

LANDFIRE Biophysical Setting Model

Biophysical Setting 7416280

Western North American Boreal Low Shrub-Tussock Tundra

☐ This BPS is lumped with:

☐ This BPS is split into multiple models:

General Information

Contributors (also see the Comments field)

Date 4/4/2008

Modeler 1 Jennifer Allen

Jennifer_Allen@nps.gov

Reviewer Lisa Saperstein

Lisa_Saperstein@fws.gov

Modeler 2

Reviewer Stuart Chapin

fffsc@uaf.edu

Modeler 3

Reviewer

Vegetation Type

Upland Shrubland

Map Zone

74

Model Zone

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

Dominant Species*

ERVA4 LEPAD
CABI5 VACCI
BENA CACA4
SAPU15 ARCTA

General Model Sources

- ☒ Literature
☒ Local Data
☒ Expert Estimate

Geographic Range

This BpS occurs in the boreal and the northern section of the sub-boreal region of AK. It is found on lowland to subalpine sites.

Biophysical Site Description

The following information was taken from the draft Boreal Ecological Systems description (NatureServe 2008):

Permafrost is usually present at depths of 30-50cm. Soils are generally acidic, poorly drained, gleyed, and often with a poorly decomposed organic horizon at the surface, which may constitute most of the active layer. Frost scars are common. Tussock communities occur on gentle slopes, terraces, and old alluvial deposits. Sites are often underlain by silty mineral soils with a surface peat layer 10-40cm thick surrounding the tussocks (Viereck et al 1992).

Vegetation Description

The following information was taken from the draft Boreal Ecological Systems description (NatureServe 2008):

Boreal Low Shrub-Tussock Tundra is a common lowland system dominated by tussock sedges and low shrubs. Eriophorum vaginatum is the primary tussock-former in most stands, but Carex bigelowii may be the dominant tussock sedge on some sites. Other indicator species include Betula nana (includes B. glandulosa), Salix pulchra, Ledum decumbens (Ledum palustre L. ssp. Decumbens), Vaccinium vitis-idaea, V. 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).

*Dominant Species are from the NRCS PLANTS database. To check a species code, please visit <http://plants.usda.gov>.

**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

Disturbance Description

The fuel layer in sedge-shrub tussock tundra is dense and continuous and leads to large, fast spreading fires (Duchesne and Hawkes 2000, Racine et al 1987). Racine (1979) found much variation in burn intensity on a landscape scale on the Seward Peninsula, from completely unburned to intensely burned. These patterns are related to variations in topography and the composition, moisture content and soil organic accumulations of the plant communities. Fires in Eriophorum tussock tundra types tend to be light because of the wet soil profile (Wein 1971). Burns in this type usually consume all aerial woody and herbaceous plant material and litter; regeneration is vigorous via rhizomes and root sprouts. Racine (1979) found that burning was generally less severe in the tussock-shrub and sedge-shrub tundras than in the birch and ericaceous shrub tundra of the Seward Peninsula. He found that tundra burns were patchy, with unburned communities and unburned patches within burned communities.

More fires occur near the forest-tundra ecotone and spread further if trees are present (Heinselman 1981). Wein (1976) reports that July and August are the most common months for lightning fires in tundra ecosystems, while Racine et al (1983, 1985) found that distinct fire seasons occur in both June and July in the Noatak River watershed. Subsidence and thermal erosion following fire is usually minimal in tundra ecosystems (Walker 1996).

In most areas of tussock-shrub tundra on the Seward Peninsula, less than one half of accumulated organic soil layer was removed by fire (Racine 1979). Thaw depths increased to reach into the mineral soils, but were not greatly increased except where organics were removed. Frost features were made more conspicuous, and soil nutrient concentrations (K and P) increased locally.

