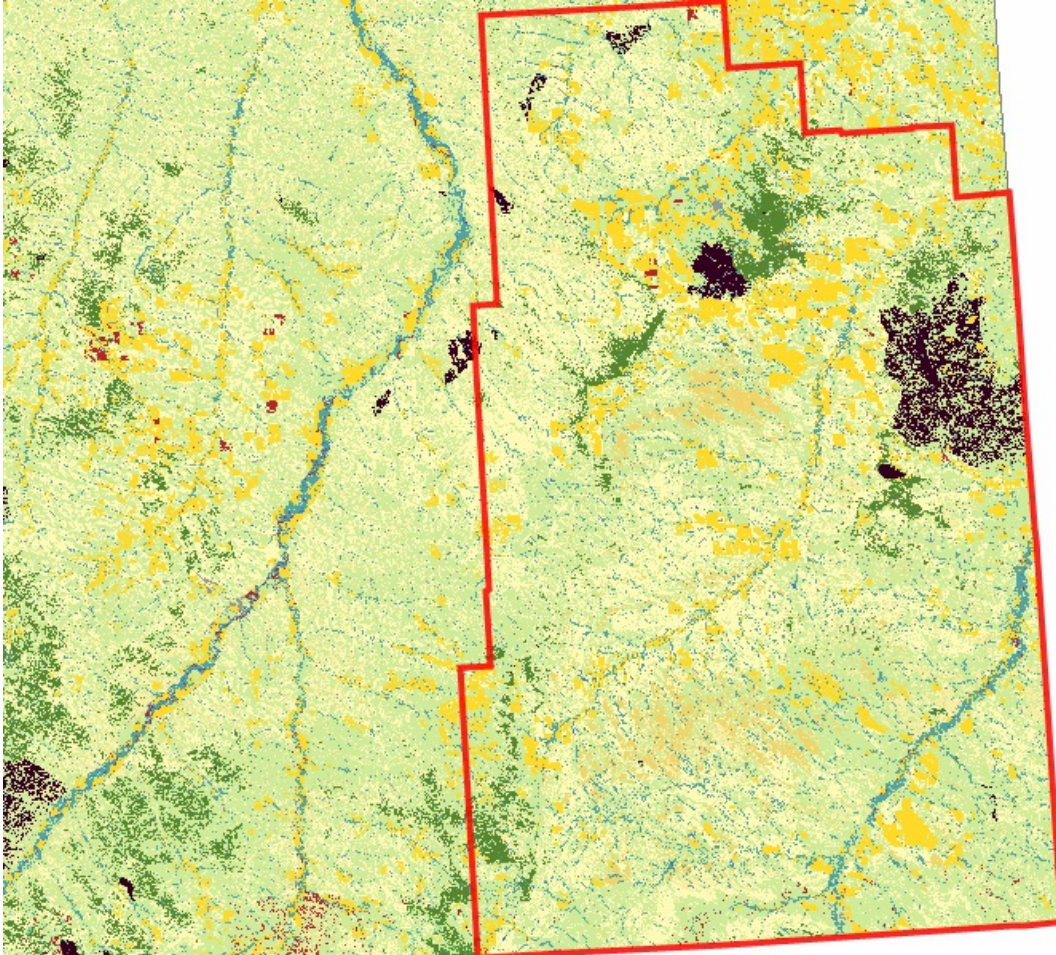




## Land Cover

Summarized by: **Carter** (County)



