



Landscape Phenology, Vegetation Condition, and Relations with Climate at Dinosaur National Monument, 2000–2019



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Landscape phenology, vegetation condition, and relations with climate at Dinosaur National Monument, 2000–2019

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Abstract

Climate plays a major role in determining vegetation composition in parks, and changes in climate will affect vegetation conditions and composition in the future. This study, which examined changes in climate, water availability, and vegetation from 2000 to 2019 in Dinosaur National Monument (NM) in Utah, USA, evaluates vegetation sensitivity to weather and climate to understand climate-vegetation relationships that can be used to predict what vegetation types may change. Specifically, it evaluates where change is likely in the monument, when change may happen, and why change may occur. This information is needed to help avoid surprises and can be used to plan for inevitable change. Satellite images were analyzed with climate data to quantify vegetation sensitivity to climate and drought tolerance. Historic trends in vegetation production and phenology were evaluated, and analysis with climate data identified which aspects of climate were most important to annual production and phenology for different vegetation types. Additionally, trends in climate and climate drivers of vegetation phenology were also identified. Since 2000, primary production has increased at Dinosaur NM. The increase coincided with a slight but statistically insignificant increase in precipitation over the same period. However, over this period, there were dry years and dry periods extending for several years that resulted in substantial declines in vegetation cover that largely rebounded by the end of the study. The variation in vegetation condition across wet and dry years was evaluated to identify which alliance groups were most drought-tolerant (Water and Wet Meadow), and which were least drought tolerant (Douglas-fir). The information generated in this study can be applied to long-term management and planning which can help preserve the natural resources of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.

Executive Summary

Quantitatively linking satellite observations of vegetation condition and climate data over time provides insight into climate influences on primary production, phenology (timing of growth), and sensitivity of vegetation to weather and longer-term patterns of weather referred to as climate. This, in turn, provides a basis for understanding potential climate impacts to vegetation—and the potential to anticipate cascading ecological effects, such as impacts to forage, habitat, fire potential, and erosion, as climate changes in the future.

This report provides baseline information about vegetation production and condition over time at Dinosaur National Monument (NM), as derived from satellite remote sensing. Its objective is to demonstrate methods of analysis, share findings, and document historic climate exposure and sensitivity of vegetation to weather and climate as drivers of vegetation change.

This report represents a quantitative foundation for vegetation–climate relationships on an annual timestep. The methods can be modified to finer temporal resolutions and other spatial scales if further analyses are needed to inform monument planning and management. The knowledge provided in this report can inform vulnerability assessments for Climate Smart Conservation planning by monument managers. Patterns of pivot points and responses can serve as a guide to anticipate what, where, when, and why vegetation change may occur.

For this analysis, vegetation alliance groups were derived from vegetation-map polygons (Coles et al. 2008) by lumping vegetation types expected to respond similarly to climate. Relationships between vegetation production and phenology were evaluated for each alliance map unit larger than a satellite pixel ($\sim 300 \times 300$ m). We used a water-balance model to characterize the climate experienced by plants. Water balance translates temperature and precipitation into more biophysically relevant climate metrics, such as soil moisture and drought stress, that are often more strongly correlated with vegetation condition than temperature or precipitation are. By accounting for the interactions between temperature, precipitation, and site characteristics, water balance helps make regional climate assessments relevant to local scales.

The results provide a foundation for interpreting weather and climate as drivers of change in primary production over a 20-year period at the polygon and alliance-group scale. Additionally, they demonstrate how vegetation type and site characteristics, such as soil properties, slope, and aspect, interact with climate at local scales to determine trends in vegetation condition. This report quantitatively defines critical water needs of vegetation and identifies which alliance types, in which locations, may be most susceptible to changes in climate in the future.

Key findings:

- The patterns of pivot points and responses can serve as a guide to anticipate what, where, when, and why vegetation change may occur.
- Annual production increased in 99% of the study area since 2000, with the largest area of increase occurring in Pinyon-Juniper and Juniper woodlands.
- Growing-season production increased in all vegetation alliance groups since 2000, with only a few exceptions that represent less than one percent of the analysis area.
- Alliance groups Water, Disturbed, and Annual Exotic Grasslands increased at the fastest rates.
- Annual precipitation, soil moisture, and rain were generally the variables most strongly correlated with annual production, suggesting that increases in annual precipitation may have caused the increase in production over the study period.
- Based on precipitation pivot points, Water, Wet Meadow, Disturbed, Dry Shrublands, and Annual Exotic Grassland alliance groups were the most drought-tolerant.
- Based on precipitation pivot points, Douglas-fir, Mixed Montane Shrublands and Mesic Sagebrush were the least drought-tolerant alliance groups.
- Disturbed and Annual Exotic Grassland alliance groups were most sensitive to interannual variation in precipitation.
- Douglas Fir, Geology, and Ponderosa Pine were the least sensitive to interannual variation in precipitation.
- Two to three years of annual average soil moisture was the best indicator of annual production at the monument scale. This was also generally true at the alliance-group scale.
- Start of growing season was 4.5 days earlier by the end of the study, averaged across all alliance groups.
- End of growing season was 14.5 days later by the end of the study, averaged across all alliance groups.
- Changes in start and end of season resulted in a growing season 18.8 days longer by the end of the study averaged across all alliance groups.
- Precipitation, growing degree days, and date of complete snowmelt were the most important determinants of start of growing season.

This report provides a foundation for interpreting weather and climate as drivers of change in primary production over a 20-year period at the polygon, alliance-group, and monument scales. It can be used to determine what, when, where and why future climate change may impact vegetation.

List of Acronyms

AET: actual evapotranspiration

D: climatic water deficit

EOS: end of growing season

GDD: growing degree days

iSAVI: integrated growing season soil adjusted vegetation index

LOS: length of season

Meltd: date of complete snowmelt

MODIS: moderate resolution imaging spectroradiometer

NCPN: Northern Colorado Plateau Network of parks

NDVI: normalized difference vegetation index

NM: national monument

NVC: National Vegetation Classification

NVCS: National Vegetation Classification Standard

P: annual precipitation

PACK: snowpack water equivalent

PET: potential evapotranspiration

POP: timing of peak growth

RAIN: rain

SAVI: soil adjusted vegetation index

SNOW: snow

SOIL: soil moisture

SOS: start of season/green-up

SRAD: solar radiation

T: temperature (annual average)

T_{max}: temperature (maximum)

T_{min}: temperature (minimum)

VP: vapor pressure

VPD: vapor-pressure deficit

W: water as rain plus snowmelt

1 Introduction

This report provides baseline information about vegetation production and condition over time as derived from satellite remote sensing at three scales: monument, vegetation-alliance group, and vegetation-alliance polygon. The objective is to demonstrate the methods of analysis, share standardized findings, and document historic climate exposure and sensitivity to weather and climate as drivers of vegetation change at Dinosaur National Monument.

This study quantitatively defines critical water needs of vegetation and demonstrates how vegetation type and site characteristics interact with climate at local scales to determine change in vegetation condition.

It provides a foundation for interpreting weather and climate as drivers of change in primary production over a 20-year period at local scales. It can be used to quantitatively determine which alliance types, in which locations, may be most susceptible to climate-change impacts in the future, providing a basis for vulnerability assessments in Climate Smart Conservation planning (see Section 4).

1.1 The importance of primary production

Photosynthesis is the process in plants that converts sunlight, CO₂, water, and minerals into the chemical forms of energy (carbohydrates and sugars) essential to life. All terrestrial life depends on photosynthesis, also called “primary production,” because it is the foundation of food webs. As the first step in creating food and habitat for wildlife, vegetation production is an important indicator, or “vital sign” of ecosystem health that can be tracked over time to assess conditions that support higher life forms in parks. The complex temporal and spatial patterns of primary production are influenced by many factors, including disturbances, such as wildfire and drought; differences in precipitation across space or over time; vegetation assemblages that differ in response to change; topography and soil properties; land use; and invasive species (Kariyeva and van Leeuwen 2011).

Sunlight provides the energy used to synthesize organic compounds from CO₂ and water. In semiarid environments like the Colorado Plateau, sunlight and CO₂ are abundant and rarely limit production. However, primary production is controlled by different environmental variables in different places. In tropical forests, primary production may be controlled by availability of sunlight (due to cloud cover and dense canopy) or soil nutrients. In deserts, primary production is mostly controlled by water availability. At the highest elevations on the Colorado Plateau, it may be controlled by cold temperatures and a short growing season. Changes in primary production may indicate changes in ecological structure (e.g., change in vegetation assemblage) or ecological function (e.g., loss of vegetation cover, resulting in erosion and loss of soil nutrients).

1.2 Satellite monitoring of primary production

Assessing the rate of photosynthesis and the condition of vegetation at broad landscape scales provides insight to the cycles of energy, nutrients, and water that sustain life in parks. Sunlight reflected from vegetation provides information about photosynthetic rates, leaf area, and biomass accumulation, as well as conditions of habitat and forage for animals. High-frequency satellite remote sensing of vegetation condition provides a broad-scale view of spatial patterns in vegetation condition, production, and change in response to climate, disturbance, and management actions over time.

The Northern Colorado Plateau Network (NCPN) monitors landscape-scale vegetation condition and trends using satellite imagery collected more frequently than ground-based data (which are also collected). The high frequency of observations and complete spatial coverage of satellite images are ideal for assessing seasonal as well as annual conditions and trends. The imagery also provides insight into the response of vegetation to climate patterns and disturbance (e.g., fire and forest disease, often mediated by climate) that cannot be obtained at broad scales in any other cost-effective way.

Quantitatively linking satellite observations of vegetation condition and climate data over time provides insight into climate influences on primary production, phenology (timing of growth), and sensitivity of vegetation to weather and long-term weather patterns referred to as climate. This in turn provides a basis for understanding potential climate impacts to vegetation and the potential to anticipate cascading ecological effects, such as impacts to forage, habitat, fire potential, and erosion, as climate changes in the future.

Primary production assessed via satellite remote sensing does not indicate which species are present, or which species are performing well or poorly. It is also not a “good” or “bad” judgment (i.e., increased or decreased production is not inherently good or bad). Monitoring primary production is analogous to monitoring river flow. Flow monitoring measures the timing and abundance of water that provides habitat for animals and other essential ecological functions. It does not indicate which organisms are present, or how different species are faring.

1.3 Vegetation condition and vulnerability

Vegetation condition and trend are monitored as changes in vegetation production, or the cumulative green biomass of leaves that grow via photosynthesis. Green biomass is strongly correlated with near-infrared and red wavelengths of solar energy reflected off vegetation measured by satellites (Thoma et al. 2002). The satellite imagery reveals repeating seasonal fluctuations in growth and senescence, as well as annual trends or abrupt changes due to disturbances. Although disturbances can be detected, it is beyond the scope of this analysis to do so because it requires different methods than those used here. However, all the data used to detect disturbance is available and can be made available via the author.

Climate is a strong driver of vegetation distributions (Stephenson 1998). Variation in weather strongly affects vegetation condition through stress (e.g., drought) and disturbance (e.g., wildfire).

Linking changes in vegetation production to climate provides important information about resistance to disturbance (resilient or susceptible) and recovery from disturbance (fast or slow).

Vegetation that is susceptible to disturbance and slow to recover is considered the most vulnerable to change (Kariyeva and van Leeuwen 2011). This kind of information can be used to assess vulnerability of vegetation assemblages to climate change.

1.4 Pivot points and responses

In semiarid environments, vegetation persists when there is a positive balance between growth and resistance to drought (Noy-Meir 1973). Vegetation traits, such as rooting depth, xylem diameter, and stomatal density and resistance, interact with climate and site conditions to determine how vegetation responds to climate. Understanding these interactions provides insight into potential changes in vegetation condition and composition as the climate changes. When coupled with climate data, two important ecological characteristics, pivot points and responses, can be derived from measuring change in vegetation condition over time (Munson 2013).

A pivot point is the value of a climate variable at which annual vegetation production teeters between above- or below-average condition. For water variables, pivot points determine whether vegetation production increases or decreases given the water available for growth. A pivot point is analogous to the recommended eight glasses of water per day for adults: Except in extreme cases, more water is generally not bad—but less can have detrimental effects, even when unmet needs are slight. Semiarid plants generally respond more positively than humans to water that exceeds minimum needs. But as with people, receiving less than the minimum can cause deterioration in condition. As such, the pivot point can be considered a critical water need as well as an indicator of drought tolerance. A species' basic water needs and the rate of change when those needs are unmet or exceeded, are important ecological variables that determine how plants respond to weather and climate.

Plant traits determine how much water vegetation needs to maintain production. How much water is available depends on climate, weather, soil, and site properties. These interactions can cause variation in the magnitude of pivot points for the same climate variable across vegetation types. Some types may be more tolerant of drought conditions than others.

Vegetation response is the sensitivity of vegetation to a climate variable or, more specifically, the amount of change in vegetation production per unit change in a climate variable. This rate of change is a quantitative measure of vegetation sensitivity to climate. Cumulative annual vegetation production and phenology are indicators of vegetation response to a suite of environmental conditions. Some conditions are spatially variable but stable over time, such as slope, aspect, and soil properties. Others, such as climate, vary both temporally and spatially. The vegetation growing at any location reflects adaptations suited to the environment where it persists. If conditions change, either abruptly or gradually, plants respond. The change can be spatial, due to differences in soil type or elevation. It can also be temporal, as weather and climate change over time.

