover.

Description

Post Fire Regrowth Stage - Duration: one year. From blackened state, rapid regrowth of fire positive and fire neutral perennial vegetation to maximum height by end of growing season. Warm season grasses and fire positive forbs display increased height, flowering and fruiting and appear to be more abundant depending on season of the burn. Annual, biennial and short-lived perennial species occupy space opened by litter removal. Fire neutral perennial forbs maintain pre-fire composition, but may appear to be reduced. Fire negative species are reduced. No litter accumulation in this class. Probability of a replacement fire is 1.00 as all surface fires are replacement in this system.

The cover in this class is defined as 0-70% for mapping purposes. However, it could really go up to 100% cover.

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Class B 58 %

Mid Development 1 Open

Upper Layer Lifeform☒ Herbaceous☐ Shrub☐ Tree**Fuel Model**

3

Indicator Species and Canopy Position

ANGE

Upper

SONU2

Upper

PAVI2

Upper

Structure Data (for upper layer lifeform)

	Min	Max
Cover	71 %	100 %
Height	Herb 0m	Herb >1.1m
Tree Size Class		

☐ Upper layer lifeform differs from dominant lifeform.SPHE refers to *Sporobolus heterolepis*.**Description**

Unburned Stage - Duration: 2-4yrs. This unburned stage continues to be dominated by big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) and prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) on more mesic sites with prairie cordgrass (*Spartina pectinata*) and bluejoint grass dominating the wet sites. Secondary species such as little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) and porcupine grass (*Stipa spartea*) occupied the drier portions of these uplands and soil types and varied in importance. Perennial forbs include genera such as *Asclepias*, *Aster*, *Echinacea*, *Helianthus*, *Solidago*, *Liatris*, *Dalea*, and *Viola*. Noticeable scattered shrubs, *Amorpha*, *Rosa* spp., and *Coenothus*, annually increase in size. Litter accumulates annually. Annuals, biennials, and short lived perennials gradually become less abundant.

Probability of a replacement fire is 0.33. If it's a cool fire, and intensity is low, it'll probably stay in class B; the fire will not remove all thatch and some shrubs will survive. However, with a lot of fuels, and if the fire is hot the stand could go all the way back to class A. Without fire for about six years, sometimes it will move to C.

The cover in this class is defined for mapping purposes as 71-100%. Some shrubs might be coming up in this stage.

Class C 2 %

Late Development 1 All Structures

Upper Layer Lifeform☐ Herbaceous☒ Shrub☐ Tree**Fuel Model**

3

Indicator Species and Canopy Position

ANGE

Middle

SONU2

Middle

COAM3

Upper

QUMA2

Upper

Structure Data (for upper layer lifeform)

	Min	Max
Cover	0 %	30 %
Height	Shrub 0.6m	Shrub 3.0m
Tree Size Class		

☐ Upper layer lifeform differs from dominant lifeform.

Herbaceous layer is still dominant but grass cover declining due to thatch. Vegetation cover will not be as dense.

Description

Unburned Thatch Accumulation Stage - Duration 5-20yrs. Continuation of unburned state from class B, however, with lack of fire for the long term, the prairie matrix weakens and it is succeeded by woody cover of shrubs and trees, depending on proximity of woody seed sources. Without fire the length of this stage is dependent on precipitation and temperature as well as topography and soils. It can be inferred that the effect of large ungulates, bison and elk, was highly limited in this region of this type. Probability of a replacement fire is 0.33 approximately.

As thatch builds up, grasses will start to lose vigor and become less competitive, and then shrubs or trees might start moving in, which would be uncharacteristic, because that would be due in part to lack of fire.

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Class D 0 %

[Not Used] [Not Used]

Upper Layer Lifeform

- ☐ Herbaceous
☐ Shrub
☐ Tree

Fuel Model

Indicator Species and Canopy Position

Structure Data (for upper layer lifeform)

	Min	Max
Cover	%	%
Height		
Tree Size Class		

☐ Upper layer lifeform differs from dominant lifeform.

Description

Class E 0 %

[Not Used] [Not Used]

Upper Layer Lifeform

- ☐ Herbaceous
☐ Shrub
☐ Tree

Fuel Model

Indicator Species and Canopy Position

Structure Data (for upper layer lifeform)

	Min	Max
Cover	%	%
Height		
Tree Size Class		

☐ Upper layer lifeform differs from dominant lifeform.

Description

Disturbances

Fire Regime Group:** II

Historical Fire Size (acres)

Avg 10000

Min 10

Max 100000

Sources of Fire Regime Data

- ☒ Literature
☐ Local Data
☒ Expert Estimate

Additional Disturbances Modeled

- ☐ Insects/Disease ☐ Native Grazing ☐ Other (optional 1)
☒ Wind/Weather/Stress ☐ Competition ☐ Other (optional 2)

Fire Intervals

	Avg FI	Min FI	Max FI	Probability	Percent of All Fires
Replacement	3.565	2	5	0.2805	100
Mixed					
Surface					
All Fires	4			0.28052	

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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