

Ecological Site Description

Chert Limestone/Dolomite Exposed Backslope Woodland

F115BY046MO

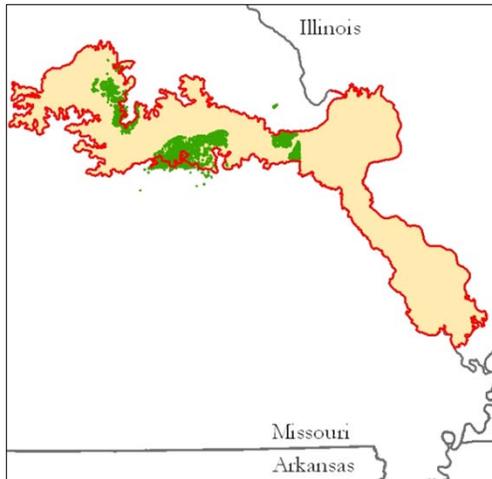
- (*Quercus stellata* - *Quercus marilandica*/*Rhus aromatica*/*Schizachyrium scoparium*)
- (post oak – blackjack oak/aromatic sumac/little bluestem)

An Ecological Site Description (ESD) is a reference document of ecological knowledge regarding a particular land area (ecological site). An ESD describes ecological potential and ecosystem dynamics of land areas and their potential management. Ecological sites are linked to soil survey map unit components, which allows for mapping of ecological sites. (**NOTE:** *This is a “provisional” ESD, and is subject to change. It contains basic ecological information sufficient for conservation planning and land management in Missouri. After additional information is developed and reviewed, a “Correlated” ESD will be published and will be available via the Web Soil Survey <http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov> .)*

Major Land Resource Area: 115B – Central Mississippi Valley Wooded Slopes, Western Part

Introduction

The Central Mississippi Valley Wooded Slopes, Western Part (area outlined in red on the map) consists mainly of the deeply dissected, loess-covered hills bordering the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers as well as the floodplains and terraces of these rivers. It wraps around the northeast corner of the Ozark Uplift, and constitutes the southern border of the Pre-Illinoian-aged till plain. Elevation ranges from about 320 feet along the Mississippi River near Cape Girardeau in the south to about 1,020 feet on the highest ridges near Hillsboro, Missouri in the east. Local relief varies from 10 to 20 feet in the major river floodplains, to 50 to 100 feet in the dissected uplands, with bluffs of 200 to 350 feet along the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Underlying bedrock is mainly Ordovician-aged dolomite and sandstone, with Mississippian-aged limestone north of the Missouri River.