Differences in vegetation response rates or sensitivity to water availability reflect survival strategies for persisting through drought or responding rapidly when water is available, making species more

competitive if water needs are met. The survival strategies are a consequence of vegetation traits, including rooting depth, stomatal density, leaf area, and perennial versus annual growth forms that confer competitive advantage under different climate conditions. Generally, plant traits that favor one strategy preclude the other (Noy-Meir 1973; Thoma et al. 2019).

Individual plant responses to environmental conditions cumulatively scale up, resulting in spatial and temporal landscape patterns that can be detected in satellite imagery (Thoma et al. 2019). Because vegetation production and phenological responses are interrelated, it is useful to measure and report the two simultaneously. It is not always possible to know what caused a change noted in satellite imagery, but communication with monument staff and ground-based monitoring can help interpret findings in this report.

1.5 Phenology

The annual cycle of vegetation growth and senescence, and recurring biological phenomena, such as seasonal migrations, are collectively known as phenology. Commonly known measures of vegetation phenology include timing of bud burst, first leaf, and spring bloom, all observed from the ground (de Beurs and Henebry 2010). The high-frequency observations from satellites make it possible to track vegetation phenology (Dunn and de Beurs 2011) at broad spatial scales that include an assemblage of different vegetation species, referred to as “land-surface phenology.” Land-surface phenology is an indicator of ecosystem health because it regulates dependent ecological functions, such as pollination and onset of forage production (Dunn and de Beurs 2011). On the Colorado Plateau, springtime vegetation growth is preceded by warming temperatures and snowmelt. In drier regions, onset of springtime growth may be limited if there is insufficient accumulation of fall and winter soil moisture (Workie and Debella 2018).

Changes in land-surface phenology can provide an early indication of cascading climate-change impacts that may result in changing species assemblages and shifting range boundaries (Workie and Debella 2018). These may affect pollinators, as well as bird and mammal migrations. Determining the drivers of phenology, and changes in phenology over time, provides insights into cascading effects on pollinators and migrating animals that depend on growth initiation, forage production, and the length of the growing season.

2 Methods

2.1 Overview

A variable project boundary ranging between approximately 1.6 km (1 mile) and 9.5 km (6 miles) around the edge of the monument (environs) was chosen by network and monument staff over the course of several scoping meetings held in 2002 (Figure 1). The total project mapping area is 161,169 hectares (398,258 acres). Of this area, 85,096 hectares (210,278 acres) are within the monument boundary and 76,073 hectares (187,980 acres) are in the environs. The environs were extended on Douglas Mountain to include an important part of the Yampa River watershed.

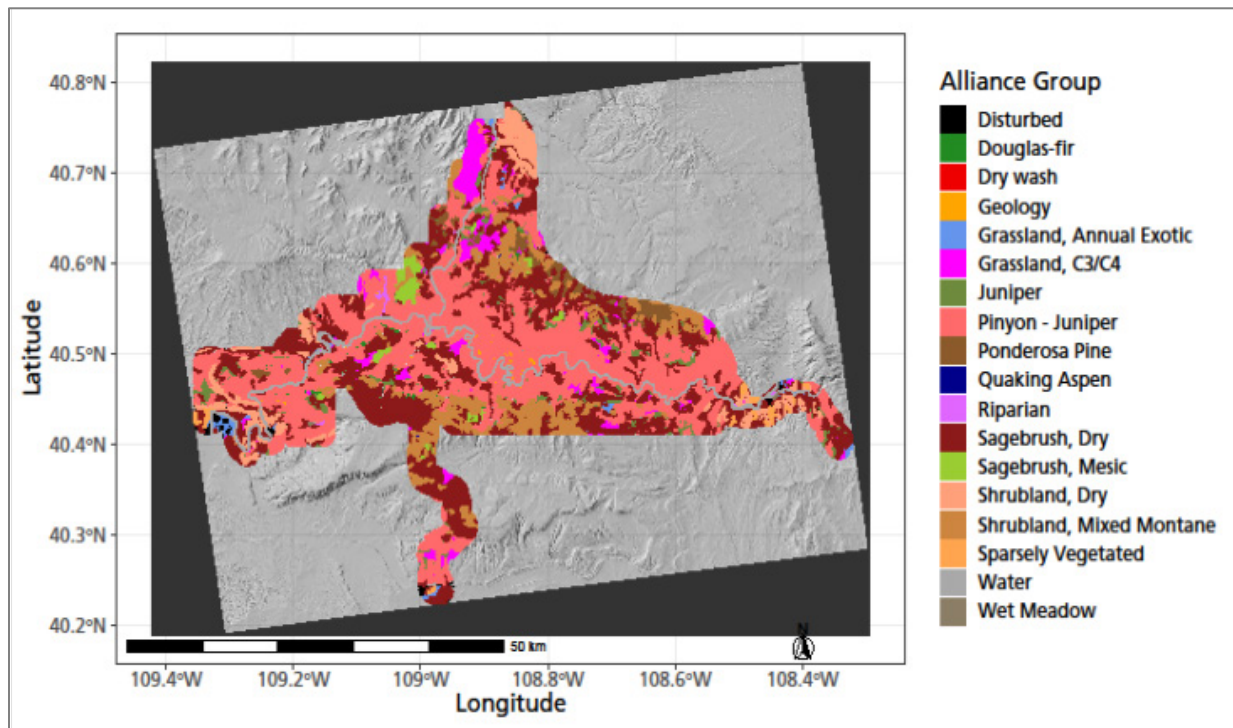


Figure 1. NCPN alliance groups analyzed for trends in production, phenology, and climate relations at Dinosaur National Monument. Areas not colored within the study boundary are alliance polygons smaller than the minimum target area of 8.3 hectares. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

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This report was compiled by comparing climate data with variation in land-surface greenness over time, as measured in satellite imagery of the monument's vegetation-mapping project area (Coles et al. 2008). A large archive of 460 remotely sensed satellite images was downloaded and processed in the statistical analysis software R. A large amount of gridded climate data for the same area was downloaded and processed in Excel to estimate water-balance variables, such as soil moisture, evapotranspiration, and water deficit from temperature and precipitation (see Section 2.6). The imagery and water-balance/climate data were merged in R separately for each vegetation alliance

polygon (see Section 2.2) and analyzed statistically for spatial patterns across monument landscapes and over time for trends.

2.2 Remote-sensing targets

Three scales of analysis are presented in this report: vegetation-alliance polygon, vegetation-alliance group, and parkwide. Vegetation-alliance polygons were derived from vegetation-map polygons by lumping together vegetation types expected to respond similarly to ecological disturbances, such as climate change (Coles et al. 2008; Jennings et al. 2009). The polygon scale features finer spatial resolution—but with higher resolution comes more complexity in interpretation. The group scale lumps similar alliances together for broader-scale interpretations but is not always as accurate as the polygon scale, because lumping even slightly dissimilar objects introduces variation. The monument-scale analysis is achieved by lumping all alliance polygons into a single analysis or by averaging analysis results across alliances to the monument scale.

It is important to note that satellite-based proxies for primary production reflect production from all vegetation within a sampling unit, regardless of the alliance name (which identifies the dominant or diagnostic vegetation types). For example, a forested alliance type may include shrub or graminoid understory that influences the satellite signal. Untangling the proportional influence of the named alliance components from background components is beyond the scope of this report.

2.2.1 Alliance polygons

The National Vegetation Classification Standard (NVCS) identifies eight hierarchical levels of classification, ranging from Formation Class (Level 1, the broadest scale) to Association (Level 8, the finest scale). The finest scale used in this report was the vegetation alliance (Level 7). The NVCS defines a vegetation alliance as “a characteristic range of species composition, habitat conditions, physiognomy, and diagnostic species, typically at least one of which is found in the uppermost or dominant stratum of the vegetation. Alliances reflect regional to subregional climate, substrates, hydrology, moisture/nutrient factors, and disturbance regimes” (FGDC 2008).

Vegetation alliances are useful targets for tracking production and phenology because they are spatially repeating, relatively homogeneous in type composition, and share similar affinities and responses to environmental conditions, such as climate. They are also mapped consistently across monument units, making them an ideal classification level for cross-monument analysis. Polygon boundaries for the alliances were obtained from monument vegetation maps (Coles et al. 2008).

Analysis at the alliance, rather than association level, resulted in larger and fewer polygon targets that contained a larger number of satellite pixels. This helped ensure that satellite-image pixels fell mostly within target polygons and improved the signal-to-noise ratio necessary for tracking change in response to climate. Improving the signal-to-noise ratio in remote sensing of sparsely vegetated environments is achieved by spatially averaging pixels within relatively homogeneous areas (Thoma et al. 2017). For this reason, the analysis in this report relies primarily on aggregated pixel means across the spatial extent of each target polygon, rather than per-pixel analysis. More detail on pixel

screening to exclude low-quality observations and outliers can be found in Sections 2.3 and 2.5 below.

2.2.2 NCPN alliance groups

For purposes of this study, alliances that respond similarly to climate based on structure and life-history traits were further grouped by NCPN ecologist Dana Witwicki (personal communication) to simplify interpretations and reporting.¹ We created our own grouping system to simplify the alliance naming conventions and reduce the large number of alliances, which were too numerous for meaningful reporting.

Beginning with 98 different National Vegetation Classification (NVC) alliances mapped consistently across NCPN monument units, we created 32 alliance groups based on floristics, canopy structure, and local environmental conditions. Of those, 18 occurred in Dinosaur NM (Table 1; Figure 1). The alliance group names are shortened representations of the dominant alliance(s) in each group. Please note that because alliance groups represent an aggregation of multiple alliance types, not all polygons assigned to a given alliance group necessarily contain the species for which the group is named. Hereafter, we refer to the grouped alliance categories as “NCPN alliance groups” or “alliance groups,” but it should be noted that these groups are similar to, but different from, Level 6 of the NVC. A key that links each NCPN alliance group to vegetation-mapping units familiar to NCPN managers can be found in Table S-1 of NPS (2025). The image-analysis targets were the ungrouped alliance polygons, so while results reported in the body of this report are for NCPN alliance groups, results are also available by polygon for ungrouped alliances in the supplemental tables (NPS 2025).

Table 1. NCPN alliance groups and corresponding National Vegetation Classification alliances, Dinosaur National Monument.

NCPN alliance group	National Vegetation Classification alliance(s) ^A
Disturbed	Non-natural
Douglas-fir	Douglas-fir Middle Rocky Mountain Mesic-Wet Forest Alliance
Dry wash	Fourwing Saltbush - Rubber Rabbitbrush Desert Wash Alliance
Geology	Geology
Grassland, Annual Exotic	Cheatgrass - Medusa-head Ruderal Annual Grassland Alliance
Grassland, C3/C4	Indian Ricegrass - Bluebunch Wheatgrass - Sandhill Muhly Grassland Alliance
Juniper	Utah Juniper / Shrub Understory Woodland Alliance
Pinyon-Juniper	Two-needle Pinyon - Utah Juniper / Shrub Understory Foothill & Lower Montane Dry-Mesic Woodland Alliance
Pinyon-Juniper	Two-needle Pinyon - Utah Juniper / Herbaceous Understory Open Woodland Alliance

^A The alliance names shown in this table do not match those found in Coles et al. (2008) because alliance names and codes in that report were subsequently updated to USNVC Version 2.01, released March 30, 2017. The names from 2008 were cross-walked to the current names displayed here. For information on nomenclature, see FGDC (2008).

¹ Although there is an NVC Group level (6), the “NCPN alliance groups” discussed in this report were developed independently from the NVC for purposes of this study.

Table 1 (continued). NCPN alliance groups and corresponding National Vegetation Classification alliances, Dinosaur National Monument.

NCPN alliance group	National Vegetation Classification alliance(s) ^A
Pinyon-Juniper	Two-needle Pinyon - Utah Juniper / Herbaceous Understory Open Woodland Alliance
Pinyon-Juniper	Two-needle Pinyon - Utah Juniper / Shrub Understory Colorado Plateau Woodland & Scrub Alliance
Ponderosa Pine	Ponderosa Pine Southern Rocky Mountain Forest & Woodland Alliance
Quaking Aspen	Quaking Aspen Rocky Mountain Forest & Woodland Alliance
Riparian	Rio Grande Cottonwood - Plains Cottonwood Riparian Forest Alliance
Riparian	Box-elder - Cottonwood species - Spruce species Ruderal Riparian Forest Alliance
Riparian	Tamarisk species Ruderal Riparian Scrub Alliance
Sagebrush, Dry	Black Sagebrush Steppe & Shrubland Alliance
Sagebrush, Dry	Wyoming Big Sagebrush Mesic Steppe & Shrubland Alliance
Sagebrush, Dry	Basin Big Sagebrush - Foothill Big Sagebrush Mesic Steppe & Shrubland Alliance
Sagebrush, Dry	Wyoming Big Sagebrush Dry Steppe & Shrubland Alliance
Sagebrush, Mesic	Mountain Big Sagebrush - Mixed Steppe & Shrubland Alliance
Shrubland, Dry	Shadscale Saltbush Scrub Alliance
Shrubland, Dry	Spiny Hopsage Scrub Alliance
Shrubland, Mixed Montane	Curl-leaf Mountain-mahogany / Shrub Understory Woodland Alliance
Shrubland, Mixed Montane	Utah Serviceberry - Alderleaf Mountain-mahogany - Littleleaf Mountain-mahogany Shrubland Alliance
Shrubland, Mixed Montane	Greenleaf Manzanita - Pinemat Manzanita Shrubland Alliance
Sparsely Vegetated	Mat Saltbush Low Scrub Alliance
Water	Water
Wet Meadow	Baltic Rush - Mexican Rush Wet Meadow Alliance

^A The alliance names shown in this table do not match those found in Coles et al. (2008) because alliance names and codes in that report were subsequently updated to USNVC Version 2.01, released March 30, 2017. The names from 2008 were cross-walked to the current names displayed here. For information on nomenclature, see FGDC (2008).