**38%**  
**(807,073**  
**Acres)**

### Grassland Systems Lowland/Prairie Grassland

#### **Great Plains Mixedgrass Prairie**

The system covers much of the eastern two-thirds of Montana, occurring continuously for hundreds of square kilometers, interrupted only by wetland/riparian areas or sand prairies. Soils are primarily fine and medium-textured. The growing season averages 115 days, ranging from 100 days on the Canadian border to 130 days on the Wyoming border. Climate is typical of mid-continental regions with long severe winters and hot summers. Grasses typically comprise the greatest canopy cover, and western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*) is usually dominant. Other species include thickspike wheatgrass (*Elymus lanceolatus*), green needlegrass (*Nassella viridula*), blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*), and needle and thread (*Hesperostipa comata*). Near the Canadian border in north-central Montana, this system grades into rough fescue (*Festuca campestris*) and Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*) grasslands. Remnants of shortbristle needle and thread (*Hesperostipa curtisetata*) dominated vegetation are found in northernmost Montana and North Dakota, and are associated with productive sites, now mostly converted to farmland. Forb diversity is typically high. In areas of southeastern and central Montana where sagebrush steppe borders the mixed grass prairie, common plant associations include Wyoming big sagebrush-western wheatgrass (*Artemisia tridentata* ssp. *wyomingensis*/ *Pascopyrum smithii*). Fire and grazing are the primary drivers of this system. Drought can also impact it, in general favoring the shortgrass component at the expense of the mid-height grasses. With intensive grazing, cool season exotics such as Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*), smooth brome (*Bromus inermis*), and Japanese brome (*Bromus japonicus*) increase in dominance; both of these rhizomatous species have been shown to markedly decrease species diversity. Previously cultivated acres that have been re-vegetated with non-native plants have been transformed into associations such as Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*)/western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*) or into pure crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron cristatum*) stands.



## Shrubland, Steppe and Savanna Systems Sagebrush Steppe

30%  
(634,282  
Acres)

### Big Sagebrush Steppe

This widespread ecological system occurs throughout much of central Montana, and north and east onto the western fringe of the Great Plains. In central Montana, where this system occurs on both glaciated and non-glaciated landscapes, it differs slightly, with more summer rain than winter precipitation and more precipitation annually. Throughout its distribution, soils are typically deep and non-saline, often with a microphytic crust. This shrub-steppe is dominated by perennial grasses and forbs with greater than 25% cover. Overall shrub cover is less than 10 percent. In Montana and Wyoming, stands are more mesic, with more biomass of grass, and have less shrub diversity than stands farther to the west, and 50 to 90% of the occurrences are dominated by Wyoming big sagebrush with western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*). Japanese brome (*Bromus japonicus*) and cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*) are indicators of disturbance, but cheatgrass is typically not as abundant as in the Intermountain West, possibly due to a colder climate. The natural fire regime of this ecological system maintains a patchy distribution of shrubs, preserving the steppe character. Shrubs may increase following heavy grazing and/or with fire suppression. In central and eastern Montana, complexes of prairie dog towns are common in this ecological system.



5%  
(108,770  
Acres)

## Human Land Use Agriculture

### Cultivated Crops

These areas used for the production of crops, such as corn, soybeans, small grains, sunflowers, vegetables, and cotton, typically on an annual cycle. Agricultural plant cover is variable depending on season and type of farming. Other areas include more stable land cover of orchards and vineyards.



5%  
(101,790  
Acres)

## Wetland and Riparian Systems Floodplain and Riparian

### Great Plains Riparian

This system is associated with perennial to intermittent or ephemeral streams throughout the northwestern Great Plains. In Montana, it occurs along smaller tributaries of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers, as well as tributaries to the large floodplain rivers that feed them (e.g. the Milk, Marias, Musselshell, Powder, Clark's Fork Yellowstone, Tongue, etc). In areas adjacent to the mountain ranges of central and southeastern Montana, and near the Rocky Mountain Front, it grades into Rocky Mountain Lower Montane-Foothill Riparian Woodland and Shrubland systems. This system is found on alluvial soils in highly variable landscape settings, from confined, deep cut ravines to wide, braided streambeds. Channel migration occurs in less-confined areas, but within a more narrow range than would occur in broad, alluvial floodplains. Typically, the rivers are wadeable by mid-summer.