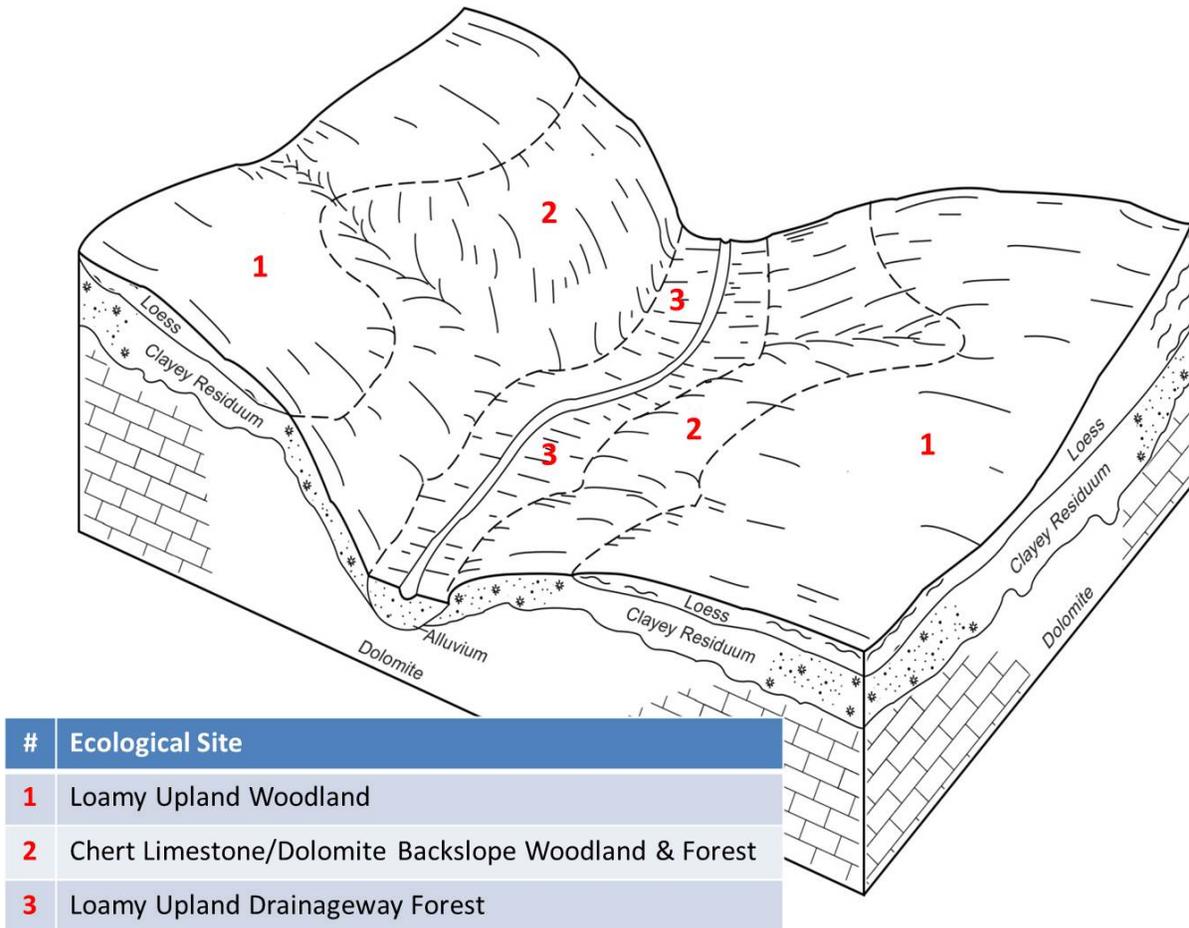


Chert Limestone/Dolomite Exposed Backslope Woodlands are within the green areas on the map. They occupy the southerly and westerly aspects of steep, dissected slopes, and are mapped in complex with the Chert Limestone/Dolomite Protected Backslope Forest ecological site. These sites are in scattered upland locations in the Missouri River watershed. Soils are typically moderately deep over limestone/dolomite bedrock, with gravelly surfaces. Shallow Limestone/Dolomite Upland Glade/Woodlands are often found associated with this ecological site.

Physiographic Features

This site is on backslopes with slopes of 15 to 70 percent. It is on exposed aspects (south, southwest, and west), which receive significantly more solar radiation than the protected aspects. The site receives runoff from upslope summit and shoulder sites, and generates runoff to adjacent, downslope ecological sites. This site does not flood.

The following figure (adapted from Davis, 2002) shows the typical landscape position of this ecological site, and landscape relationships among the major ecological sites in the uplands. The site is within the area labeled “2”, on steep backslopes with southerly and westerly aspects. Loamy Upland Woodlands (labeled “1”) are typically upslope on hillslope summits, crests and shoulders. Shallow Limestone/Dolomite glade sites are commonly associated with this site, but are not shown on the figure.



Soil Features

These soils are underlain with limestone and/or dolomite bedrock at 20 to 40 inches deep. The soils were formed under woodland vegetation, and have thin, light-colored surface horizons. Parent material is slope alluvium over residuum weathered from limestone and dolomite, overlying limestone bedrock. They have gravelly to very gravelly silt loam surface layers, with clayey subsoils that have moderate to high amounts of chert gravel and cobbles. These soils are not affected by seasonal wetness. Soil series associated with this site include Bardley and Gatewood.