2.3 Satellite imagery

Since early 2000, the Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) on the Terra satellite, operated by NASA, has collected daily imagery of Earth at a spatial resolution of 250 meters (820 ft). However, since cloud cover, cloud shadows, aerosols, smoke, and water vapor can interfere with clear views of Earth's surfaces, daily images are composited into a single image for 16-day periods of time (product MOD13Q1). The 16-day composite images are created from values obtained from the clearest view during the 16-day window. They are generally the best-quality observations for every pixel during that time.

Even so, during extended periods of poor atmospheric viewing conditions, some pixel values are unreliable. Therefore, each pixel in the composite image is tagged with a quality rating that can be used to screen out unreliable values influenced by poor viewing conditions. Sophisticated algorithms

are used to assess the quality of every pixel value based on measurements of atmospheric conditions collected by the satellite during image acquisition (Didan et al. 2015).

There are 23 fixed 16-day window periods in a year (with a few overlapping days the end of the year to account for leap years). Thus, there were 457 viewing opportunities and 23 observations per year for every pixel in the NCPN during the period of record covered in this report. Observation completeness was calculated on an annual and seasonal (March–November) basis for the 20-year study period as the percentage of pixels in each polygon that were observed under high-quality viewing conditions. In semiarid environments, there are typically many high-quality observations during the growing season, but fewer in winter due to clouds and snow cover.

2.4 Soil Adjusted Vegetation Index

The Soil-Adjusted Vegetation Index (SAVI) is a measure of primary production (Bunting et al. 2019; Qi et al. 1994) obtained from reflectance in red and near-infrared wavelengths, adjusted for soil backgrounds in semiarid environments (Huete 1988). It is calculated as

$$SAVI = \frac{(1 + L)(NIR - Red)}{(NIR + Red + L)}$$

where L is the soil background adjustment factor (L=0.5), NIR is reflectance in the near infrared wavelengths, and Red is reflectance in red wavelengths.

These wavelengths were selected specifically because they are sensitive to the abundance of green vegetation and optimized for detecting spatial and temporal changes in vegetation. We use SAVI in this report, rather than the normalized difference vegetation index (NDVI), because of the thin vegetation cover and soil background reflectance in most NCPN parks. This combination of factors results in unfavorable signal-to-noise ratios that can make remote sensing of spatial and temporal change difficult in semiarid environments. However, in addition to working with a vegetation index specifically designed to reduce the background noise caused by soil variability (SAVI), there are many steps in the processing workflow that help further alleviate these issues.

2.5 Pixel time series extraction and smoothing

Despite precautions taken by the imagery providers to minimize noise and provide an analysis-ready product from the MODIS sensor, there were lingering issues that required attention prior to analysis (Thoma et al. 2017). Each polygon larger than 8.3 hectares (the area of a MODIS pixel at NCPN latitude) was analyzed independently for trends in production and phenology and for its relationship with multiple climate variables. Pixels extracted from target polygons above the 90th percentile or below the 10th percentile of average greenness were removed from analysis. This step served several purposes. First, it removed pixels that fell on alliance-group boundaries if the reflectance was very different across the boundary, such as riparian ribbons adjacent to dry uplands. Second, it eliminated areas that may have been classified incorrectly in the vegetation maps if the result of misclassification included an area of substantially different reflectance. It also eliminated inclusions of contrasting reflectance (if any occurred).

After outliers were removed, each pixel was weighted according to its proportional area that fell within the target (see Section 2.2). This step further minimized the effect of any remaining pixels that overlapped target boundaries. After computing an area-averaged value at each timestep for the pixels within a polygon target, missing polygon-average values were interpolated.

Missing daily values were a consequence of the 16-day periodicity of observations and quality screening in earlier steps. Finally, a smoothing filter was used to remove high-frequency noise from the time series of each polygon. After smoothing across large gaps in winter, prominent dips in time series (artificially low values that were an artifact of the smoothing) were truncated to a minimum winter value based on pixel values that were likely reflectance from bare soil or senesced vegetation (Wang et al. 2018). This process resulted in a smoothed and complete daily time series for each polygon.

2.6 Water-balance model

Vegetation responds to seasonal and interannual variations in temperature and water availability depending on adaptations and site conditions (Munson et al. 2015; Thoma et al. 2019). To understand climate drivers of vegetation condition and potential impacts across large environmental gradients (hot/dry to cold/wet), we used a water-balance model to determine how different aspects of climate and site characteristics affected vegetation production and phenology. The water-balance model quantitatively accounts for temperature, precipitation, and their interactions with local site conditions (such as soil water-holding capacity, slope, and aspect) that affect soil moisture, evapotranspiration, and drought stress (Thoma et al. 2020). To calculate the water-balance variables in the model, we used 1-kilometer gridded, Daymet temperature and precipitation data (Thornton et al. 2018).

The model partitions precipitation (P , mm) into rain (RAIN, mm) or snow (SNOW, mm of water), which accumulates until rising temperature (T , °C) causes it to melt. Soil moisture (SOIL, mm) is stored in the top meter of soil, which the model treats as a single layer with a maximum storage determined by its water-holding capacity. Water-holding capacity was obtained from soil surveys where data were available (NRCS 2015) but was fixed at 100 millimeters otherwise. This fixed value accommodated analyses where soil surveys have not been conducted and accounted for some water storage in geologic structures (cracks or porous, rocky material) that may be mapped as having no water-holding capacity but support sparse vegetation detected by the satellite sensor. Water input that exceeds the storage capacity becomes runoff.

Potential evapotranspiration (PET, mm), calculated via the Oudin method, is the amount of water that could be evapotranspired from short grass with available energy if water were unlimited. The Oudin method calculates PET using daily mean temperature, daylength, and solar radiation (Oudin et al. 2005). Actual evapotranspiration (AET, mm) is the loss of water from soil via evapotranspiration, constrained by soil-water availability. Climatic water deficit (D , mm) is the unmet water need of vegetation and a measure of drought stress calculated as the difference between PET and AET (Stephenson 1998).

Water-availability variables include P, RAIN, SNOW, and SOIL. Variables that estimate water use include AET and PET; however, AET is limited by dry soil. Two aspects of heat that influence vegetation growth are average annual temperature (T) and growing degree days (GDD) (McMaster and Wilhelm 1997).

This study also evaluated two variables that could influence vegetation production and phenology: vapor-pressure deficit (VPD, Pa) and solar radiation (SRAD, W m^{-2}), available from Daymet. Vapor-pressure deficit is the difference between the amount of water vapor the air can hold and the amount of vapor in the air. Solar radiation is the energy plants receive from the sun that can be used for photosynthesis (Grossiord et al. 2020; Seager et al. 2015; Stephenson 1990).

In the following sections, state variables, representing conditions at a point in time (e.g., SOIL, T, VPD), are averaged (Table 2). Variables representing fluxes of water (water passing through the environment) are summed annually or seasonally, except for SOIL, which is presented as an average value because soil water-holding capacity has an upper limit. Exceeding this limit through summation is physically impossible.

Table 2. Climate and water-balance variables used to identify correlations with vegetation production and phenology.

Variable	Abbreviation	Units	Type	Temporal summary
Precipitation	P	mm	flux	sum
Rain	RAIN	mm	flux	sum
Snow	SNOW	mm	flux	sum
Snow Pack Water Equivalent	PACK	mm	flux	sum
Date of Complete Snowmelt	Meltd	day-of-year	state	day
Actual Evapotranspiration	AET	mm	flux	sum
Potential Evapotranspiration	PET	mm	flux	sum
Climatic Water Deficit	D	mm	flux	sum
Solar Radiation	SRAD	W m^{-2}	state	mean
Temperature	T	$^{\circ}\text{C}$	state	mean
Temperature Maximum	Tmax	$^{\circ}\text{C}$	state	maximum
Temperature Minimum	Tmin	$^{\circ}\text{C}$	state	minimum
Soil Moisture	SOIL	mm	state	mean
Vapor Pressure	VP	Pa	state	mean
Vapor-pressure Deficit	VPD	Pa	state	mean
Growing Degree Days	GDD	$^{\circ}\text{C}$	state	sum

The effects of summing or averaging have important implications for interpreting results. While additional precipitation can substantially change the cumulative magnitude of annual precipitation, a large amount of water input is required to change an annual average soil-moisture value even a small

amount. For example, 10 millimeters of additional precipitation falling on dry soil on one day in one year would increase annual precipitation by 10 millimeters but would increase average annual soil moisture by just 0.027 millimeters (10/365). Temperature and pressure variables are also summarized as means in this analysis. Units of measure are millimeters for water terms, degrees Celsius for temperature, and pascals for pressure.

Snowmelt date (Meltd) used in the phenology analysis was determined from the water balance model variable, PACK. This term is the daily snow water equivalent (mm) stored in the snowpack that accumulated over winter. In spring, PACK declines rapidly with warming temperatures. Determining the day of complete melt is somewhat subjective due to flashy spring snow events that may linger for one to a few days, even in late spring after the initiation of vegetation growth. The algorithm used to identify the day of melt begins by searching backward from May 1 (user specified date) for PACK values greater than four millimeters (user-specified depth) for a span of three days (also user-specified). In the water-balance model, the combination of depth and span is the minimum degree days necessary to yield the user-specified depth of snowmelt water. Visual inspection of snowmelt date plotted on time series of daily PACK values confirmed this was a reasonable approach to differentiating between periods that were predominantly snow-covered or snow-free.

2.7 Measures of vegetation production

Because net primary production is generated through photosynthesis, and spectral indexes are responsive to the abundance of photosynthetically active vegetation, vegetation indexes are good proxies for primary production (Paruelo et al. 2000). Characteristics of the annual repeating cycle of SAVI curves were used as proxies for production and phenology (Figure 2). We determined trends in three variables derived from the SAVI time series for each polygon: mean annual SAVI, maximum annual SAVI (maximum value regardless of the month in which it occurred), and iSAVI (or sum of daily interpolated SAVI), the area under the curve during the growing season (February through October). Daily interpolation was made via linear regression with a maximum gap size of 16 days. Mean annual SAVI (sum of 16-day observations/23 periods per year) is a measure of average productivity across the calendar year. Maximum annual SAVI is an indication of peak instantaneous rate of vegetation production, or rate of maximum biomass accumulation. It is strongly correlated with both green cover and leaf-area index. The sum of SAVI (iSAVI) is a proxy for vegetation production during the growing season. It is most strongly correlated with biomass production and cumulative productivity (Garrouette et al. 2016; Johnson et al. 2018; Thoma et al. 2002).

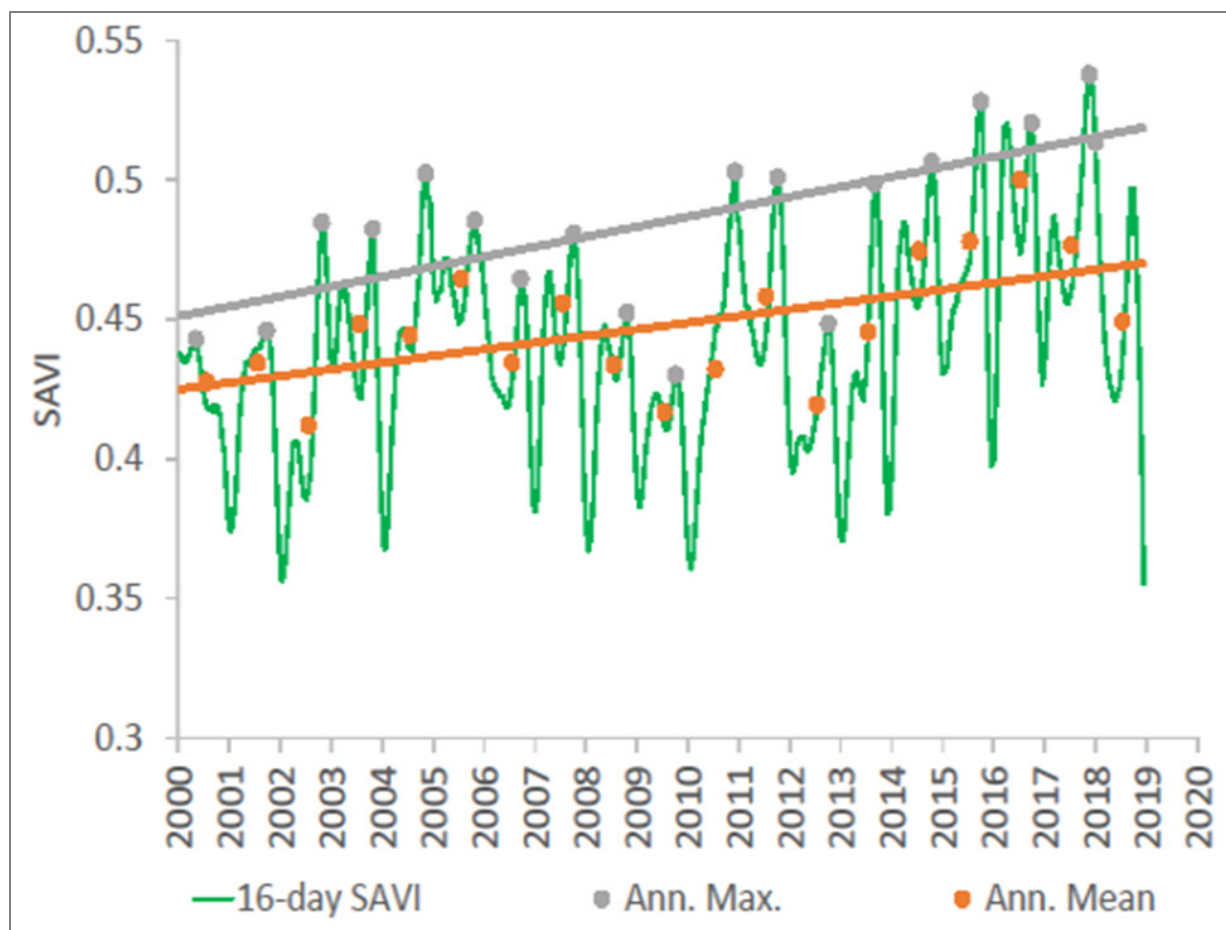


Figure 2. Measures of annual production from a time series of 16-day soil adjusted vegetation index (SAVI) derived from MODIS imagery. Linear trends against time for annual maximum and annual mean values are shown as straight lines.

