RANGE TREND STUDY METHODS

Studies monitoring range trend depend greatly on site selection, especially when dealing with large geographic areas such as wildlife management units. Since it is impossible to intensively monitor all vegetation or habitat types within a unit, it is necessary to concentrate on specific sites and/or "key" areas within distinct plant communities on big game ranges. These "key" areas should be places where big game animals have demonstrated a definite pattern of use during normal climatic conditions over a long period. Trend studies are located within these areas of high use and/or crucial habitat as agreed upon by Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and US Forest Service (USFS) personnel. Historically, Range Trend studies were established in conjunction with permanently marked pellet group transects. Once a "key" area is selected, then specific placement for sampling will be determined. The sampling grid is carefully placed in order to adequately represent the surrounding area. Half-high steel fence posts or similar materials permanently mark all sampling baselines. The first, or "0-foot baseline stake", is marked with a metal tag for proper identification of the transect.

Study sites for the Watershed Restoration Initiative (WRI) are placed to monitor vegetation treatment projects. Studies are established to assess conditions prior to treatment, and then are re-read approximately every 3-5 years following treatment.

Vegetation Composition

Study Site Setup: Study sites are set up to determine vegetation composition. The standard study site setup consists of a 500-foot transect (five consecutive 100-foot baselines) and a 100-foot belt that crosses perpendicular to each baseline. Each 100-foot belt is placed at predetermined footmark along each baselines and is centered on the 50-foot mark of each belt. When a standard study setup will not fit within the desired study location, the study transect can be modified by doglegging, splitting, shortening a baseline, or reducing the number of baselines within the study transect. If the study transect is shortened by removing one or more 100-foot baseline(s), the corresponding belt(s) should be moved to another baseline. Regardless of how many baselines are set up, all five belts need to be included in study site setup. A rebar stake is placed at the beginning of each belt to ensure that future sampling is in consistent alignment with the originally sampled belt.

1/4 m² quadrat: A 1/4 m² quadrat is centered every 5 feet along the left side of the belt, starting at the 5-foot mark. Cover and nested frequency values are determined for vegetation, litter, rock, pavement, cryptogams, and bare ground. Cover and nested frequency values are also estimated for all plant species occurring within a quadrat, including annual species. However, prior to 1992 no data was collected for annual species.

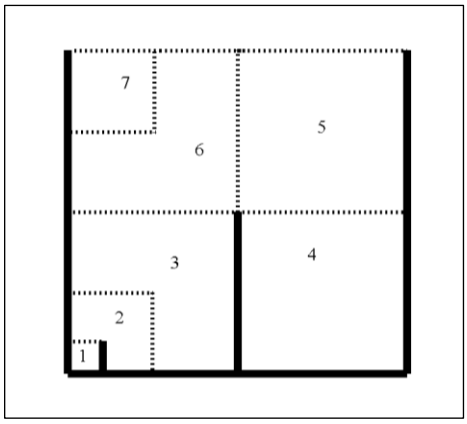

Figure 1 Cover classes of the 1/4 m^2 sampling quadrat

Quadrat Cover: Cover is determined using an ocular cover estimation procedure using seven cover classes (Bailey and Poulton 1968, Daubenmire 1959). The seven cover classes are: 1) .01-1%, 2) 1.1-5%, 3) 5.1-25%, 4) 25.1-50%, 5) 50.1-75%, 6) 75.1-95%, and 7) 95.1-100% (Figure 1). For example, to estimate vegetation cover with this method, an observer visualizes which cover class all the vegetation would fit into if the plants were moved together until touching. To quantify percent cover for bare ground, litter, rock, pavement, and cryptogams, the observer visually estimates which cover class could accommodate all specified cover types within the quadrat. These numbers are then recorded. To determine percent cover for each belt, the midpoint for each cover class value observed is summed and divided by the number of sampled quadrats (20). The mean for the five belts combined is the percent cover for a given site.

Nested Frequency: Nested frequency values for the quadrat range from 1-5 according to which area or sub-quadrat the plant species or cover type is rooted in. The notation for each sub-quadrat is as follows: 5 = 1% of the area, 4 = 5% of the area, 3 = 25% of the area, 2 = 50% of the area, and 1 = the remainder of the quadrat. Each time a particular plant species or cover type occurs within the quadrat, it is scored relative to which of the smallest nested quadrats it is rooted in (in the case of vegetation) or where it first occurs (for all other cover types). The highest possible score is 5 for each quadrat occurrence and 100 per belt, for a possible score of 500 for each species or cover type at a given site (Figure 2).

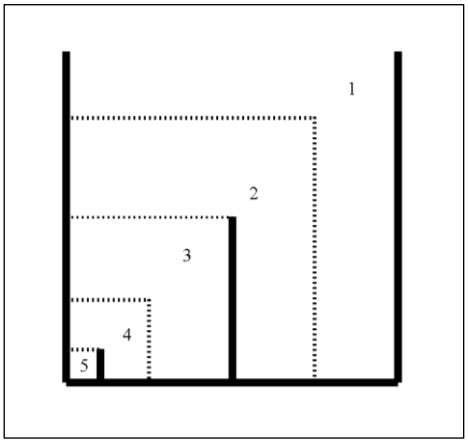

Figure 2 Nested frequency sub-quadrats of the 1/4 m^2 sampling quadrat

Higher nested frequency scores represent a higher abundance for that plant species or cover type. These summed values are used to help determine changes in trend

and composition through time. Plant cover and density values are not reliable indicators of trend for herbaceous species and can fluctuate greatly with precipitation and time of season sampled. Therefore, plant cover and density values can be misleading if used independently and do not necessarily indicate changes in composition and/or distribution of key plant species.

