

# Montana Natural Heritage Program

## FAQ - Site Record and Vegetation Community Element Occurrences

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### Data Submission

#### **How can I submit a Site Record or Community Element Occurrence?**

The Montana Natural Heritage Program (MTNHP) does not systematically survey for Sites or Community Element Occurrences and needs your help in submitting candidate areas for inclusion into the database. You can download a data form or submit a Site Record or Community Element Occurrence at [www.mtnhp.org](http://www.mtnhp.org) under the “Submit Your Observation” button. Filling out a form is not necessary if you have other documentation, like a printed report. Submissions will be reviewed by MTNHP ecologists, please provide as much detail and documentation as possible. Contact us with any specific questions. We also welcome additional or updated information on Community Element Occurrences or Site Records that are already in our database, as information can become dated and therefore less accurate or useful.

### Site Records

#### **What are Sites?**

An ecologically significant land unit documented with information in the MTNHP database. There are no laws or regulations that directly apply to Sites, although some are regulated in other ways, like wetlands or RNAs.

#### **How large are Sites?**

Sites are larger than the single plant association locations recorded in the MTNHP database as “Community Element Occurrences”. They may be as small as a wetland <1 acre in size with only two vegetation types or an entire region like the Rocky Mountain Front – but typically they are in between those two extremes.

#### **Are Sites mapped?**

Some sites have distinct boundaries that are mapped like Research Natural Areas and wetlands. Otherwise, sites are only generally mapped to a HUC boundary with a written description of the area included.

## **What kind of information is in the Sites database?**

Some sites have detailed information from field visits and research by MTNHP biologists on vegetation, key ecological processes, weed problems, land use history, threats, and management needs. Others have only minimal information derived from other sources. There is often a reference to further documentation.

## **Why do we have Sites?**

Most MTNHP data focuses on occurrences of “rare” plant, animal or vegetation communities, but does not address the landscape context on which they depend. Site records provide this larger context by highlighting the ecological significance and characteristics of the area. Such areas may include rare elements, or may simply represent high quality native habitats such as intact wetlands, riparian areas, or larger habitat mosaics.

## **Who should use Site information?**

Site information is available to biologists, planners, and others involved in resource management. Our goal is to provide documentation of ecologically significant areas or landscapes for better land stewardship.

## **Sites are not:**

Sites data is not an identification of conservation priority lands or meant to suggest any boundaries. Sites are not ranked. We don't advocate for any specific management actions or pass judgment on past management.

## **Is Site data comprehensive for Montana?**

Not at all. We have built the Sites database from a variety of sources including MTNHP projects, Forest Service data on Research Natural Areas and other designations, and reports from various studies. Site data is more prevalent for Western Montana.

## **What are the criteria for a Site Record?**

- Any area and associated data should represent information that would be valuable to those involved in public planning or management actions.
- An ecologically intact (or easily restorable) area with unique ecological values (geology, wetlands, vegetation, soils, habitat for species of concern) or a larger landscape significant for its high-quality habitat.
- Sites will typically have Element Occurrences of plants, animals, or communities, although the communities may only be high quality examples of common types.

## **Community Element Occurrences**

### **What are Community Element Occurrences?**

MTNHP and NatureServe maintain a list, description and ranking for vegetation communities (plant associations). Element occurrences are mapped locations of individual examples of communities. There are no laws or regulations that pertain to vegetation communities.

### **Are there element occurrences for all community types in Montana?**

No, most of the more than 500 plant communities thought to occur in Montana are common, so we don't track individual occurrences of these widespread types. However, plant communities have conservation ranks and we have about 400 occurrences of less common types (like a G2 S2 rank, see our website for an explanation of ranks), especially those in good ecological condition. We also maintain a separate vegetation database for Montana, which includes plots for common types. Please contact us to help build this separate resource if you have plot data.

### **Have good examples of uncommon community types been well documented in Montana?**

Montana has never had a systematic survey of plants or communities. All community element occurrences have been located through literature searches, various site-specific MTNHP projects, and input from other biologists. A more comprehensive database of uncommon plant communities will allow us to accurately rank communities, define their characteristics, and inform management decisions in areas where these communities are located.

### **How can I identify the community type?**

Communities are named for their dominant and diagnostic vegetation. A list of Montana communities and their rank is available at our website as is a community field guide with Montana specific information for some communities. The NatureServe website also has detailed community descriptions. There is no comprehensive key to communities but we have a key available for SW Montana on our website (Beaverhead Mountains specifically, but applicable in the general area). A plant list with the dominant species noted will help MTNHP ecologists to name the community if there is any doubt.

### **What are the criteria for a tracked Community Element Occurrence?**

This is a combination of two factors: the rank of the community and the quality of the occurrence based on such factors as size, landscape context, and condition. Lower quality occurrences of highly ranked (e.g. S1 or S2 rank) are acceptable while only outstanding examples of S3 communities may merit tracking.