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 has 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 DWR, BLM, and USFS personnel. Often, range trend studies are established in conjunction with permanently marked pellet group transects. Once a "key" area has been selected, specific placement for sampling is determined. The sampling grid is carefully placed in order to adequately represent the surrounding area. Half-high steel fence posts or similar material permanently marks 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 Imitative (WRI) are placed to monitor vegetation treatment projects. Studies are established to assess conditions prior to treatment. Each study is re-read approximately every 3-5 years following treatment.

Vegetation Composition

Determining vegetation characteristics is determined by setting up five consecutive 100 foot transects in the area of interest. This 500-foot line is the baseline and one, 100-foot belt is placed perpendicular to each 100-foot section of the baseline at predetermined footmarks and centered on the 50-foot mark of the belt. 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. A 1/4 m² quadrat is centered every 5 feet along the same 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.

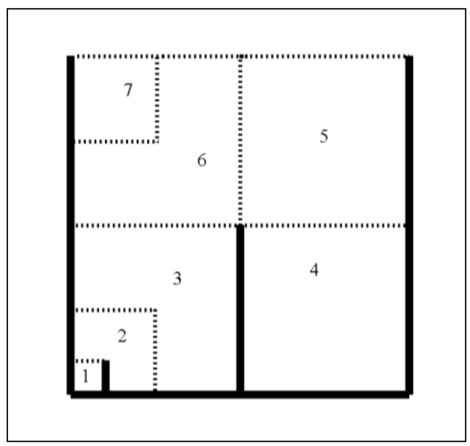

Figure 1. Cover classes of the 1/4 m^2 sampling quadrat.

<u>Percent Cover</u>: 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 would visualize which cover class all the vegetation would fit into if the plants were moved together until they were touching. To quantify percent cover for bare ground, litter, rock, pavement, and cryptogams, the observer would visually estimate which cover class could accommodate all of the specified cover type 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 sampling quadrats (20). The mean for the five belts is the percent cover for a given site.

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 tree or shrub along each belt is divided by the total length of the line to give percent canopy cover. A six-inch gap rule was used in measuring intercept; gaps less than six inches between the same tree or shrub species were included in total measurement (Boyd, Bates, & Miller 2007).

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).

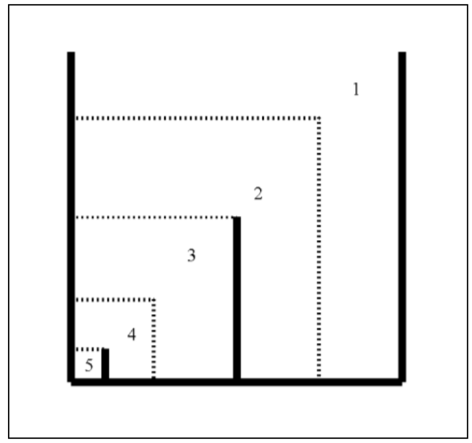

Figure 2. Nested frequency sub-quadrats of the 1/4 m^2 sampling quadrat.

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. Nested frequency has been found to be a more sensitive measurement for changes taking place within plant communities than quadrat frequency (Smith et al. 1987, Smith et al. 1986, Mosley et al. 1986). 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.

Nested frequency and average percent cover data for individual grass and forb species are summarized in the "Herbaceous Trends" table of each study discussion. Average cover of vegetation, rock, pavement, litter, cryptogams, and bare ground are summarized in the "Basic Cover" table of each study discussion.

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 ft distance tape are counted and recorded in the following size classes:

Size Class I = less than or equal to 1.5 feet (18 inches). *Scan as Seedling*
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. Scan as *Young*

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. Scan as *Mature*

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. Scan as *Decadent*

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.

*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.

In addition, 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.

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. If trees are rare due to a treatment or wildfire, the sampling area is extended to 200 foot intervals measuring to a maximum of 30 meters, and 300 feet is added to the end of the transect so that five, 200 foot point-quarter centers can be read. This allows sampling trees on a much larger scale. 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 densities 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 knowledgeable 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. For the 2015 and newer species naming follows the USDA, NRCS plants database (http://plants.usda.gov/java/), but prior to 2015, species identification mostly followed "A Utah Flora" (Welsh et al. 2003). In some cases, most notably *Agropyron spp.* and *Purshia spp.*, the species names used are 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 are retained to maintain continuity and alleviate confusion with earlier published reports.

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