Ecological Dynamics

Information contained in this section was developed using historical data, professional experience, field reviews, and scientific studies. The information presented is representative of very complex vegetation communities. Key indicator plants, animals and ecological processes are described to help inform land management decisions. Plant communities will differ across the MLRA because of

the naturally occurring variability in weather, soils, and aspect. The Reference Plant Community is not necessarily the management goal. The species lists are representative and are not botanical descriptions of all species occurring, or potentially occurring, on this site. They are not intended to cover every situation or the full range of conditions, species, and responses for the site.

The somewhat shallow, droughty soils of Cherty Limestone/Dolomite Exposed Backslope Woodlands limit the growth of trees and support an abundance of native grasses and forbs in the understory. Wild fires played an important role in the maintenance of these ecological sites with these sites, along with adjacent glades and woodlands burned at least once every 5 years. These periodic fires kept woodlands open, removed the litter, and stimulated the growth and flowering of the grasses and forbs. Rather short (40 to 50 feet) post oak dominated an open overstory, with chinkapin, blackjack and black oaks. Shrubs were scattered within a dense matrix of native grasses and forbs.

During longer fire free intervals, woody species, such as especially eastern red cedar and black hickory, would have increased and the herbaceous understory diminished. But the return of wild fires would have opened the woodlands up again and stimulated the abundant ground flora. Characteristic plants in the ground flora can be used to gauge the restoration potential of a stand along with remnant open-grown old-age trees, and tree height growth.

Cherty Limestone/Dolomite Exposed Backslope Woodlands were also subjected to occasional disturbances from wind and ice, as well as grazing by native large herbivores, such as bison, elk, and deer. Wind and ice would have periodically opened the canopy up by knocking over trees or breaking substantial branches off canopy trees. Grazing by native herbivores would have effectively kept understory conditions more open, creating conditions more favorable to oak reproduction and sun-loving ground flora species.