Mean fire return interval estimates for tussock tundra ecosystems include:

- 50-300yrs (personal communication FRCC experts' workshop March 2004)
- 260yr (s.d. 170) fire return interval for past 1500yrs for Noatak National Preserve (preliminary data from Higuera et al. 2008)
- 180-1460yrs in forest shrub zone and 9320yrs in shrub subzone in northern Quebec; shorter cycle west of Hudson's Bay/in interior zone (Payette et al 1989)
- 612yrs for Noatak River watershed (all vegetation types) (Racine et al 1983)
- 611yr fire rotation for Noatak River watershed (all vegetation below 600m which is predominantly tundra) (Racine et al 1985)
- Fire interval yet to be determined (Racine et al 1987)
- Rapid recovery following fire makes fire frequency difficult to determine (Wein 1971)
- The fire regime of tundra systems are likely quite variable from one region to another making generalizations difficult (Viereck and Schandelmeier 1980).

On interior and southcentral AK 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 AK, 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.

Adjacency or Identification Concerns

The Boreal Low Shrub-Tussock Tundra is similar to the Arctic Tussock Low Shrub Tundra system (and the Tussock Tundra 2 PNV) that occurs in AK's arctic and has a longer mean fire return interval

*Dominant Species are from the NRCS PLANTS database. To check a species code, please visit <http://plants.usda.gov>.

**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

(NatureServe 2008). Geographic location is the best determinant between these two systems.

Native Uncharacteristic Conditions

Scale Description

Vegetation found in large patches.

Wien (1976) reports many tundra fires in the 1-100ha size range and few large (thousands of ha) fires. Racine (1979) reports that in 1977, lightning-caused fires burned 35,480ha on the Seward Peninsula, with one fire burning 9440ha. Jandt and Meyers (2000) report that large fires (>200,000ha) occur about every 10yrs in the Buckland Valley and surrounding highlands of the Seward Peninsula. Racine et al (1983) found that 40 fires burned 100,000ha (1000km²) in the 30,000km² watershed of the Noatak River between 1956 and 1981. Racine et al (1985) found a minimum fire size of 0.4ha, a maximum fire size of 45,800ha and a mean fire size of 1310ha from 1956-1983 in the Noatak River watershed, an area dominated by tundra vegetation. Of the 79 fires analyzed by Racine et al (1985), nearly half were between 1-10ha in size. Forty-three percent of wildland fires occurring in interior AK occur in treeless areas, primarily tundra bogs and fens (Vioreck 1975).

Issues/Problems

Comments

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).

Vegetation Classes

Class A 10 %

Early Development 1 All Structures

Upper Layer Lifeform

- ☒ Herbaceous
☐ Shrub
☐ Tree

Indicator Species* and Canopy Position

ERVA4 Upper
CABI5 Upper
CACA4 Upper
ARCTA Upper

Structure Data (for upper layer lifeform)

	Min	Max
Cover	Herbaceous	Herbaceous
Height	Herbaceous	Herbaceous
Tree Size Class	None	

☐ Upper layer lifeform differs from dominant lifeform.

Description

0-14yrs

Mesic herbaceous-graminoid-tussock-sedge. First year following fire Eriophorum (cottongrass) and Carex spp. (sedges) regrow via rhizomes, most vascular species begin to recover, shrubs sprout from rootstock. Sedges often capture site 6-10yrs post fire. Grasses (Calamagrostis and Arctagrostis) are locally important following fire.

Succession to class B. Replacement MFRI = 175yrs.

*Dominant Species are from the NRCS PLANTS database. To check a species code, please visit <http://plants.usda.gov>.

**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 B 75 %

Mid Development 1 Closed

Upper Layer Lifeform☐ Herbaceous☒ Shrub☐ Tree**Indicator Species* and Canopy Position**

BENA Upper

SALIX Upper

ERVA4 Upper

CABI5 Upper

Structure Data (for upper layer lifeform)

	Min	Max
Cover	Open Shrub (25-74% shrub cover)	Closed Shrub (> 75% shrub cover)
Height	Dwarf Shrub (< 20 cm)	Low Shrub (20 cm to 1.5 m)
Tree Size Class	None	

☐ Upper layer lifeform differs from dominant lifeform.