The primary inputs of water to these systems include groundwater discharge, overland flow, and subsurface interflow from the adjacent upland. Flooding is the key ecosystem process, creating suitable sites for seed dispersal and seedling establishment, and controlling vegetation succession. Communities within this system range from riparian forests and shrublands to tallgrass wet meadows and gravel/sand flats. Dominant species are similar to those found in the Great Plains Floodplain System. In the western part of the system's range in Montana, the dominant overstory species is black cottonwood (*Populus balsamifera ssp. trichocarpa*) with narrowleaf cottonwood (*Populus angustifolia*) and Plains cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) occurring as co-dominants in the riparian/floodplain interface near the mountains. Further east, narrowleaf cottonwood and Plains cottonwood become dominant. In wetter systems, the understory is typically willow (*Salix spp.*) and redosier dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*) with graminoids such as western wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*) and forbs like American licorice (*Glycyrrhiza lepidota*). In areas where the channel is incised, the understory may be dominated by big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) or silver sagebrush (*Artemisia cana*). Like floodplain systems, riparian systems are often subjected to overgrazing and/or agriculture and can be heavily degraded, with salt cedar (*Tamarix ramosissima*) and Russian olive (*Eleagnus angustifolia*) replacing native woody vegetation and regrowth. Groundwater depletion and lack of fire have resulted in additional species changes.



4% (88,219  
Acres)

## Human Land Use Agriculture

### Pasture/Hay

These agriculture lands typically have perennial herbaceous cover (e.g. regularly-shaped plantings) used for livestock grazing or the production of hay. There are obvious signs of management such as irrigation and haying that distinguish it from natural grasslands. Identified CRP lands are included in this land cover type.



## Grassland Systems

### Lowland/Prairie Grassland

#### Great Plains Sand Prairie

4% (85,996 Acres)

The sand prairies constitute a very unique system within the western Great Plains. The unifying and controlling feature for this system is that coarse-textured soils predominate and the dominant grasses are well-adapted to this condition. In the northwestern portion of the system's range, stand size corresponds to the area of exposed caprock sandstone, and small patches predominate, but larger patches are found embedded in the encompassing Great Plains Mixed Grass Prairie, and usually occupy higher positions in local landscapes where former caprock formations have eroded into more subdued and planar topography. In most of eastern Montana, substrates supporting this system have weathered in place from sandstone caprock. Soils can be relatively thin or deep due to varying amounts of downslope movement of weathered sands. Needle and thread (*Hesperostipa comata*) is the dominant grass species. Other frequent species include little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), often occurring with threadleaf sedge (*Carex filifolia*) and dominating both sandy sites and actively eroding sites. Prairie sandreed (*Calamovilfa longifolia*), sand bluestem (*Andropogon hallii*) and big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*) are sporadically distributed and found generally on the coarsest-textured sands. Other graminoids include bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*), sun sedge (*Carex inops ssp. heliophila*), and purple threeawn (*Aristida purpurea*). Characteristic forbs differ by occurrence, but species of scurf pea (*Psoralegium* species) and Indian breadroot (*Pediemelum*) species are common. Communities of silver sage (*Artemisia cana ssp. cana*) or skunkbush sumac (*Rhus trilobata*) can occur within this system. Wind erosion, fire and grazing constitute the other major dynamic processes that can influence this system.



## Forest and Woodland Systems

### Conifer-dominated forest and woodland (xeric-mesic)

#### Great Plains Ponderosa Pine Woodland and Savanna

3% (71,838 Acres)

These ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) occurrences differ from the Rocky Mountain Ponderosa Pine Woodland and Savanna systems in that they are typically found within the matrix of the Great Plains grassland systems. They are often surrounded by mixed-grass prairie, in places where available soil moisture is higher or soils are more coarse and rocky. Elevation ranges from 1,189 meters (3,900 feet) in southeastern Montana to 1,646 m (5,400 feet) in north-central Montana. Occurrences are usually on east- and north-facing aspects. These woodlands can be physiognomically variable, ranging from very sparse patches of trees on drier sites, to nearly closed-canopy forest stands on north slopes or in draws where available soil moisture is higher.



