

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

Ecoregion 16 (Montana Valley and Foothill Prairies) Observations

On October 11-13, 1999, Terry and I visited 9 of 10 randomly selected sample blocks for the Montana Valley and Foothill Prairies ecoregion (16). We also visited one additional block that fell mostly within the Northern Rockies ecoregion (15), but did touch ecoregion 16 on the outer corners of the block. My comments will be directed towards ecoregion 16. This ecoregion covers the valley regions in the western half of the state of Montana and is dominated by three main land cover types: agriculture, shrubland/rangeland, and urban. In addition there are a few areas of forest and tree cover that fall within ecoregion 16. Overall, there is little major change happening in this ecoregion. Land cover and land use practices tend to remain static from place to place.

Agriculture

The characteristics of the agriculture were consistent throughout this ecoregion. The main cash crops appear to be wheat, hay, and alfalfa. Most of the fields have some sort of irrigation system although many of them did not appear to be in working order. The majority of the wheat fields were already harvested but there were remaining stalks to show the alternating patterns of wheat and fallow. Fields were very large and often times irregularly shaped to utilize as much of the available land as possible.

There was evidence of agribusiness all over the ecoregion. Most small towns had large grain elevators that appeared to be the central business in town. There were also implement dealers and many hardware stores. Ranchers need to fix things more often than buy new equipment.

The livestock and other animals we saw included sheep, cattle, horses, buffalo, llamas, pigs (some in confinement operations), mule deer, antelope, chipmunks, miniature horses and magpies. We also saw dead skunks (numerous), jackrabbits, and porcupines along or in the road.

Shrubland/rangeland

The shrublands were more common in the Southern portion of the ecoregion and dominated mostly by sagebrush. Most of the rangeland appeared to be heavily grazed. We encountered some ranchers (cowboys on horses) herding cattle along the road indicating evidence of rotating the land use from grazed to non-grazed. Large bushes of varying type surrounded streams and rivers in the southern portions of the ecoregion.

Urban

The urban areas consisted mostly of small towns and large ranches. There was little evidence of urban growth around the city edges. Missoula showed some growth on the

very west edge leading up to Flathead Lake. There were new houses scattered around but never very close together. Each owner must have had at least 5 acres of land on which to build.

We also saw several fenced in areas that appeared to be underground missile silos. It was not evident whether they were in use or abandoned.

The logging industry was evident in the valleys. Saw mills and logging trucks were found in various parts of the ecoregion. Near Flathead Lake was the most evidence of log trucks and semi trucks hauling what appeared to be wood chips or some other byproduct.

Mining is a part of the industry in this ecoregion. We saw 2 major mining operations including the large mine in Butte and a smaller mine along Interstate 90 in Trident.

Forest/Woodland

Ecoregion 16 contains the transition from forest at higher elevations in the surrounding ecoregions to the valleys and rolling hills of ecoregion 16. These forests are primarily conifer with lodgepole pine dominating, but also include some spruce and fir with larch in the northern areas. There are also some scattered patches of deciduous, with birch in upland locations. River valleys contain primarily cottonwood and willow trees.