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2.8 Calculating the measures

Trends in production were assessed by tracking changes in maximum and mean annual SAVI for 2000–2019 using the annual aggregated time series method (AAT) and Mann–Kendall trend test (Forkel et al. 2013) (Figure 2). The rate of change (regression slope) was estimated via linear regression. Significance of change was estimated by the Mann-Kendall trend test (Forkel et al. 2013). Trends in annual maximum values were more reliable than changes in mean annual values due to use of the full annual curves that include screened and gap-filled winter values. Trends in growing-season greenness were considered in the annual pivot-points analyses below.

Representing the sum of daily interpolated SAVI values during the growing season, iSAVI is a holistic measure of the cumulative production of actively photosynthesizing vegetation (Mendez-Barroso et al. 2009; Reed et al. 1994). This proxy for aboveground net primary production results from the intentional construction of spectral indices, such as SAVI, that are strongly responsive to

absorbed, photosynthetically active radiation used by plant canopies to capture and store carbon and energy during growth.

Trends in iSAVI time series were noted in some polygons, which confound relationships with climate unless the trend in iSAVI is removed before analysis. For this reason, we used the first difference in iSAVI, which represents the change in growing-season production from one year to the next, as an indicator of response to weather on an annual basis. This helps guard against overfitting when a trend exists in a time series. The annual change in iSAVI was calculated as

$$\Delta iSAVI = \frac{iSAVI_{t_2} - iSAVI_{t_1}}{t_2 - t_1}$$

where $iSAVI_{t_1}$ is the sum of growing-season SAVI for year t_1 , and $iSAVI_{t_2}$ is the sum of growing-season SAVI for year t_2 . Positive values indicate increasing growth from one year to the next. Negative values indicate decreasing growth. This framing of the response variable makes an increase or decrease in growth contingent on conditions in the previous year, allowing change to be linked to variation in weather from one year to the next. This is essentially equivalent ($r^2 \sim 0.99$) to the specific-growth concept used in plot-based studies of vegetation response to climate over long periods of time (Munson 2013).

2.9 Climate correlates with annual production

Two types of analysis were used to explore climate relationships with annual production (iSAVI).

2.9.1 Single-variable analysis

First, simple linear-regression models compared a single climate variable to the annual increase or decrease in production relative to the prior year. The adjusted r^2 measured the strength of relationships between the climate variable and vegetation production in a range between 0 and 1, with stronger relationships closer to one. This revealed the proportion of variation in $\Delta iSAVI$ explained by variation in climate.

Simple linear regression was used to determine pivot points and production responses (Figure 3; see Section 1.4). Every polygon was tested against every climate and water-balance variable. After screening out relationships that were not significant ($p\text{-value} < 0.05$), the adjusted r^2 terms were averaged across polygons from the same alliance group to see if any one climate variable outperformed the others as a predictor of vegetation production.

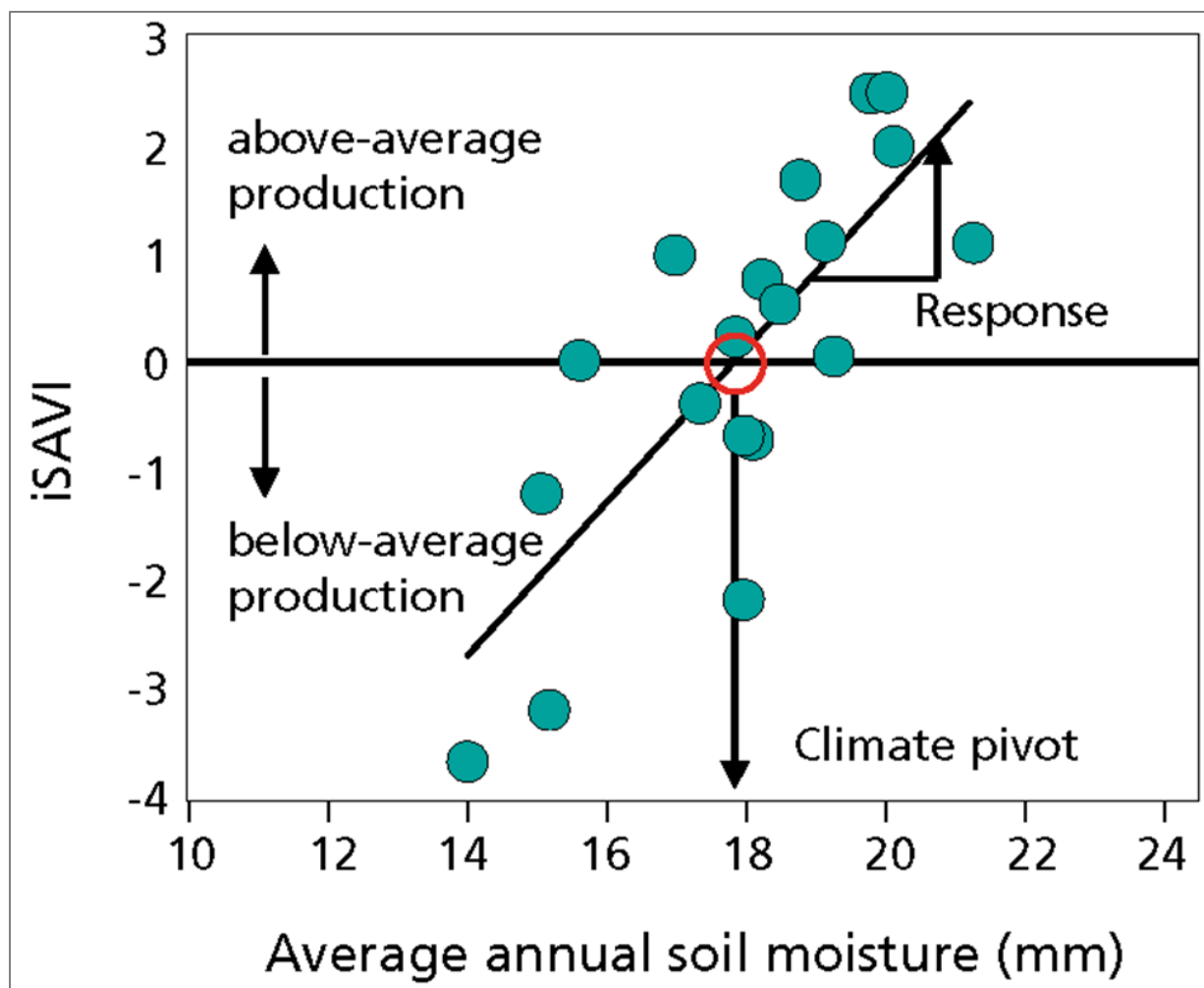


Figure 3. Conceptual diagram of soil-moisture pivot point and response of a single vegetation-alliance map unit to variation in annual average soil moisture. Vegetation production transitions from below- to above-average condition at the soil moisture pivot point. The response is the rate of change in iSAVI per millimeter of change in average soil moisture. Pivot-point figures like this can be constructed for other climate variables.

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2.9.2 Multiple-variable analysis

Second, multiple-regression models compared multiple climate variables simultaneously with production. These included lagged climate effects characterizing climate condition 1–2 years prior to an observation. This modeling framework helps account for legacy effects, which are conditions in prior years that set limits on production in a current year (Sala et al. 2012). By accounting for legacy effects, the longer-term cumulative effects of drought or good growing conditions in prior years can be considered.

Additionally, this approach can help determine if climate variables interact in important ways to influence production. Whereas the linear-regression framework used to determine pivot points considers only the influence of a single variable, such as AET, on production, multiple regression can

determine interactions of AET and D, or other interactions and lags that include effects from prior years.

To account for multiple interacting factors that collectively influence vegetation production on an annual basis, we established a suite of *a priori* candidate models (Table 3) based on expected vegetation responses to climate variables and lags from our earlier experience working in semiarid landscapes. In those studies (Thoma et al. 2019; Witwicki et al. 2016), we found water-balance variables to be better predictors of vegetation response than temperature and precipitation. In addition, lag effects were apparent as much as two years prior to a given satellite observation.

Table 3. *A priori* models of climate influence on vegetation production competed via generalized linear mixed-effects modeling to identify best correlates with production.

Model ^A	Climate variables ^B											
	AET	AET (lag1)	AET (lag2)	D	D (lag1)	D (lag2)	SOIL	SOIL (lag1)	SOIL (lag2)	P	P (lag1)	P (lag2)
AET1	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
AET12	X	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
AET123	X	X	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
AET123_D1	X	X	X	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
AET123_D12	X	X	X	X	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
AET123_D123	X	X	X	X	X	X	–	–	–	–	–	–
SOIL1	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	–	–	–	–	–
SOIL12	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	X	–	–	–	–
SOIL123	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	X	X	–	–	–
AET1_D1	X	–	–	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
AET12_D12	X	X	–	X	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
D1_SOIL1	–	–	–	X	–	–	X	–	–	–	–	–
D1_SOIL2	–	–	–	X	–	–	–	X	–	–	–	–
D1_SOIL12	–	–	–	X	–	–	X	X	–	–	–	–
P1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	–	–
P12	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	X	–
P123	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	X	X

^A See Table 2 for acronyms.

^B X = variable used in model, – = variable not used in model. Lags refer to models that include the water balance term for the preceding one (lag1) or two (lag2) years.

We then competed the models against each other using multiple regression models and identified competitive models based on delta AICc values < 4 to determine the combination of climate variables acting over one or more years that had the most influence on growing-season production. Models that did not compete well (delta AICc > 4) were excluded. Several models could be competitive in any given polygon because every *a priori* model was evaluated for every polygon. We first looked for a global best model of primary production at the monument level by aggregating results from all polygons in the monument. Then, we tabulated how frequently the top model

occurred by NCPN alliance group to determine the best climate correlates and lags or cumulative duration of effect on production at the alliance-group level.

2.10 Conceptual basis of climate pivot points and responses

Using the pivot-point framework, annual change ($\Delta iSAVI$) was regressed (via linear regression) against climate data to determine the degree to which annual variation in weather affected production (Munson 2013). In this analysis, a pivot point is the critical magnitude of a climate or water-balance variable where vegetation “teeters” between above- or below-average condition. Generally, water pivot points are important in water-limited environments. Temperature pivot points are important at higher elevations, where cold temperature limits growth (Thoma et al. 2020).

Vegetation response, or sensitivity to climate or water-balance, is the rate of change in condition per unit change in water or temperature. In this analysis, vegetation response is the slope of the regression line when interannual change in $iSAVI$ is related to the corresponding change in climate or water balance for the same period (see Figure 3).

Pivot points and responses are depicted graphically (Figure 3) as the x-axis value where each linear-regression line crosses the horizontal line, indicating no change from one year to the next. Production values plotting above the x-axis indicate that vegetation increased in production from the previous year. Points below the horizontal line indicate vegetation production decreased from the previous year. If a deficit pivot point was exceeded during the growing season, vegetation production was likely below average, because vegetation has an inverse or negative relationship with water deficit, a measure of drought stress. If an AET pivot point was exceeded during the growing season, vegetation production was likely above average, because production is positively related to AET. Thus, the interpretation of exceeding a pivot point depends on the influence the climate variable has on vegetation (negative for water deficit, positive for water-availability variables).

Polygons that cross the horizontal line further to the left, where the x-axis variable is a water-availability metric, are considered more dry-tolerant. That is, their performance is above average at lower water availability than a polygon that crosses the horizontal line further to the right. For example, a vegetation assemblage with a precipitation pivot point of 250 millimeters is more drought-tolerant than a vegetation assemblage with a pivot point of 300 millimeters. The opposite is true if the x-axis is deficit. In that case, polygons that cross the horizontal line further to the left are less drought-tolerant; that is, their production declines to below average condition when drought stress is relatively low.