## Shrubland, Steppe and Savanna Systems

### Scrub and Dwarf Shrubland

#### Mat Saltbush Shrubland

3% (69,382 Acres)

This system occurs in Montana on gentle slopes, rolling plains and badlands in the extreme south-central and south-eastern portions of the state. It also occurs from Glasgow north to the Canadian border. Throughout Montana, it is associated with shale foothills and badlands where soils are saline or alkaline clays and silts with low infiltration rates. It comprises relatively pure stands of Gardner's saltbush (*Atriplex gardneri*) or birdfoot sagebrush (*Artemisia pedatifida*). Other shrubs and sub-shrubs present may include longleaf wormwood (*Artemisia longifolia*), bud sagebrush (*Picrothamnus desertorum*), winterfat (*Krascheninnikovia lanata*), shortspine horsebrush (*Tetradymia spinosa*), shadscale saltbush (*Atriplex confertifolia*) or fourwing saltbush (*Atriplex canescens*). Wyoming sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata ssp. wyomingensis*) can occur in patches within this system on substrates that are less saline or alkaline. The herbaceous layer is usually very sparse. Harsh environmental conditions slow down community dynamics. Following disturbance, the same species, or species similar in stature or appearance, often succeed each other. Currently, exotic grass invasions are changing the dynamics of this system.



## Sparse and Barren Systems

### Bluff, Badland and Dune

#### Great Plains Badlands

3% (64,447 Acres)

The Western Great Plains Badlands ecological system occurs within the mixed grass and sand prairie regions of eastern and southeastern Montana, where the land lies well above or below its local base level, shaped by the carving action of streams, erosion, and erodible parent material. It is easily recognized by its rugged, eroded, and often colorful land formations, and the relative absence of vegetative cover. In those areas with vegetation, species can include scattered individuals of many dryland shrubs or herbaceous taxa, including curlycup gumweed (*Grindelia squarrosa*), threadleaf snakeweed (*Gutierrezia sarothrae*) (especially with overuse and grazing), greasewood (*Sarcobatus vermiculatus*), Gardner's saltbush (*Atriplex gardneri*), buckwheat (*Eriogonum* species), plains muhly (*Muhlenbergia cuspidata*), bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*), and Hooker's sandwort (*Arenaria hookeri*). Patches of sagebrush (*Artemisia* spp.) can also occur. Climate is typical of mid continental regions with long severe winters and warm summers. Precipitation ranges from 7 to 14 inches per year, with two-thirds of the precipitation falling during the summer, and a third falling in the spring. The sedimentary parent material of exposed rocks and the resultant eroded clay soils are derived from Cretaceous sea beds and are often fossil-rich. Dominant soil types are in the order Entisols. These mineral soils are found primarily on uplands, slopes, and creek bottoms and are easily erodible. The growing season is short, averaging 115 days, with a range from 100 days on the Canadian border to 130 days on the Wyoming border. Land use is limited, except for off-highway vehicle recreation and incidental grazing.

## Additional Limited Land Cover

- 1% (23,706 Acres) ■ Burned Sagebrush
- 1% (20,423 Acres) ■ Post-Fire Recovery
- 1% (12,534 Acres) ■ Great Plains Wooded Draw and Ravine
- 1% (11,919 Acres) ■ Great Plains Floodplain
- <1% (9,161 Acres) ■ Other Roads

<1% (7,444 Acres) ■ [Recently burned forest](#)

<1% (6,092 Acres) ■ [Greasewood Flat](#)

<1% (4,212 Acres) ■ [Recently burned shrubland](#)

<1% (2,723 Acres) ■ [Major Roads](#)

<1% (2,453 Acres) ■ [Open Water](#)

<1% (2,429 Acres) ■ [Introduced Upland Vegetation - Annual and Biennial Forbland](#)

<1% (1,589 Acres) ■ [Introduced Upland Vegetation - Annual Grassland](#)

<1% (1,091 Acres) ■ [Rocky Mountain Lower Montane-Foothill Shrubland](#)

<1% (954 Acres) ■ [Low Intensity Residential](#)

<1% (921 Acres) ■ [Great Plains Saline Depression Wetland](#)

<1% (497 Acres) ■ [Recently burned grassland](#)

