



Proposal to the America's Great Outdoors (AGO) Large Scale Collaboration and Conservation group for Ecological Site Descriptions and their use in Large Landscape Conservation

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Background

An interagency memorandum of understanding (MOU) was developed to guide interagency development of the manual policy and subsequent handbook (FS No. 05-MU-11132421-009, USDA-Forest Service (2005), BLM MOU WO-220-2005-07, USDI-Bureau of Land Management (2005), NRCS No. A-3A75-5-39, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (2005). The MOU stated the three agencies would develop a national standard method for defining, delineating, and describing ecological sites.

The Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Natural Resources Conservation Service approved and signed the Rangeland Interagency Ecological Site Manual in June 2010. The manual establishes as policy that the three agencies will cooperatively identify and define rangeland (non-forested vegetation) ecological sites in the inventory, monitoring, evaluation, and management of the nation's rangelands. The policy includes direction to establish interagency, interdisciplinary work groups to recommend, develop, and support the policy; and to review, approve, and provide quality control and assurance for ecological site descriptions and associated data.

What are Ecological Site Descriptions (ESDs) and why are they useful to AGO?

Ecological sites (described in ESDs) comprise a land classification system that describes ecological potential and dynamics, ecosystem services, and responses to natural and anthropogenic disturbances of land areas at local scales. They are used to stratify landscapes and organize ecological information for purposes of monitoring, assessments, management and restoration.

An ecological site is defined as a distinctive kind of land with specific soil and physical characteristics that differs from other kinds of land in its ability to: 1) produce distinctive kinds and amounts of vegetation, and 2) respond similarly to management actions and natural disturbances. An important application and use of ESDs is to document and provide reference biotic (e.g. biotic integrity, vegetation) and abiotic (e.g. soil/site stability, hydrologic function) conditions used to assess, describe, and monitor ecosystem health.

ESDs are the "common currency" that describes the "site potential" of various landscape components, *especially on private lands* (in addition to public lands). They are used by multiple agencies and provide the common language for determining ecosystem status and restoration opportunities. As such, interagency coordination is greatly improved.