The slope of the regression line quantifies the expected change in $iSAVI$ per millimeter of water or degree of temperature. Polygons with steeper regression slopes are more sensitive to a change in water availability. For each unit change in a climate or water balance variable, a more sensitive vegetation type will have a larger change in growing-season $iSAVI$.

Together, pivot points and responses determined from historical observations of vegetation condition and weather are two important ecological indicators of critical water amounts (in arid environments) or heat (in alpine environments) needed for growth, and how growth changes per unit change in the

climate variable. For this reason, pivot points and responses are indicators of expected change in vegetation production as the climate changes in the future (Munson et al. 2011). When linked with projections of future climate, these two important ecological variables can be used in quantitative vulnerability assessments as part of the Climate Smart Conservation planning framework (Stein et al. 2014), which helps managers set long-range goals achieved by near-term tactical actions (see Section 3.8).

2.10.1 Operational use of pivot points for “now-casts”

This report provides information for estimating vegetation condition using climate data. By tracking the climate variable with the strongest relationship to production in real time relative to its corresponding pivot point, we can determine if weather conditions are below, near, or above predetermined pivot points, and by what amount. In this way, we can use climate data to provide real-time “now-casts” indicating when weather conditions suggest production is likely to be above or below that of the previous year.

The interpretation of climate conditions against a pivot-point value requires consideration of pivot-point precision, determined by the standard error around the regression line where it crosses the horizontal axis. The range is larger in polygons where the relationship between climate and vegetation growth is more variable. At the alliance-group level, pivot-point range is caused by variability in plant assemblages in different polygons of the same alliance, as well as variations in soil and site properties. Additional variation is caused by noise in the MODIS sensor near its sensitivity limits in sparsely vegetated environments, errors in the gridded climate data, and vegetation legacy effects that cause plants to respond differently to the same weather depending on what happened in the recent past. All these factors contribute to the observed standard error of a pivot point that bracket weather conditions determining if vegetation is likely performing above or below average.²

Vegetation performance when weather conditions are within the standard error of the pivot point is best described as “near-average.” When weather conditions exceed the standard error of the pivot point (above or below the pivot point), there is higher confidence that vegetation production is above or below average.

2.10.2 Lapse-rate adjustment of station data for operational use with pivot points

Operationally, vegetation condition can be reported in real time using weather-station data to calculate daily water balance (see [ClimateAnalyzer.org](https://climateanalyzer.org)). These data can be compared to a pivot point. The relationships between climate and vegetation in this report used Daymet (a gridded climate dataset). For this reason, before operational reporting commences using weather-station data, a relationship needs to be established between the Daymet climate dataset at a location of interest and the weather station, typically located at monument headquarters. Specifically, station temperature and precipitation data should be lapse-rate adjusted for the location of interest if there is more than

² Although not shown graphically, the standard error of pivot points is available for every polygon (NPS 2025, Table S-2).

500 meters' difference in elevation between the weather station and the site of interest. This is because temperature and precipitation change with elevation.

2.11 Phenology metrics and climate drivers

Phenology metrics were determined using the derivative method in the greenbrown R package (Forkel 2015) after smoothing and interpolation to daily values. The derivative method identifies growing-season phenology by recognizing inflections in the annual curves where growth rate accelerates (start), peaks (maximum), and decelerates (end) (Figure 4). The length of growing season is the span of time between the start and the end. These values were determined for every polygon-year combination where possible. In some cases, phenology metrics could not be determined because the amplitude of annual variation was small, which made it impossible to find inflection points. The length of season metric was dropped if either start or end of season could not be determined. Start, end, and length-of-season metrics were also dropped if start of season occurred in winter between November 1 and April 1 due to vegetation shadows that confound satellite-based phenology assessments (Norris and Walker 2020).

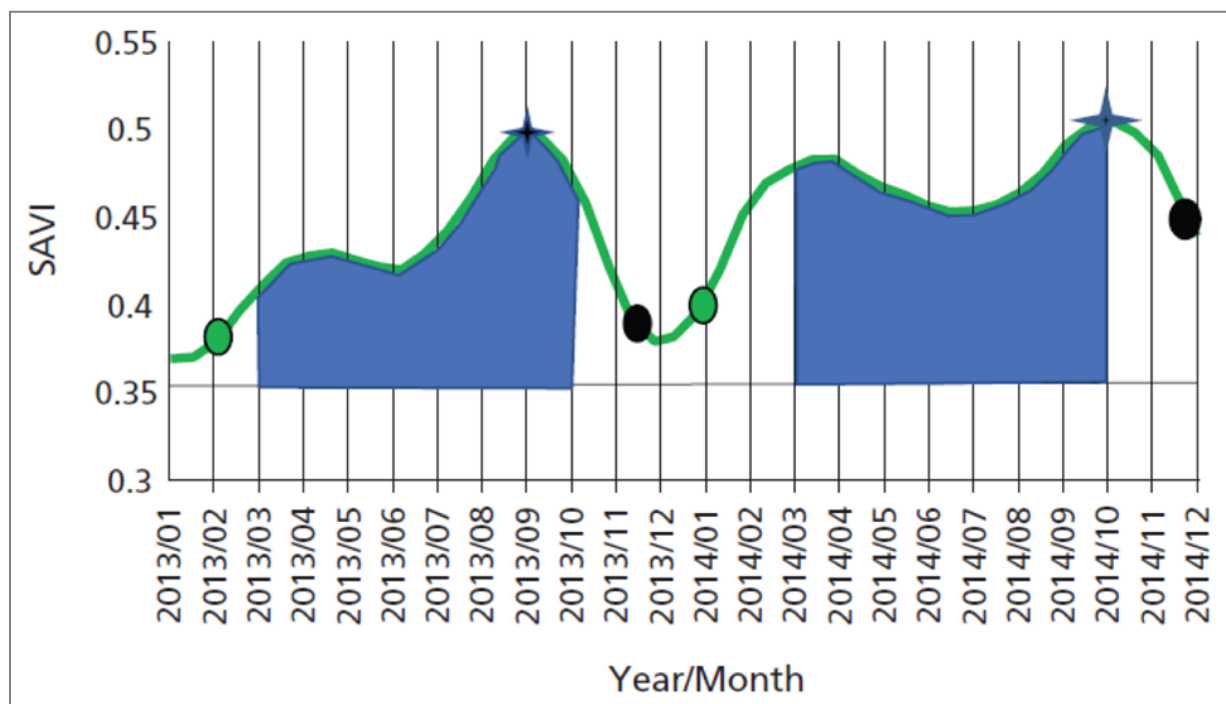


Figure 4. Integrated area under the growing-season curve (shaded area) for one polygon over two calendar years. The months used to calculate growing-season production are fixed and include March through October. Phenology metrics are derived using a process that determines inflection points on the annual curves using the derivative (rate of change in growth rate) method. In some years, phenology cannot be determined in semiarid environments due to weak or noisy signals. The fixed growing-season duration used for calculating iSAVI and the start and end of growing season determined from phenology analysis may not always agree. Start of growing season (green point), peak (star), and end of growing season (black point) indicate important annual milestones in vegetation growth over two consecutive years.

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Polygon-level phenology metrics were summarized across alliance groups. The summary involved averaging linear regression slopes (days of change per year) across polygons within an alliance type, then multiplying the slope by the number of years (20 years) in the study to determine the average days of change in each phenology metric over the course of the study. Due to variation in the regression relationships and the use of regression slope to convert to days of change in each metric, the change in length of season in summary tables is similar to, but not equal, to the length of time between start and end of season.

Climate drivers of phenology were identified by focusing on the start-of-season, because plant growth in spring is most sensitive to climate (Fu et al. 2014). A suite of climate variables was reduced by dropping variables highly correlated with day of year ($r^2 > 0.7$) and determining pairwise correlations between remaining explanatory variables. In the case of correlated variable pairs, the more integrative variable was retained.

The timing of start of season (SOS), peak greenness and magnitude, senescence, and length of season (LOS) were derived from the full annual curves for each polygon with winter-period minimums truncated to 60% of the winter maximum during the period of record. The cutoff value of 60% was determined via trial and error to both minimize lengths of winter gaps and include growing-season SAVI in every year. This prevented long periods of snow or winter cloud cover from having undue influence on the timing of phenology. The truncation of winter minimum values described above was a simplified version of published methods (Wang et al. 2018).

Some vegetation types (primarily conifer and shrublands) in the western United States exhibit a peak satellite-observed greenness (measured using the normalized difference vegetation index, or NDVI) in winter months that is an artifact of shadows when the angle between reflected sunlight and the satellite is large (Norris and Walker 2020). It is unknown how this issue affects SAVI. The bands used to calculate SAVI are the same as those used to calculate NDVI, but a soil-correction factor is applied in SAVI to account for variable background reflectance. There is currently no known solution for resolving this shadowing effect. Thus, polygon-year combinations that exhibit winter peaks cannot be used in phenology analysis. These polygon-year combinations were removed by determining if their annual peak of greenness occurred during winter months, defined as the period between November 1 and April 1. If any winter peaks in SAVI occurred during any year of the study period, the polygon-year was removed from analysis for that year. This allowed retention of polygon-year combinations that did not result in spurious satellite observations, rather than removing a polygon from analysis if only a few years failed the screening rules.

Two statistical methods were used to identify climate drivers of SOS, or green-up. This helped identify multiple lines of evidence for drivers if both methods yielded similar results. The first method relied on preconceived notions of phenology drivers. The second method, a machine-learning approach, let the data tell the story. In the first method, *a priori* models thought to be important in western rangelands were identified (Table 4) (St. Peter 2015). These models were competed against one another to determine top models of SOS.

Table 4. *A priori* models of climate influence on timing of green-up (start of the growing season).

Model ^A	Climate variable ^B											
	AET	GDD	P	RAIN	D	VPD	SRAD	Tmax	Tmin	VP	SOIL	Meltd
AET	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
GDD	–	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
P	–	–	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
RAIN	–	–	–	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
D	–	–	–	–	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
VPD	–	–	–	–	–	X	–	–	–	–	–	–
SRAD	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	–	–	–	–	–
Tmax	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	–	–	–	–
Tmin	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	–	–	–
VP	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	–	–
GDD_P	–	X	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
GDD_RAIN	–	X	–	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
GDD_SOIL	–	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	–
GDD_AET	X	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
SRAD_AET	X	–	–	–	–	–	X	–	–	–	–	–
SRAD_P	–	–	X	–	–	–	X	–	–	–	–	–
Meltd	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X
Meltd_SRAD	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	–	–	–	–	X
Meltd_P	–	–	X	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X

^A Models were competed via generalized linear mixed-effects modeling to identify best correlates with green-up. All climate variables were summed or averaged from January 1 to the day of year when green-up began. See Table 2 for acronyms.

^B X = variable used in model, – = variable not used in model.

Second, the random forests machine-learning technique was used to determine important drivers of phenology and provide predictive models of SOS (Breiman 2001). Random forests is a learning method for regression that constructs a multitude of decision trees until the optimum combination of factors describing a result is obtained. In this case, *a priori* candidate models were not specified beforehand. Rather, the random forests algorithm used climate and water balance variables to identify a top model using a subset consisting of 70% of the data, which was randomly selected. The random forests algorithm generated 2,000 decision trees with a maximum of four variables randomly chosen per split, which is the recommended number for a model testing the utility of 12 predictors. Sampling was done with replacement, which is the default setting.

The top model was validated against a holdout dataset consisting of the remaining 30% of observations. Variable-importance plots were used to identify which variables had the most predictive power. They consisted of percent-increase in mean square error (%IncMSE), which is a measure of model improvement when adding each variable to the model, and increase in node purity

(IncNodePurity), which is the difference in residual sum-of-squares in regression with or without each variable.

After model fitting with the training data, predictions for the start of the growing season were made using the validation dataset, where SOS predictions could be compared against observations in the validation dataset. The accuracy of predictions for SOS was characterized by the mean absolute error (MAE), which is the mean value of differences between predictions and observations, with units of days. The MAE is the average magnitude of error in days without specifying the direction of error, thus specifying the average plus-or-minus error rate of predictions.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Completeness of satellite observations

Completeness of growing-season observations was 99% across all targets for the 20-year period of analysis. Clouds, aerosols, and snow cover reduced the average completeness of high-quality observations to 92% of potential observations on an annual basis across all polygon targets. The minimum completeness for any single polygon on an annual or seasonal basis was 63% and 64%, respectively.

Before analyzing satellite observations with climate and water balance, gaps were linearly interpolated to a daily time-step prior to smoothing. This removed high-frequency noise in the time series that could not be removed via quality screening and matched the periodicity to the daily time-step of the corresponding climate and water balance data. There were no missing climate or water-balance data.

3.2 Time series

At Dinosaur NM, SAVI observations reflected differences in vegetation response to climate that were apparent when observations were organized by NCPN alliance group (Figure 5). Some polygons were generally greener than others (indicating higher production and biomass), but within alliance groups there was variation. That variation can be due to species assemblages within the alliance group and site properties that modify the local effects of climate. Some outlier polygons within alliance groups might need to be considered separately in future analyses if the interest is in the central tendency of an alliance group.