<1% (266 Acres) ■ [Emergent Marsh](#)

<1% (260 Acres) ■ [Montane Sagebrush Steppe](#)

<1% (241 Acres) ■ [Developed, Open Space](#)

<1% (186 Acres) ■ [Great Plains Closed Depressional Wetland](#)

<1% (119 Acres) ■ [Great Plains Shrubland](#)

<1% (112 Acres) ■ [Great Plains Open Freshwater Depression Wetland](#)

<1% (93 Acres) ■ [Commercial / Industrial](#)

<1% (64 Acres) ■ [High Intensity Residential](#)

<1% (36 Acres) ■ [Mountain Mahogany Woodland and Shrubland](#)

<1% (36 Acres) ■ [Rocky Mountain Foothill Limber Pine - Juniper Woodland](#)

<1% (21 Acres) ■ [Rocky Mountain Foothill Woodland-Steppe Transition](#)

<1% (7 Acres) ■ [Great Plains Cliff and Outcrop](#)

<1% (6 Acres) ■ [Aspen and Mixed Conifer Forest](#)

<1% (4 Acres) ■ [Introduced Upland Vegetation - Shrub](#)

<1% (4 Acres) ■ [Gas and Gas Storage](#)

<1% (2 Acres) ■ [Rocky Mountain Subalpine-Montane Fen](#)

<1% (1 Acres) ■ [Oil and Oil / Gas](#)

<1% (1 Acres) ■ [Injection](#)

# Introduction to Land Cover

Land Use/Land Cover is one of 15 [Montana Spatial Data Infrastructure](#) framework layers considered vital for making statewide maps of Montana and understanding its geography. The layer records all Montana natural vegetation, land cover and land use, classified from satellite and aerial imagery, mapped at a scale of 1:100000, and interpreted with supporting ground-level data. The baseline map is adapted from the Northwest ReGAP (NWGAP) project land cover classification, which used 30m resolution multi-spectral Landsat imagery acquired between 1999 and 2001. Vegetation classes were drawn from the Ecological System Classification developed by NatureServe (Comer et al. 2003). The land cover classes were developed by Anderson et al. (1976). The NWGAP effort encompasses 12 map zones. Montana overlaps seven of these zones. The two NWGAP teams responsible for the initial land cover mapping effort in Montana were Sanborn and NWGAP at the University of Idaho. Both Sanborn and NWGAP employed a similar modeling approach in which Classification and Regression Tree (CART) models were applied to Landsat ETM+ scenes. The Spatial Analysis Lab within the Montana Natural Heritage Program was responsible for developing a seamless Montana land cover map with a consistent statewide legend from these two separate products. Additionally, the Montana land cover layer incorporates several other land cover and land use products (e.g., MSDI Structures and Transportation themes and the Montana Department of Revenue Final Land Unit classification) and reclassifications based on plot-level data and the latest NAIP imagery to improve accuracy and enhance the usability of the theme. Updates are done as partner support and funding allow, or when other MSDI datasets can be incorporated. Recent updates include fire perimeters and agricultural land use (annually), energy developments such as wind, oil and gas installations (2014), roads, structures and other impervious surfaces (various years): and local updates/improvements to specific ecological systems (e.g., central Montana grassland and sagebrush ecosystems). Current and previous versions of the Land Use/Land Cover layer with full metadata are available for download at the Montana State Library's [Geographic Information Clearinghouse](#).

Within the report area you have requested, land cover is summarized by acres of Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3 Ecological Systems.

## Literature Cited

- Anderson, J.R. E.E. Hardy, J.T. Roach, and R.E. Witmer. 1976. A land use and land cover classification system for use with remote sensor data. U.S. Geological Survey Professional Paper 964.
- Comer, P., D. Faber-Langendoen, R. Evans, S. Gawler, C. Josse, G. Kittel, S. Menard, M. Pyne, M. Reid, K. Schulz, K. Snow, and J. Teague. 2003. Ecological systems of the United States: A working classification of U.S. terrestrial systems. NatureServe, Arlington, VA.