Classes B and C should be mapped based on EVT if possible. Class B is represented by Mixed Shrub-Sedge Tussock Tundra/Bog and class C by tussock-shrub-lichen. If these types are not mapped, B can be considered a low shrub class and C a dwarf shrub class for mapping.

Description

15yrs+

Low shrub-tussock. Tussocks dominated by Eriophorum (cottongrass), Carex spp. (sedges). Common shrub species include Betula nana, Salix spp. and Vaccinium uliginosum. Lichens begin to re-establish but do not reach former abundance until 50-120yrs following fire. Fire is difficult to detect even in the early stages of this class; however, the proportions of species differ from the pre-burn community, with very few lichens, fewer shrubs and more sedges, grasses and cottongrass. Former abundances of all species are typically reached 50-120yrs post fire. Lichens, if present, have <25% cover.

This class can persist in the absence of disturbance or follow an alternate succession pathway to class C (probability = 0.001). Replacement MFRI = 175yrs causes transition to class A.

Class C 15 %

Mid Development 1 Open

Upper Layer Lifeform☐ Herbaceous☒ Shrub☐ Tree**Indicator Species* and Canopy Position**

BENA Upper

SALIX Upper

ERVA4 Upper

PECA60 Upper

Structure Data (for upper layer lifeform)

	Min	Max
Cover	Open Shrub (25-74% shrub cover)	Closed Shrub (> 75% shrub cover)
Height	Dwarf Shrub (< 20 cm)	Low Shrub (20 cm to 1.5 m)
Tree Size Class	None	

☐ Upper layer lifeform differs from dominant lifeform.

Classes B and C should be mapped based on EVT if possible. Class B is represented by Mixed Shrub-Sedge Tussock Tundra/Bog and class C by tussock-shrub-lichen. If these types are not mapped, B can be considered a low shrub class and C a dwarf shrub class for mapping.

Description

80yrs+

Dwarf shrub-lichen-tussock. Tussocks are dominated by shrubs and lichens. Species composition is similar

*Dominant Species are from the NRCS PLANTS database. To check a species code, please visit <http://plants.usda.gov>.

**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

to that in class B, but lichen cover is >25%.

This class can persist in the absence of disturbance. Replacement MFRI = 200yrs causes transition to class A. Mixed fire (MFRI = 2000yrs) maintains this class.

Class D 0 %

[Not Used] [Not Used]

Upper Layer Lifeform

- ☐ Herbaceous
☐ Shrub
☐ Tree

**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

**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:** IV

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)
☐ Wind/Weather/Stress ☐ Competition ☐ Other (optional 2)

Fire Intervals

	Avg FI	Min FI	Max FI	Probability	Percent of All Fires
Replacement	180			0.00556	98
Mixed	9999			0.00010	2
Surface					
All Fires	177			0.00567	

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.

References

Duchesne L.C. and B.C. Hawkes. 2000. Fire in northern ecosystems. In: Brown, J.K. and J.K. Smith (eds.) Wildland fire in ecosystems: effects of fire on flora. Gen. Tech. Rep. RMRS-GTR-42-vol 2. Ogden, UT: USDA Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station. 257 pp.

*Dominant Species are from the NRCS PLANTS database. To check a species code, please visit <http://plants.usda.gov>.

**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

Heinselman, M.L. 1981. Fire and succession in the conifer forests of northern North America. In: West, D.C., H.H. Shugart, and D.B. Botkin. Forest succession: concepts and application. Springer-Verlag, New York. Chapter 23.

Higuera, P.E., M. Chipman, J. Allen, S. Rupp and F.S. Hu. 2008. Preliminary data provided by Jenifer Allen from a study of tundra fire regimes in the Noatak National Preserve since 6000 years before present.