Line Intercept Cover: Total canopy cover of shrubs or trees is also estimated using the line-intercept method ([1]U.S. Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management, 1999). The total distance intersecting the line by a particular species of shrub or tree along each belt is divided by the total length of the belt to give percent canopy cover. A six-inch (15cm) gap rule is used in measuring intercept; gaps less than six inches between the same tree or shrub species are included in total measurement (Boyd et al., 2007).

Shrub Density & Characterization: Shrub densities are estimated using five, 1/100th acre strips centered over the length of each 100-foot belt. All shrubs rooted within each strip are counted and categorized using a modified Cole Browse Method ([2]U.S. Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management, 1999):

Seedling:	Plants up to three years old, which have become firmly established, usually less than 1/8-inch diameter.
Young:	Larger with more complex branching. Does not show signs of maturity. Usually between 1/8 and 1/4-inch diameter.
Mature:	Complex branching, rounded growth form, larger size, seed is produced on healthy plants. Generally larger than 1/4-inch diameter.
Decadent:	Plant, regardless of age, that is in a state of decline, usually evidenced by 25% or more dead branches.
Dead:	A plant that is no longer living.

Data Collection for Aspen Density by Size Class: Starting in 2011, aspen density was estimated using an aspen classification method by Jones, Burton, and Tate (2005). All aspen stems within 67 cm of each side of 100-foot distance tape are counted and recorded in the following size classes:

Size Class I:	Less than or equal to 1.5 feet (18 inches). This class size represents the annual or recent recruitment of suckers due to suckering at root buds.
Size Class II:	Greater than 1.5 feet to 5 feet. This class size represents the survival of suckers and the progression of recruitment of existing suckers that are vulnerable to browsing of the terminal leader.
Size Class III:	Greater than 5 feet and up to 1 inch dbh. This class size represents the aspen regeneration grown above the height range that is vulnerable to browsing; the minimum height for size class III represents the maximum browse line height for herbivores present.
Size Class IV:	Greater than 1 inch dbh. Class IV captures information for all remaining cohorts in the plot.

Shrubs are also rated according to their availability and the amount of use they display, and placed in one of nine form classes:

1. All available, lightly hedged
2. All available, moderately hedged
3. All available, heavily hedged
4. Largely available, lightly hedged
5. Largely available, moderately hedged
6. Largely available, heavily hedged
7. Mostly unavailable
8. Unavailable due to height
9. Unavailable due to hedging

Degree of hedging is measured by the percentage of twigs or branches that are browsed.

Lightly hedged*:	0 to 40 percent of twigs browsed
Moderately hedged*:	41 to 60 percent of twigs browsed
Heavily hedged*:	Over 60 percent of twigs browsed
Largely available:	One-third to two-thirds of plant available to animal
Mostly unavailable:	Less than one-third of plant available to animal
Unavailable:	In classifying browse to a form class, unavailability may be the result of height, location, or density

*Degree of hedging is based on leader use over the past three years: current annual growth is not included.

Shrubs are also rated on their health and placed into one of four vigor classes:

1. Normal and vigorous
2. Insect infested or diseased
3. Poor vigor
    - Chlorotic or discolored leaves, smaller than normal stems or leaves, flowering restricted, partially trampled, pulled up, or otherwise damaged. Stunted growth, partial crown death.
4. Dying
    - Substantial portion of crown dead (more than 50%), more extreme than 3 above. Probably an irreversible condition.

Height and Crown: Each mature shrub species closest to every 10-foot mark along a sampling belt is measured to determine average height and crown. This allows a maximum sample of 50 plants per species to be measured at a given site depending on their respective densities. Height and Crown measurements were discontinued prior to the 2021 field season.

Point-Center Quadrat Method: Tree density is determined using the point-center quarter method (Mitchell, 2007; Dahdouh-Guebas and Koedam, 2006; Pollard, 1971; Cottam and Curtis, 1956) at 100-foot intervals along the baseline measuring to a maximum of 15 meters. The strip method that is used to estimate shrub density can, in most cases, effectively inventory seedling and young tree densities. However, the strip method is less effective at estimating density of mature trees that are often widely distributed.

Animal Occupancy: The pellet group transect utilizes (50) $100ft^2$ circular plots that are placed through the study area. These are usually two parallel transects of 25 plots on each side of the vegetation transect which runs 400 feet to 500 feet in length. The number of recent pellet groups for wildlife (usually deer and elk) and pats for cattle are recorded. That number is then converted to days use per acre (hectare) (Neff, 1968). Quadrat frequency of wildlife and livestock droppings is also captured within the 1/4 m^2 quadrat. Rabbit pellet groups are not included in the pellet group transects, but are sampled in quadrat frequency.

Other Information: Management background information, photographs, and creditable plant identification add to the dataset for each site. Management and background information for each site is obtained from the administering agency. Repeat photographs are taken including a general view down and back up the baseline. A close-up of each half-high baseline post further characterizes individual sites. Correct plant identification is critical for a complete and accurate site analysis. Starting in 2016, species identification and classification is reported following the USDA Plant Database taxonomic nomenclature (USDA, NRCS, 2016). Prior to 2015, species identification mostly followed "A Utah Flora" (Welsh et al., 2003). In some cases, most notably *Agropyron sp*. and *Purshia sp.*, the species names used were those found in the Range Trend Study Plant Species List (Giunta, 1983), Intermountain Flora (Cronquist et al., 1977), and the Intermountain Range Plant Names and Symbols (Plummer et al., 1977) and were retained to maintain continuity and alleviate confusion with earlier published reports.

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