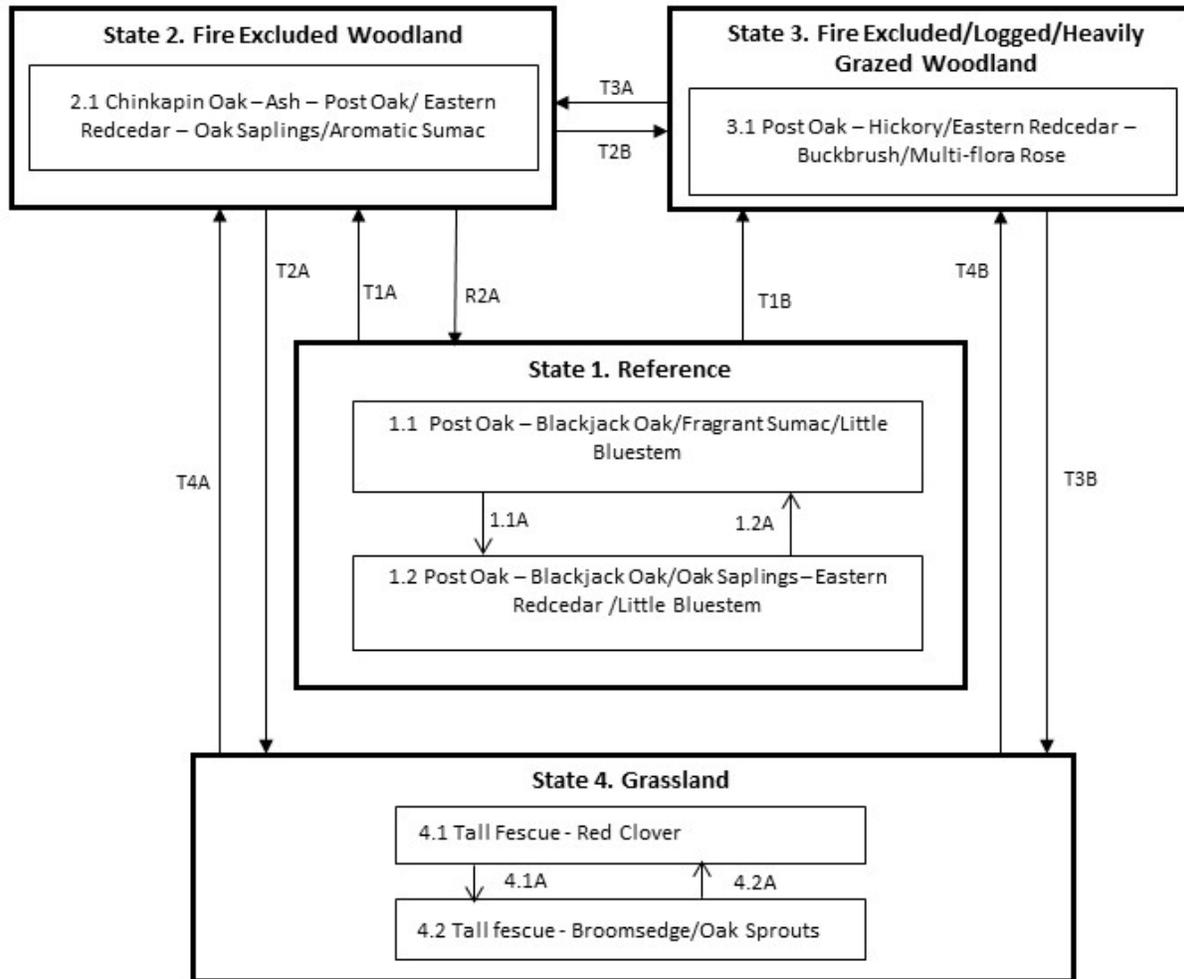
Uncontrolled domestic grazing has also impacted these communities, further diminishing the diversity of native plants and introducing species that are tolerant of grazing, such as redcedar, buckbrush, gooseberry, and Virginia creeper. Grazed sites also have a more open understory. In addition, soil compaction and soil erosion due related to grazing can be a problem and lower site productivity.

Timber harvest is limited on these sites because of rather poor to fair quality trees. Removal of the younger understory and the application of prescribed fire have proven to be effective restoration management practices.

A State and Transition Diagram is depicted in Figure 1. Detailed descriptions of each state, transition, plant community, and pathway follow the model. This model is based on available experimental research, field observations, professional consensus, and interpretations. It is likely to change as knowledge increases.

Figure 1: State and Transition Diagram

**Chert Limestone/Dolomite Exposed Backslope Woodland,
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Code	Event/Activity
T1A	Fire-free interval (20+ years)
T1B	Fire suppression; heavy grazing by livestock; logging
T3A	Livestock removal
T2B	Heavy grazing by livestock; logging
T2A, T3B	Clearing; grassland seeding; grassland management
T4A	Tree planting; long term succession (50+ years); no grazing
T4B	Long term succession (50+ years); light periodic grazing
R2A	Understory removal; prescribed fire
1.1A	Fire-free interval 10-15 years
1.2A	Fire 3-5 year cycle
4.1A	Over grazing; no fertilization
4.2A	Brush management; grassland seeding; grassland management

Ecological States

State 1: Reference State

Historically, these woodlands occurred occur on steep backslopes with southern and western aspects. The restricted soil depth, droughty conditions, and native grasses made them susceptible to frequent fires, once every 3 to 5 years. Consequently, fire-tolerant post oak, black oak, and chinkapin oak, along with hickory dominated the open-canopy overstory. The understory consisted of a dense cover of native grasses and forbs (community phase 1.1). Tree height was 40 to 50 feet, and canopy closure 40 to 80 percent. During fire-free intervals, eastern redcedar, along with oak sprouts, increased in abundance and competed with the herbaceous ground flora, creating brushy woodland (community phase 1.2). However, the return of fire would re-open the woodland and promote the ground flora.