Gap-filled and smoothed time series of 16-day SAVI illustrated a broadly similar and slightly upward trend in all alliance groups during the study period that was most notable in the Annual Exotic Grassland and Water alliance groups (Figure 5). However, the alliance groups showed a high degree of variability in amplitude and timing of peak values. It was typical for some polygons in an alliance group to exhibit “outlier character,” indicating they were not a good fit with other polygons in the group. This issue was most notable in the Disturbed, Water, Wet Meadow, and Mixed Montane Shrubland alliance groups. This could happen for several reasons, including grouping vegetation types into alliance groups, which forces some dissimilarity among group members; misclassification in the vegetation-mapping process; or, less commonly, disturbance since mapping was completed that resulted in a different vegetation response signal than what is characteristic of other polygons in the alliance group.

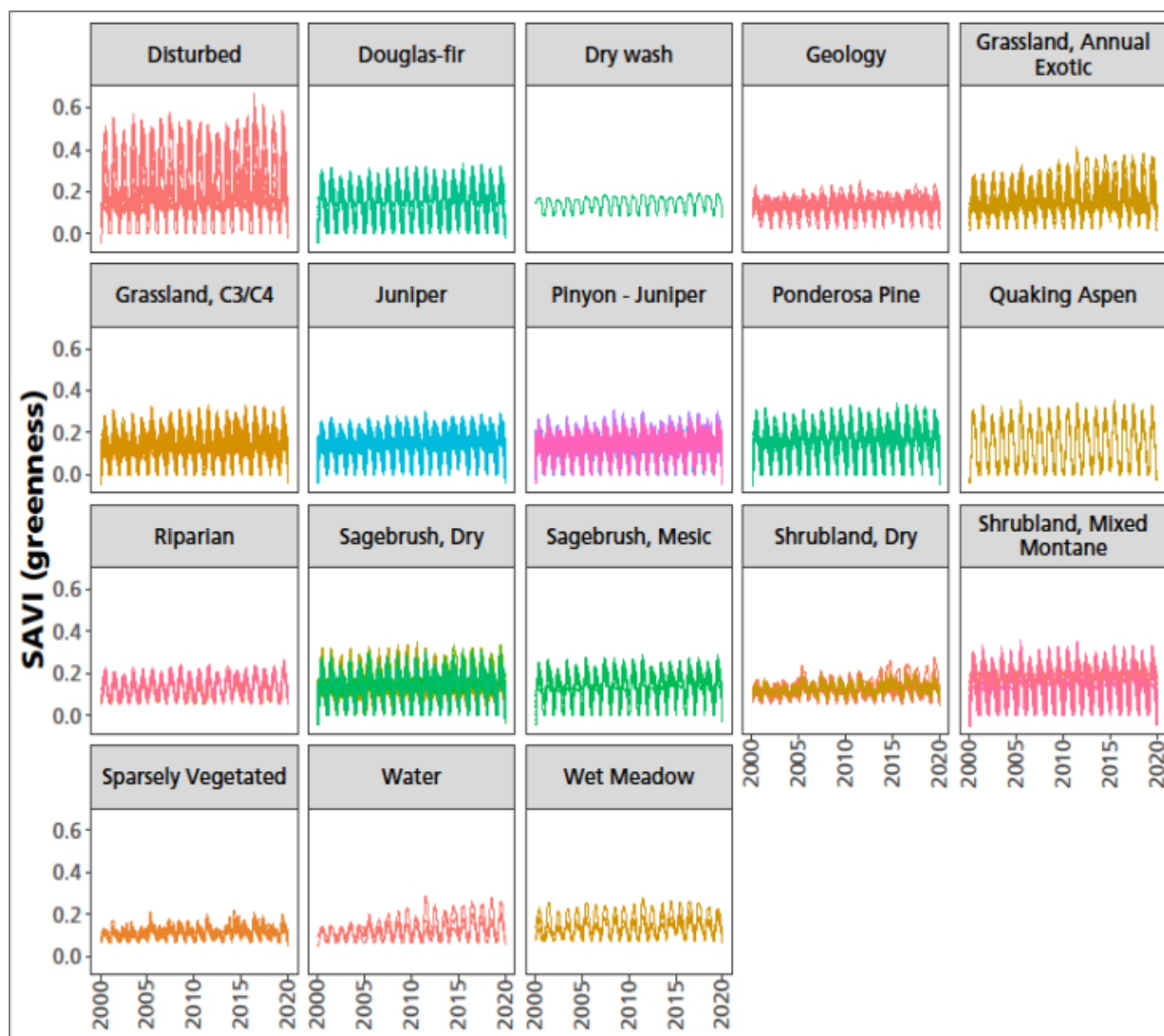


Figure 5. Soil-adjusted vegetation index time series by alliance group for 2406 polygons analyzed for 2000–2019. Colors help differentiate individual polygon time series traces. Each polygon time series was filtered to include only high-quality pixel values, with minimum values truncated to winter minimum, gap-filled, and then smoothed with a Savitsky-Golay moving-window filter to remove high-frequency noise. Analysis was limited to polygons of > 8.3 hectares. A single-line trace indicates either all polygon units have similar seasonality and interannual variation, or only one polygon of the alliance group was sampled.

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It is important to evaluate outlier polygons carefully, with consideration given to potential effects of land use or disturbance. Time series in the Geology and Water alliance groups were surprising because, based on the alliance-group name, little if any vegetation should have been present. Strong seasonality and relatively high amplitude in the Water alliance group suggested that (1) there was some vegetation growing in areas mapped as Geology and Water, or (2) there was some pixel overlap of polygon boundaries picking up vegetation signals that could not be removed despite the rigorous

screening criteria. Without further investigation, it is not possible to know which of these issues, or a combination, was in play.

3.3 Trends in annual production

Significant upward trends (p-value < 0.05) in maximum and mean annual SAVI occurred across 99.2% and 99.7% of the study area, respectively. Only 0.3% of the area decreased in maximum or mean annual SAVI. The greatest area of mean annual and maximum annual iSAVI increase occurred in the Pinyon-Juniper and Juniper woodlands, representing 59% of the area analyzed in and near Dinosaur NM. Decreases in both maximum and mean annual SAVI occurred in Douglas Fir (1), Juniper (1), Pinyon-Juniper (3), and Ponderosa Pine (2) polygons (Table 5; Appendix A). These polygons in these alliance groups represented only 0.3% of the area analyzed in and near the monument. The downward trend in production may be due to natural disturbance, management actions, forest disease, fire, or declines in understory vegetation components, any of which could be verified by site visits.

Table 5. Amount of monument area with increasing (pos) or decreasing (neg) trends in mean annual or maximum annual SAVI by alliance group. Since there are two variables that can trend in the same or opposite directions there can be more than one row of information for each alliance group.

Alliance Group	Annual Trend		Monument Area (hectares)	# of polygons	% of analysis area ^A
	Maximum	Mean			
Disturbed	pos	pos	1382.7	22	1.45
Douglas-fir	neg	neg	19.9	1	0.02
Douglas-fir	pos	pos	1287.8	53	1.35
Dry wash	pos	pos	13.9	1	0.01
Geology	neg	pos	13.6	1	0.01
Geology	pos	pos	2070.7	68	2.18
Grassland, Annual Exotic	pos	pos	1699	46	1.79
Grassland, C3/C4	neg	pos	61.7	2	0.06
Grassland, C3/C4	pos	pos	10486.5	131	11.02
Juniper	neg	neg	10.6	1	0.01
Juniper	pos	neg	17.7	1	0.02
Juniper	pos	pos	9852.4	296	10.36
Pinyon-Juniper	neg	neg	154.8	3	0.16
Pinyon-Juniper	neg	pos	38.2	2	0.04
Pinyon-Juniper	pos	pos	55128.8	865	57.96
Ponderosa Pine	neg	neg	58	2	0.06
Ponderosa Pine	pos	pos	3320.8	49	3.49
Riparian	pos	pos	137	7	0.14
Sagebrush, Dry	pos	pos	69.7	4	0.07
Shrubland, Dry	pos	pos	490.2	19	0.52

^A Results by polygon for significant trends in maximum and mean annual SAVI are in Table S-3 of NPS (2025).

Table 5 (continued). Amount of monument area with increasing (pos) or decreasing (neg) trends in mean annual or maximum annual SAVI by alliance group. Since there are two variables that can trend in the same or opposite directions there can be more than one row of information for each alliance group.

Alliance Group	Annual Trend		Monument Area (hectares)	# of polygons	% of analysis area ^A
	Maximum	Mean			
Shrubland, Mixed Montane	neg	pos	386.8	1	0.41
Shrubland, Mixed Montane	pos	pos	6298.9	143	6.62
Sparsely Vegetated	pos	pos	447.1	20	0.47
Water	pos	pos	1637.2	4	1.72
Wet Meadow	pos	pos	36.2	3	0.04

^A Results by polygon for significant trends in maximum and mean annual SAVI are in Table S-3 of NPS (2025).

3.4 Trends in growing season production

Significant upward trends in growing-season iSAVI, determined via simple linear regression, were found at the alliance-group level for all alliance groups (Figure 6).

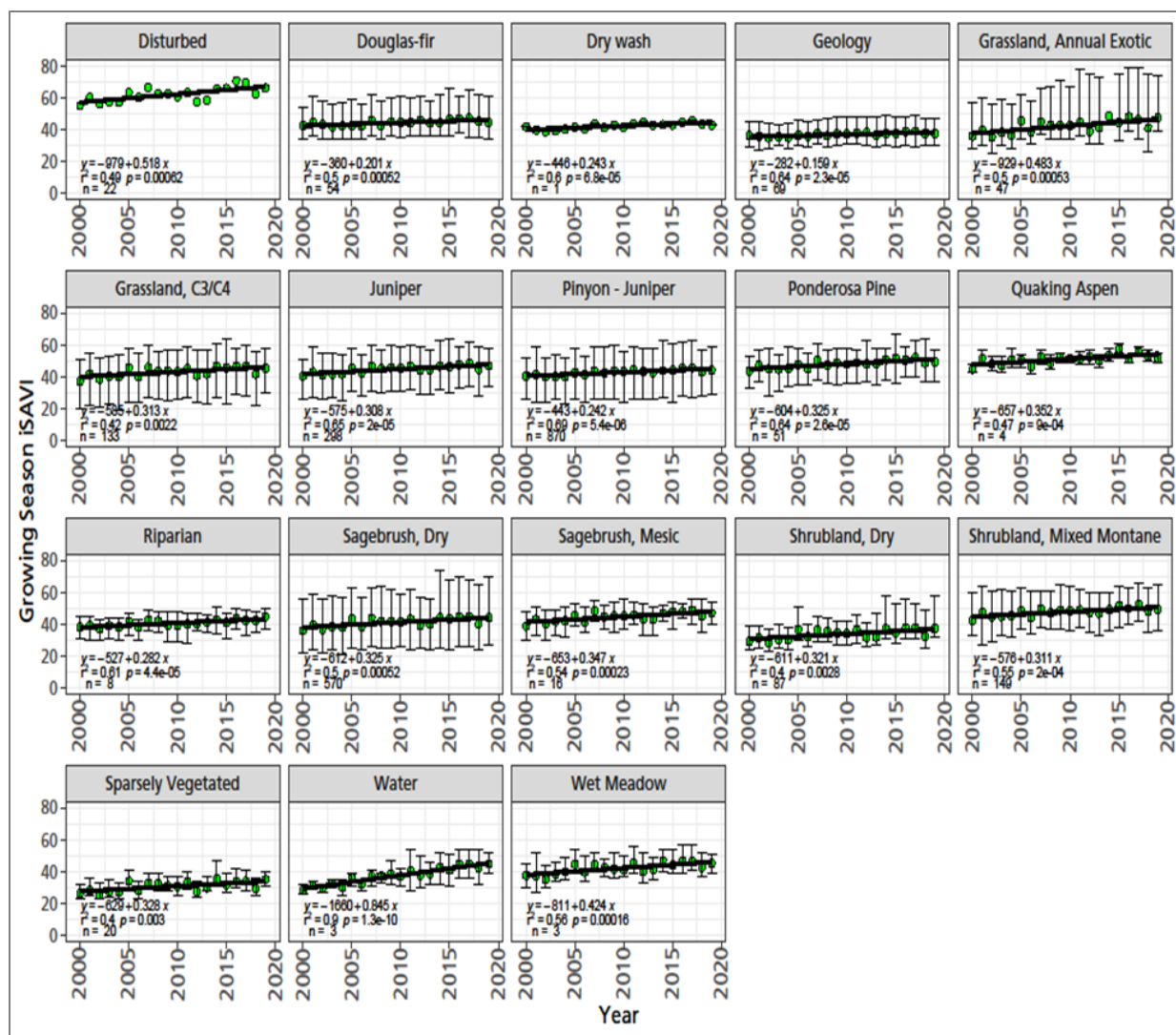


Figure 6. Trends in mean growing-season iSAVI by alliance group, determined via simple linear regression. Error bars are standard error among polygons within each alliance group. n = number of polygons analyzed in each alliance group, r^2 = coefficient of determination, p = p-value, y = growing-season iSAVI, x = year.

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As a subset of the annual period, the growing-season iSAVI focused on March through October, revealing climate-driven temporal patterns in all alliance groups. Decreases in growth were most extreme in 2002–2004, 2006, 2008, and 2012, corresponding with dry periods, followed by recovery that peaked in 2005, 2007, 2011, and 2017, corresponding with wetter periods. A pronounced downward trend in production occurred in 2018, during a drought, with partial recovery in 2019

(Figure 6), demonstrating the resilience of Dinosaur NM vegetation production to drought stress of this magnitude.³

Evaluation of simple linear-regression slopes indicated that the alliance group Water increased in greenness at nearly twice the rate of all other alliance groups except Disturbed, which increased at the second fastest rate over the 20-year period of observations. The alliance group Geology increased at the slowest rate. There was an upward trend in growing-season production over those 20 years, with areas in the southwest increasing most and areas in the northeast increasing least (see Figure 7 for spatial patterns; see Figure 6 for rates of change).