Jandt, R.J. and R.C. Meyers. 2000. Recovery of lichen in tussock tundra following fire in Northwestern Alaska. USDOI BLM-Alaska Open File Report 82.

Murphy, K.A. and E. Witten. 2006. Tussock Tundra 1. In Fire Regime Condition Class (FRCC) Interagency Guidebook Reference Conditions. Available at www.frcc.gov.

NatureServe. 2008. International Ecological Classification Standard: Terrestrial Ecological Classifications. Draft Ecological Systems Description for Alaska Boreal and Sub-boreal Regions.

Payette, S., C. Morneau, L. Sirois and M. Despons. 1989. Recent fire history of the northern Quebec biomes. *Ecology*. 70: 656-673.

Personal communication experts' workshop, March 2-4 2004. Fire Regime Condition Class (FRCC) interagency experts' workshop to develop and review Potential Natural Vegetation (PNV) groups for Alaska. Anchorage, AK.

Racine, C.H., L.A. Johnson and L.A. Viereck. 1987. Patterns of vegetation recovery after tundra fires in northwestern Alaska, USA. *Arctic and Alpine Research*. 19: 461-469.

Racine. 1979. Climate of the Chucki-Imuruk area. Pages 32-37 in H. R. Melchior, ed., Biological Survey of the Bering Land Bridge National Monument. Alaska Cooperative Park Studies Unit, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, AK.

Racine, C.H., W.A. Patterson III and J.G. Dennis. 1983. Permafrost thaw associated with tundra fires in northwest Alaska. Pages 1024-1029 in *Proceedings, Permafrost, Fourth International Conference*. National Academy Press, Washington, D.C.

Racine, C.H., J.G. Dennis and W.A. Patterson III. 1985. Tundra fire regimes in the Noatak River Watershed, Alaska: 1956-83. *Arctic* 38: 194-200.

Racine, C., J.L. Allen and J.G. Dennis. 2006. Long-term monitoring of vegetation change following tundra fires in Noatak National Preserve, Alaska. Arctic Network of Parks inventory and monitoring program, National Park Service, Alaska Region. Report no. NPS/AKRARC/NRTR-2006/02.

Viereck, L.A. 1975. Forest ecology of the Alaska Taiga. In: *Proceedings of the circumpolar conference on northern ecology; 1975 September; Ottawa, ON*. National Research Council of Canada: I-1 to I-22.

Viereck et al. 1992. The Alaska vegetation classification. Pacific Northwest Research Station, USDA Forest Service, Portland, OR. Gen. Tech. Rep. PNW-GTR286. 278 pp.

Viereck, L.A. and Schandelmeier, L.A. 1980. Effects of fire in Alaska and adjacent Canada--a literature

*Dominant Species are from the NRCS PLANTS database. To check a species code, please visit <http://plants.usda.gov>.

**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

review. BLM-Alaska Tech. Rep. No. 6. Anchorage, Alaska: U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management. 124 pp.

Walker, D.A. 1996. Disturbance and Recovery of Arctic Alaskan Vegetation. In: JF Reynolds and JD Tenhunen eds, Landscape function and disturbance in arctic tundra. Ecological studies vol. 120, Springer Verlag Berlin Heidelberg.

Wein, R.W. 1971. Panel discussion: In: Slaughter, C.W., Barney, Richard J., and Hansen, G.M. (editors). 1971. Fire in the Northern Environment – A Symposium. Sponsors: Alaska Forest Fire Council and Society of American Foresters. Held at: The University of Alaska, Fairbanks. April 13-14, 1971. Published by: Pacific.

Wein, R.W. 1976. Frequency and characteristics of arctic tundra fires. Arctic 29: 213-222.

*Dominant Species are from the NRCS PLANTS database. To check a species code, please visit <http://plants.usda.gov>.

**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.