State 2: Fire Excluded Woodland

Fire suppression has allowed these previously open woodlands to become dense with less fire-tolerant trees and saplings such as eastern redcedar. The dense, shaded conditions and lack of fire has caused the ground flora to decrease in cover and diversity. Aromatic sumac often forms a dense shrub understory under these conditions. However, many of the original herbaceous species persist as small plantlets or in the seed bank. Consequently, thinning of the woody species and the re-introduction of fire has shown these communities to be exceptionally resilient, and a return, after a period of many years, to the reference condition is possible.

State 3: Fire Excluded/ Logged/Heavily Grazed Woodland

In addition to fire exclusion, many of these sites have been subjected to heavy grazing by domestic livestock and periodic logging. Like State 2, these areas are dense and shady with a diminished ground flora. In addition, grazed areas exhibit a lower diversity of native ground flora species and an increased abundance of eastern redcedar and other invasive natives such as buck brush and multi-flora rose. Like State 2, restoration using thinning and fire is possible, but will take longer and require more effort. Restricting livestock access and eliminating logging will be necessary for successful restoration.

State 4: Grassland

Conversion of other states to non-native cool season species such as tall fescue and red clover has been common. Occasionally, these pastures will have scattered oaks. Long term uncontrolled grazing can cause significant soil erosion and compaction. A return to the reference state may be impossible, requiring a very long term series of management options. If oak sprouting is left unchecked and grazing is eliminated or reduced then over time this state will transition to a fire excluded woodland or to a high-graded/grazed woodland.

Reference State Plant Community

Canopy Trees

Common Name	Botanical Name	Cover % (low-high)	Canopy Height (ft)
CHINKAPIN OAK	<i>Quercus muehlenbergii</i>	10-20	40
BLUE ASH	<i>Fraxinus quadrangulata</i>	10-20	40
POST OAK	<i>Quercus stellata</i>	10-20	50
BLACK OAK	<i>Quercus velutina</i>	10-20	60
BLACKJACK OAK	<i>Quercus marilandica</i>	10-20	30
EASTERN REDCEDAR	<i>Juniperus virginiana</i>	10-20	30

Shrubs

Common Name	Botanical Name	Cover % (low-high)	Canopy Height (ft)
CAROLINA BUCKTHORN	<i>Frangula caroliniana</i>	10-20	10
FRAGRANT SUMAC	<i>Rhus aromatica</i>	10-20	3
DWARF HACKBERRY	<i>Celtis tenuifolia</i>	10-20	5

Forbs

Common Name	Botanical Name	Cover % (low-high)
HOARY PUCCOON	<i>Lithospermum canescens</i>	5-20
BRISTLY SUNFLOWER	<i>Helianthus hirsutus</i>	5-20
MILK VETCH	<i>Astragalus distortus</i>	5-20
STARRY CAMPION	<i>Silene stellata</i>	5-20
GOLDEN ALEXANDER	<i>Zizia aurea</i>	5-20
BUTTERFLY WEED	<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	5-20
SCURFY PEA	<i>Psoraleidium tenuiflorum</i>	5-20
BLAZING STAR	<i>Liatris aspera</i>	5-20
YELLOW STAR GRASS	<i>Hypoxis hirsuta</i>	5-20
PRAIRIE DOCK	<i>Silphium terebinthinaceum</i>	5-20
WHITE WILD INDIGO	<i>Baptisia leucantha</i>	5-20
PRAIRIE ASTER	<i>Symphotrichum turbinellum</i>	5-20
PRAIRIE COREOPSIS	<i>Coreopsis palmata</i>	5-20