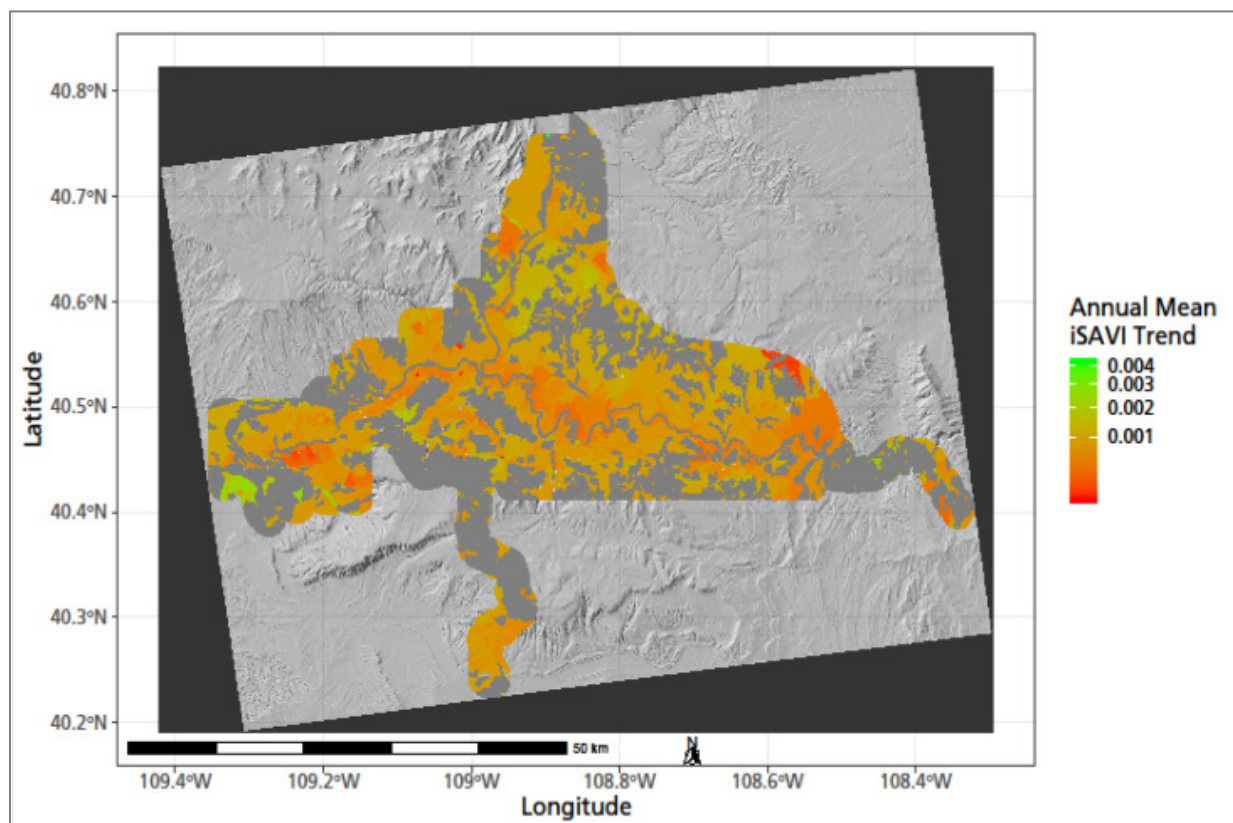


Figure 7. Spatial pattern of trends in mean annual iSAVI. Trend is average change in iSAVI per year for 2000 – 2019. Greener colors indicate a more positive trend. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

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The mostly upward production trends for the woody-plant alliance groups were consistent with other research findings on the Colorado Plateau, which showed shrubs as dominant where winter soil moisture was high and seasonal temperature was variable, and grasses as dominant where summer moisture was available (Gremer et al. 2018). That study pointed out that rising temperature and

³ This finding does not imply vegetation composition was not affected or did not change. Composition change cannot be determined from this analysis.

increasing temperature variability, associated with climate change, will result in conditions more favorable to shrubs because the change in temperature is expected to overwhelm the role of available soil moisture by late century. It also noted that shrubs are better adapted to large temperature fluctuations than grasses are. A review of woody-plant proliferation (Barger et al. 2011) found that seasonality of precipitation, land use, and atmospheric CO₂ concentrations were all important drivers of woody-plant expansion in semiarid regions where annual PET was greater than annual P, as is the case at Dinosaur NM.

3.5 Climate relations

3.5.1 Qualitative patterns in annual precipitation and production

Between 2000 and 2019, precipitation increased park-wide, as did most measures of production in this semiarid, water-limited environment. Improved water-use efficiency due to the fertilization effect of rising atmospheric CO₂ concentrations may explain some of the increase in production, but precipitation increase was likely the largest contributor (Sorokin et al. 2017). Plotting the iSAVI anomaly (difference from long-term average iSAVI) with precipitation showed a relatively tight temporal correspondence of interannual variation in annual precipitation and production (Figure 8), whereas CO₂ concentrations increased monotonically on an annual basis during the study period (<https://gml.noaa.gov/ccgg/trends/>).

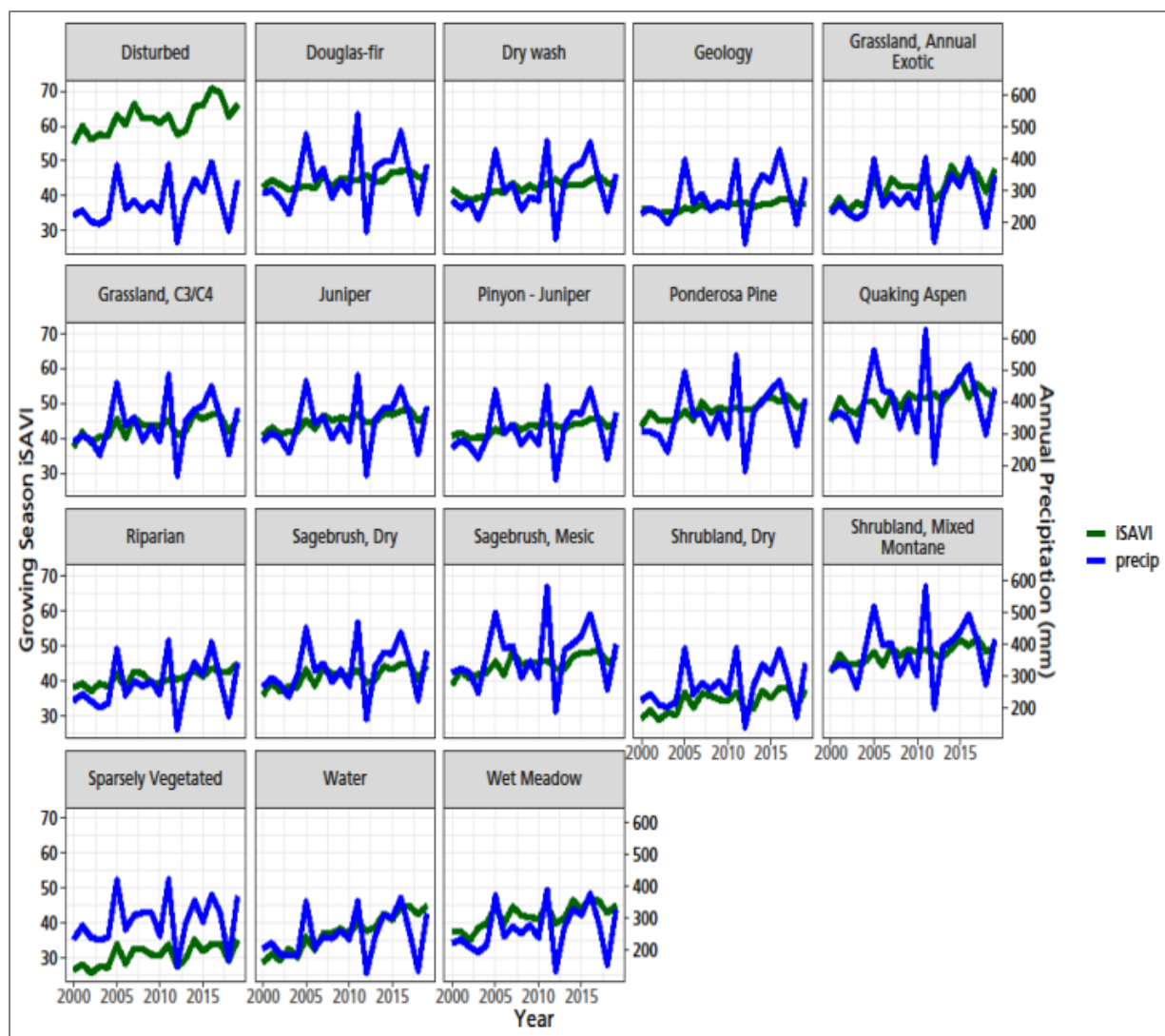


Figure 8. Co-variation in growing-season production, estimated as the iSAVI between March and October and water-year cumulative precipitation averaged within alliance groups, demonstrating the link between climate and vegetation production in the monument at the annual scale. The time series shown here is intended to illustrate precipitation as a master climate driver of production in semiarid environments. Statistical analyses of the relation of production to precipitation and all other climate variables is the subject of following sections.

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While peaks and valleys in the time series roughly coincided, there were differences in the magnitude of vegetation response to precipitation, and evidence of a response delay that varied by alliance group. iSAVI peaks and dips in annual production corresponded with interannual precipitation patterns in most alliance groups, but a lag in vegetation response can be caused by legacy effects of vegetation condition in prior years that carry over to subsequent years.

Such legacy effects have been noted in semiarid vegetation response to precipitation where prior conditions set the stage for current-year production. For example, a wet year following a drought

may not be as productive as a wet year following an average precipitation year due to legacies in tillers, stems, root density, and seed production, which are limited in a drought (Noy-Meir 1973; Thoma et al. 2016). Because of prior conditions, the largest peaks in annual production do not always coincide with the largest peaks in annual precipitation.

In addition, the timing and magnitude of response to precipitation are affected by the structural and physiological traits of plants, including rooting depths, stomatal control of gas exchange, leaf morphology, annual or perennial life cycle, and the site conditions where they grow (Munson et al. 2015). Plant physiology may explain why peaks and valleys in annual production are more pronounced in grasslands and shrublands but muted in woodland alliance groups. Additionally, evergreens that retain leaves for multiple years have lower-amplitude seasonal cycles (Yang et al. 2019). Grasslands are generally more responsive to interannual weather variation, while woodlands with deeper rooting systems can be buffered from short-term droughts. Additionally, variation in the magnitude of vegetation response to variation in precipitation could be due to higher runoff in high-precipitation years if a large proportion of precipitation fell in a few storm events.

Collectively, the response of vegetation to interannual variation in weather is complex. The study of these interactions across space and time is greatly aided by the high frequency of satellite observations coupled with continuous daily climate observations over the same period. Organizing the remotely sensed observations by management-relevant vegetation types provides insights that may be useful in climate adaptation planning.

3.5.2 Single-variable drivers of production

At the monument level, relationships between growth and climate variables were generally weak due to the highly variable response relationships with climate across vegetation types. However, when examined by alliance groups, better relationships emerged (Figure 9).

