FIELD CONVENTIONS
USFWS Region 2
Lower Rio Grande (Texas)

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Area Checked: Laredo NE, SE, NW, SW

Overview:

The area normally averages 16-20 inches of rain a year. However, weather records indicate a wet-dry cycle of approximately 5 years. This was apparent in the field where most open water areas on the photographs were found to be completely dry. The photos were taken from 1 to 2 years prior to the field check. Both photos and field check were conducted during late fall, the start of the rainy season.

1. Most small creeks and arroyos are labelled intermittent on the topos. Only main stream channels will be pulled, and will be labelled R4SB. If deeply entrenched or showing water on photo, these will be given "A" (temporarily flooded) status; if no water and only moderate scouring, they will be labelled "J" (intermittently flooded).

2. Secondary creeks and arroyos will not be pulled, as they are rarely inundated, and then for only extremely short periods, with no periodicity.

3. Few streams shown as permanent on the topo and visited in the field had any open water present. Several large streams showing water on the photos will be designated R4SBF if the topo indicates perennial. Immediately above or below major permanent impoundments short stream segments may receive the label R2OWH (provided the impoundment is fed by a significant watershed). If no water is apparent on the photos, the larger streams will be dropped to R4SBC (seasonally flooded) or R4SBA.

4. The Rio Grande is the only completely permanent riverine system on the 1:250,000 map, and will be designated R2OWH along it entire length.

5. Vegetation along the streams should be pulled if applicable. If vegetation occurs within the stream bed, the palustrine system will be used instead of riverine to classify the channel.

6. Three types of Palustrine systems are evident in the study area: streambed vegetation; impoundments, excavations and their associated vegetation; and pothole "playa" lakes.

7. Creeks and arroyos may exhibit forest (PFO) or shrub (PSS) riparian vegetation. These will in most cases carry a water regime of "A" or "J" according to the general streambed status as discussed earlier. They will be pulled as polygons if they are broad enough, or if the riparian boundary is particularly obvious.

8. Emergent vegetation may occur in or along the streambed, and will be classed PEM1, with the appropriate water regime.

9. Smaller impoundments and excavated "tanks" across the study area are generally flooded seasonally or less and therefore must be classified as PUS (unconsolidated shore) even though open water may be apparent on the photograph. If no water or very shallow (pale blue) water is evident they will be classified "J" regardless of their status on the topo (permanent or intermittent). Larger impoundments fed by significant streambeds and water sheds will be classified as seasonal ("C"), while smaller, shallower ones will be classified as temporary ("A").

10. Semi-permanently flooded open water (POWF) will be reserved for water bodies greater than approximately 5 acres (but less than 20 acres) on the assumption that their size will enable them to retain standing water throughout most years. They will also require a permanent designation on the topo and possess a large dike.

11. Palustrine forested, scrub-shrub, and emergent areas may occur adjacent to impoundments and excavations, and will be classified PFO, PSS, or PEM according to the appropriate vegetation type and water regime.

12. Several areas of pothole "playa" lakes occur in the study area. A number of these are temporarily flooded. These are characterized by a central area of scrub-shrub surrounded by an area of short grasses. They give a photo-signature of a dark grayish-blue center (PSS1A) surrounded by a smooth pink ring (PEM1J).

    The majority of the potholes are dryer than temporary and are characterized by an even mix of short grasses and either scrub-shrub or forest. These are only intermittently flooded and will receive a split vegetation class according to dominance. The use of split classes will be limited where possible.

13. Huisache (Acacia farnesiana) and willow (Salix sp.) are by far the dominant wetland tree/shrub species in the study area, with each giving a unique photo-signature. Both may occur as either tree or shrub and are characteristic along streambeds, and around impoundments, excavations, and pothole lakes.

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14. Huisache, an evergreen acacia, exhibits a dark green to brown to dull red, textured signature, and is classed PFO3 or PSS3 according to height. Willow is distinguished by a bright-red, smooth to textured signature and is classed PFO1 or PSS1, again according to height. These two species occur frequently in mixed stands, and will be split subclassed PFO3/1, PFO1/3, PSS3/1, or PSS1/3 as necessary.

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15. Retama (Parkinsonia sp.), another evergreen scrub-shrub species, frequently occurs mixed with huisache and/or willow, and presents a photo-signature similar to shrub huisache (green to brown). Although seldom dominant, its presence may help indicate the PSS3 class (as opposed to PSS1).

16. Salt cedar (Tamarix sp.) occurs along several creeks in the western half of the study area, exhibiting a bright-red, finely textured signature. It will be classed PSS2.

17. Many of the wetter ("A") pothole lakes and impoundments in the eastern half of the study area exhibit a dark grayish-blue signature (as mentioned in 12). This is scrub-shrub Rattlebox (Sesbania sp.) and is generally indicative of the temporary water regime. It will be classed PSS1A.

18. Several thick stands of Aster occurred near or in open water. These will be classed PEM1 with the appropriate water regime.

19. Cedar elm (Ulmus), Hackberry (Celtis), Anaqua (Ehretia), and Mexican ash (Fraxinus) may dominate wetland areas as trees, and are distinguished by a broad, silver to silver-brown signature, as well as by canopy height and diameter. These may be split classed with tree-sized huisache as PFO1/3 (or PFO3/1) or with smaller shrub huisache PFO1/SS3 (or PSS3/FO1) or willow PFO1/SS1 (or PSS1/FO1).

20. Phragmites occurs in large thick stands along the Rio Grande, and will be classified PEM1. It occurs in riparian bands along the edge of the river, with large bands of willow separating it from upland.

21. Only a few reservoirs are large enough to classify as lacustrine (greater than 20 acres). These include Casa Blanca Lake near Laredo, and Chiltipin Reservoir near Alice. These will be classified L1OWHh.

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