Grasses and sedges

Common Name	Botanical Name	Cover % (low-high)
LITTLE BLUESTEM	<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>	10-30
WOODLAND BROME	<i>Bromus pubescens</i>	10-20
BIG BLUESTEM	<i>Andropogon gerrardii</i>	10-20
SIDEOATS GRAMA	<i>Bouteloua curtipendula</i>	10-20
SLENDER WOODLAND SEDGE	<i>Carex digitalis</i>	10-20
WHITETINGE SEDGE	<i>Carex albicans</i>	10-20
POVERTY OATGRASS	<i>Danthonia spicata</i>	10-20
ROCK MUHLY GRASS	<i>Muhlenbergia sobolifera</i>	10-20

Site Interpretations

Wildlife

- Oaks provide hard mast; scattered shrubs provide soft mast.
- Sedges and native cool-season grasses provide green browse; native warm-season grasses on dry sites provide cover and nesting habitat; and forbs provide a diversity and abundance of insects.
- Birds associated with Chert Limestone Exposed Backslope Woodlands are Indigo Bunting, Red-headed Woodpecker, Eastern Bluebird, Northern Bobwhite, Summer Tanager, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Whip-poor-will, Chuck-will's widow, and Red-eyed Vireo.
- Reptiles and amphibians associated with this ecological type include: ornate box turtle, northern fence lizard, five-lined skink, coal skink, broad-headed skink, six-lined racerunner, western slender glass lizard, prairie ring-necked snake, flat-headed snake, rough earth snake, red milk snake, western pygmy rattlesnake, and timber rattlesnake.

Forestry

- **Management:** Statewide field collected site index values average 41 for white oak and 45 for black oak. Timber management opportunities are fair. Create group openings of at least 2 acres. Large clearcuts should be minimized if possible to reduce impacts on wildlife and aesthetics. Uneven-aged management using single tree selection or small group selection cuttings of ½ to 1 acre are other options that can be used if clear cutting is not desired or warranted. Using prescribed fire as a management tool could have a negative impact on timber quality and should be used with caution on a particular site if timber management is the primary objective. These sites respond well to prescribed fire for restoration purposes. Favor post oak, black oak, chinkapin oak, and hickory.
- **Limitations:** Large amounts of coarse fragments throughout profile; bedrock within 40 inches. Surface stones and rocks are problems for efficient and safe equipment operation and will make equipment use somewhat difficult. Disturbing the surface excessively in harvesting operations and building roads increases soil losses, which leaves a greater amount of coarse fragments on the surface. Hand planting or direct seeding may be necessary. Seedling mortality due to low available water capacity may be high. Mulching or providing shade can improve seedling survival. Mechanical tree planting will be limited. Erosion is a hazard when slopes exceed 15 percent. On steep slopes greater than 35 percent, traction problems increase and equipment use is not recommended.

Glossary

Backslope – a hillslope profile position that forms the steepest and generally linear, middle portion of the slope.

Backswamp – marshy or swampy, depressed areas of flood plains between natural levees and valley sides or terraces

Calcareous – the presence of calcium carbonate in the soil parent material within the rooting zone; relatively alkaline

Claypan – a dense, compact, slowly permeable layer in the subsoil having much higher clay content than the overlying material

Chert – hard, extremely dense or compact crystalline sedimentary rock, consisting dominantly of interlocking crystals of quartz

Cliff – a significant vertical, or near vertical, rock exposure

Dolomite – a type of sedimentary rock that is a carbonate mineral composed of calcium magnesium carbonate

Drainageway – the upper most reach of a stream channel system characterized by little meandering

Dry – a site where soil moisture is limiting during the growing season; low available water capacity

Dune – a low mound, ridge, bank or hill of loose, wind-blown sand

Exposed – steep, south and west-facing slopes, which are warmer and drier than other slope aspects

Flatwoods – a type of woodland that occurs on soils with a root restricting subsoil layer within 20 to 30 inches, resulting in very slow runoff and ponding that remains saturated for most of the winter and early spring months but dries out and becomes very dry in the summer months; plants that grow there must be adapted to both conditions

Floodplain – the nearly level plain that borders a stream and is subject to inundation under flood-stage conditions

Footslope – a hillslope position at the base of a slope where hillslope sediment (colluvium) accumulates

Forest – a vegetative community dominated by trees forming a closed canopy and interspersed with shade-tolerant understory species

Fragipan – a dense, brittle subsoil horizon that is extremely hard and compact when dry

Glade – open, rocky, barren vegetative community dominated by drought-adapted forbs and grasses, typically with scattered, stunted woody plants

Igneous –bedrock formed by cooling and solidification of magma. Granite and rhyolite are typical igneous bedrocks in Missouri

Limestone – a type of sedimentary rock composed largely of calcium carbonate

Loess – material transported and deposited by wind and consisting predominantly of silt-size particles

Loamy – soil material containing a relatively equal mixture of sand and silt and a somewhat smaller proportion of clay

Marsh – a type of wetland that is dominated by herbaceous rather than woody plant species

Moist – a site that is moderately well to well drained and has high available water capacity, resulting in a well-balanced supply of moisture (neither too dry nor too wet).

Mudstone – blocky or massive, fine-grained sedimentary rock in which the proportions of clay and silt are approximately equal

Natric – a soil horizon that displays a blocky, columnar, or prismatic structure and has a subhorizon with an exchangeable-sodium saturation of over 15%

Outwash – stratified sediments of sand and gravel removed or “washed out” from a glacier by melt-water streams

Prairie – a vegetative community dominated by perennial grasses and forbs with scattered shrubs and very few trees

Protected – steep, north- and east-facing slopes, which are cooler and moister than other slope aspects

Residuum - unconsolidated, weathered, or partly weathered mineral material that accumulates by disintegration of bedrock in place

Riser – a component of terraces and flood-plain steps consisting of the steep side slope; the escarpment

Riverfront – a vegetative community in the floodplain immediately adjacent and generally parallel to a river or stream channel

River hills – a geographic area characterized by thick, dissected loess deposits, formed immediately adjacent to the edges of the Missouri and Mississippi River floodplains

Sandy – a coarse-sized soil containing a large mixture of sand and gravels and a somewhat smaller proportion of silts and clays with excessive drainage

Sandstone – a sedimentary rock containing dominantly sand-size particles

Savanna – grasslands interspersed with open-grown scattered trees, groupings of trees, and shrubs

Shale – a sedimentary rock formed from clay, silty clay, or silty clay loam deposits and having the tendency to split into thin layers

Shallow – a site with bedrock within 20 inches of the surface

Shoulder – the slope profile position that forms the convex surface near the top of a hill slope; it comprises the transition zone from summit to backslope

Sinkhole – a closed, circular or elliptical depression, commonly funnel-shaped, characterized by subsurface drainage and formed either by dissolution of the surface of underlying bedrock or by collapse of underlying caves within bedrock

Summit – the top or highest area of a hillslope

Swale – shallow, closed depressions irregularly spaced across a floodplain or terrace with an irregularly undulating surface.

Swamp – an area of low, saturated ground, intermittently or permanently covered with water, and predominantly vegetated by shrubs and trees.

Talus – rock fragments of any size or shape (usually coarse and angular) derived from and lying at the base of a cliff or very steep rock slope.

Terrace – a step-like surface, bordering a valley floor that represents the former position of a flood plain

Till – dominantly unsorted and unstratified soil material deposited directly by a glacier

Upland – a general term for the higher ground of a region, in contrast with a low-lying, adjacent land such as a valley or floodplain

Wet – a somewhat poorly, poorly or very poorly drained site that has an oversupply of moisture during the growing season

Woodland – a highly variable vegetative community with a canopy of trees ranging from 30 to 100 percent closure with a sparse midstory and a dense ground flora of grasses, sedges and forbs

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