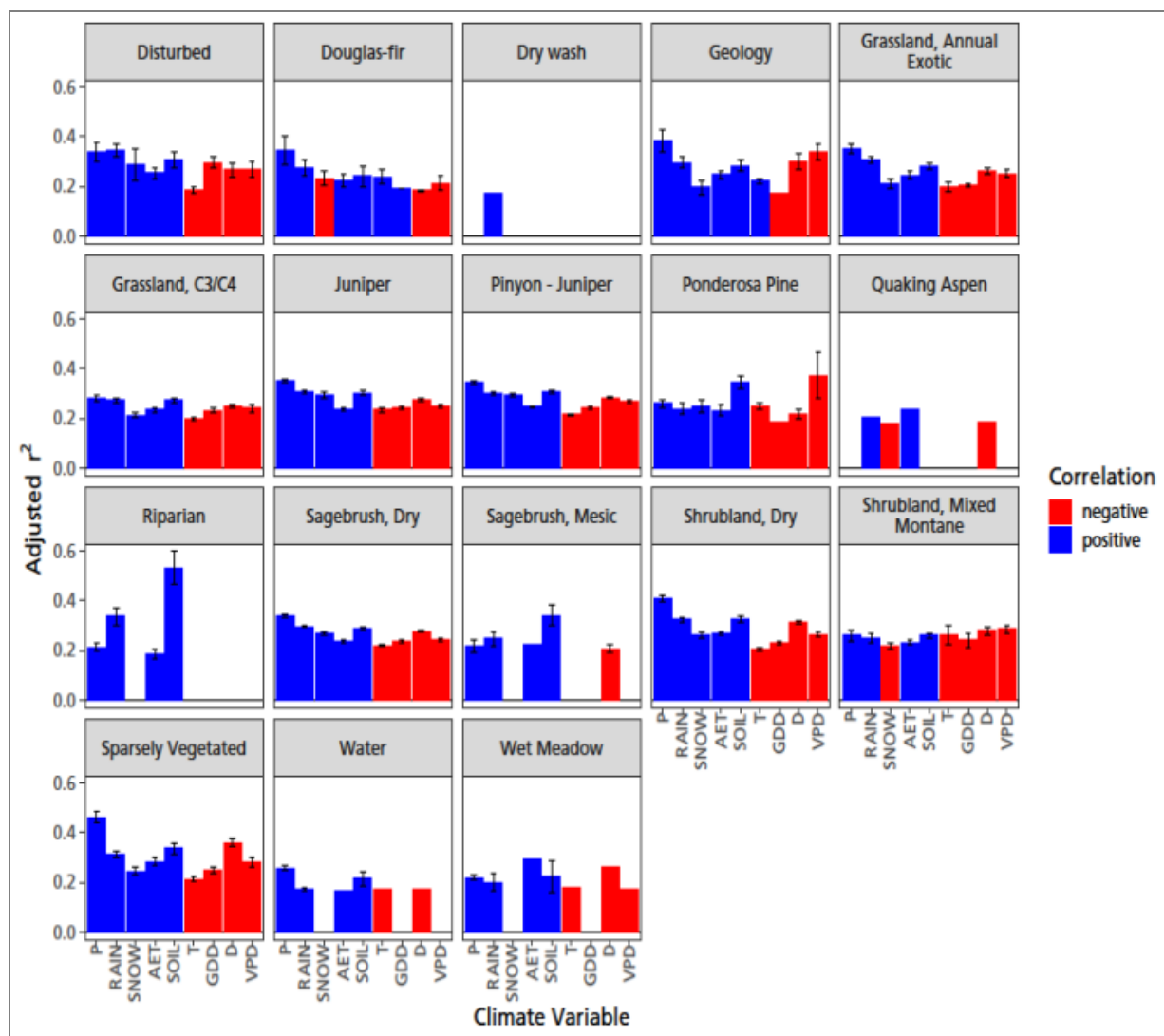


Figure 9. Significant (p -value < 0.05) relationships between water-year climate variables and first difference of growing-season iSAVI, 2000–2019. Bar height is the mean variation in iSAVI explained by variation in climate or water-balance variable on the x-axis. Error bars are standard error. Blue bar color indicates positive correlation. Red bar color indicates negative correlation. P = precipitation (mm), RAIN = precipitation as rain (mm), SNOW = precipitation as snow (mm of water), AET = actual evapotranspiration (mm), SOIL = average soil moisture (mm), T = average temperature ($^{\circ}$ C), GDD = growing degree days ($^{\circ}$ C), D = climatic water deficit (mm), VPD = vapor-pressure deficit (Pa).

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Vegetation production in all alliance groups was correlated with multiple aspects of climate. Across alliance groups at Dinosaur NM, the water-abundance variables (P, RAIN, SNOW, AET, SOIL) were positively correlated with annual production except for Douglas Fir, Mixed Montane Shrubland, and Quaking Aspen, and a few polygons in other alliance groups which were negatively correlated with SNOW (NPS 2025, Table S-2). It is unclear why this occurred because snowmelt replenishes soil moisture reservoirs. However, abundant snow cover delays the start of the growing season until it melts. Polygons where production was negatively correlated with SNOW have an

average hill slope aspect of 168 degrees (southeast-facing) which may result in longer snow cover season that could shorten the growing season following winters with heavy snow. Variables representing heat, unmet water need, or atmospheric dryness (T, GDD, D, VPD) were negatively correlated with production in every alliance group where relationships with those variables were significant. Within alliance groups with multiple polygons, there was variation in relationship strength, indicated by error bars in Figure 9 (NPS 2025, Table S-2). This can be caused by variation in species assemblages and abundances that differ among map units of the same alliance.

Generally, annual precipitation, summer rain, and annual average soil moisture had the strongest positive relationships with production in most alliance groups. Generally, deficit had the strongest negative relationship with production (Figure 9). However, on an annual basis, most of the water-balance variables were no better correlated with production than was annual precipitation.

Only 1.1% of polygons that had a significant relationship with a temperature variable (PET, T, GDD) exhibited an increase in production with warmer temperature (NPS 2025, Table S-2). These were mostly Pinyon-Juniper and Douglas-fir alliance groups. The predominantly negative response to warming is typical in water-limited environments, where warmer temperature increases evaporative demand that is often not met by available water.

Some vegetation types respond more strongly to seasonal weather than to annual conditions. For these plants, warming temperatures in the spring initiate growth. Then, as soil moisture decreases throughout the growing season, other variables, such as water deficit, typically take on greater importance. Depending on the species, most growth may occur in spring or late summer. Thus, the timing of seasonal water and energy availability may be more important to annual vegetation production than annual water and energy availability (Barnes et al. 2016). These kinds of seasonal responses to weather are difficult to characterize on an annual basis with a single variable because the important climate drivers switch seasonally, and there may be long-term memory effects from earlier growing seasons that affect current-year production (Thoma et al. 2016).

In other words, multiple aspects of climate and water balance act over both short and long periods to affect annual production. Thus, a simple linear regression approach that considers single-variable influences on production over the course of an entire year is an oversimplification of important vegetation–climate relations. This may explain coefficients of determination of < 0.5 (Figure 9), which may seem unimpressive but are similar to results of species responses to single variables in plot studies (Munson et al. 2011).

Nevertheless, there is value in determining single-predictor regressions because they can identify important drivers that result in increases or decreases in annual production and represent a practical way to derive critical water needs and drought-stress indicators (Munson et al. 2016; Thoma et al. 2019) that can be tracked using data from weather stations. The best single-variable indicator of annual vegetation production can be determined by alliance group from visual inspection of Figure 9 (tallest bar = best relationship) or by polygon from Table S-2 in NPS (2025).

Annual precipitation at Dinosaur NM was generally among the climate or water-balance variables most strongly correlated with annual production, so it is used in the following sections that further explore climate/vegetation relationships. Multiple predictors and time lags of annual production response are considered in a later section.

3.6 Pivot points

3.6.1 *Pivot points indicate drought tolerance*

Plant species with smaller pivot points for water-abundance variables (e.g., precipitation, rain, snow, actual evapotranspiration, soil moisture) demonstrated a higher degree of drought tolerance because less water was needed to achieve above-average production (NPS 2025, Tables S-2 and S-4).⁴ Conversely, larger pivot points for variables representing heat, unmet water need, or atmospheric dryness indicated a higher degree of drought tolerance because more drought was tolerated before production dropped below average.

At Dinosaur NM, the most drought-tolerant alliance groups (i.e., the ones with the lowest precipitation pivot point) were associated with wet environments and include Water and Wet Meadow (Figure 10). The low pivot points of these alliance groups are linked to accumulation of water from upslope positions that make these habitats less droughty in low-precipitation years. The water-balance model used in this report does not accumulate flow from upslope positions, so it cannot account for the process of flow accumulation that is likely the cause of drought tolerance in low lying areas or depressions. Disturbed areas and Dry shrubland were drought tolerant due to species adaptations to dryness. A few riparian areas ($n = 3$) had drought tolerance between that of Annual Exotic Grasslands and Geology, likely due to inclusion of upland areas outside low-lying riparian areas that are often narrow and sinuous. This may be due to a limitation of 250-m pixel resolution when riparian areas are less than that width.

⁴ The pivot points differed among water-abundance variables because they represent different pools, periods, and magnitudes of water availability. For example, soil moisture is only a fraction of total precipitation (P), because some P runs off and is not available to plants. Similarly, rain and snow represent fractions of total P that supply water for vegetation at different times of the year. Thus, each variable represents a different “pool” and phase of water (solid, liquid, or gas) that may be seasonally active or present during different seasons.

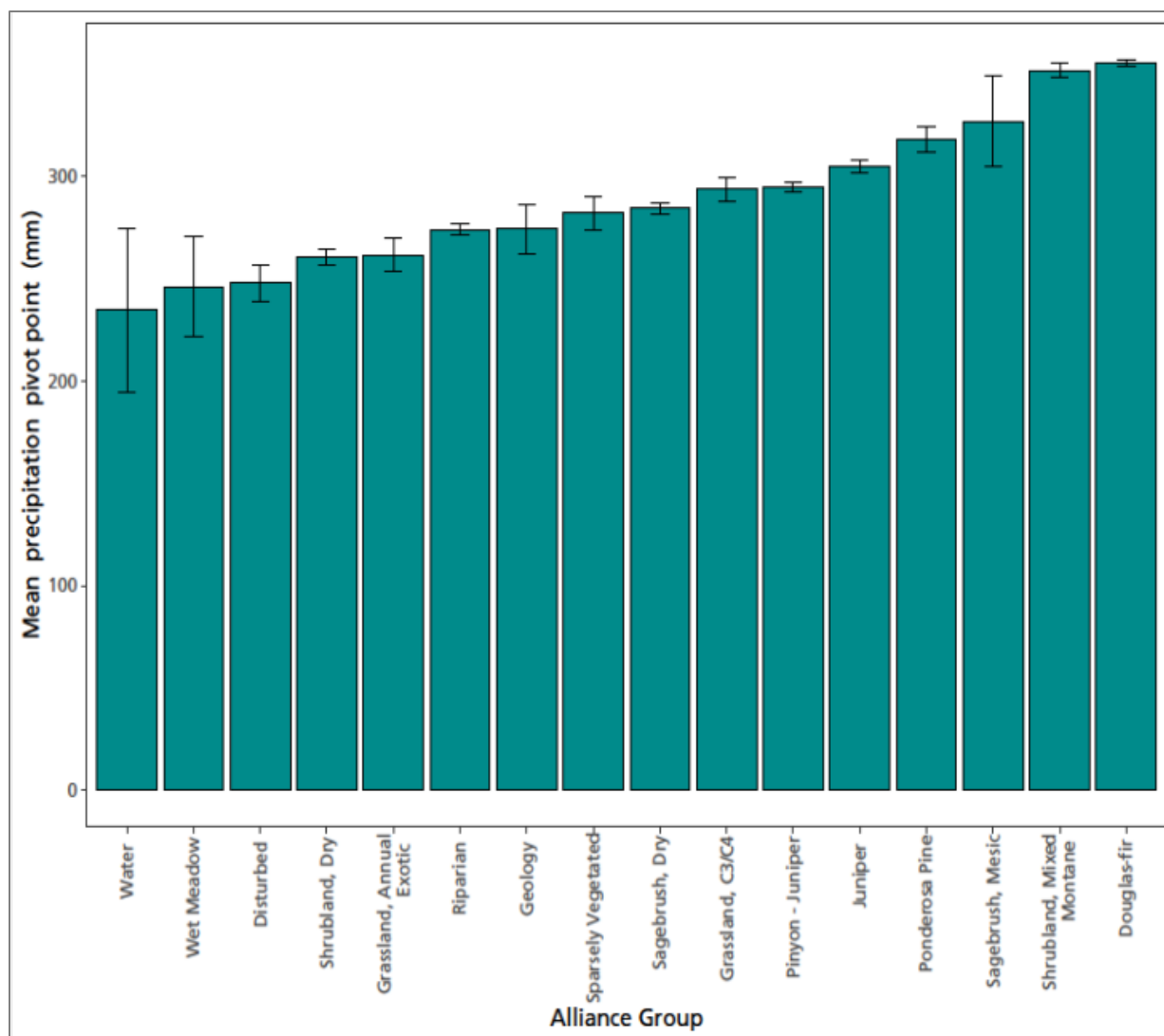


Figure 10. The mean precipitation pivot-point values shown here represent critical water needs for the different alliance groups. Standard error bars indicate range in variability of pivot points among polygons of an alliance group if more than one polygon of an had a statistically significant relationship (p -value < 0.05) with precipitation. Pivot points identify the critical water need that achieves average production for each alliance group.

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Exotic Annual Grasslands, Dry Shrublands, and Dry Sagebrush were more drought-tolerant than the Juniper or Pinyon-Juniper woodland groups, likely due to seasonal growth traits and dormancy during the driest times of year. Forests generally respond more slowly to drought conditions due to deep roots and slower growth.

Pivot points for a specific geographic area are related to but not always equal to the mean annual climate value where a pivot point is determined. For this reason, spatial patterns in pivot points often follow precipitation and temperature gradients with elevation. This can be seen in the order of alliance-group pivot points at Dinosaur NM. Lower-elevation alliance groups have lower

precipitation pivot points, suggesting they are the most drought-tolerant (see Figure 10). There are caveats to this generalization. Alliance groups consist of many species and include overstory and understory components. This could explain some of the variation in pivot points within alliance groups (error bars) as well as patterns in pivot points that may not follow elevation relationships with precipitation. Interactions between vegetation and precipitation that are modified by site conditions affecting water storage, such as soil properties, are an important aspect of this study considered by using water-balance variables as indicators of climate.

3.6.2 Spatial patterns of drought tolerance

The map of precipitation pivot points shows that the amount of moisture required to increase production above that of the previous year generally increased with elevation (Figure 11). This pattern stemmed from the distribution of vegetation groups that generally followed changes in mean climate values. More specifically, it reflected the tendency of water availability (soil moisture) to increase with elevation, and unmet water need (deficit) to decrease with elevation (Stephenson 1998).

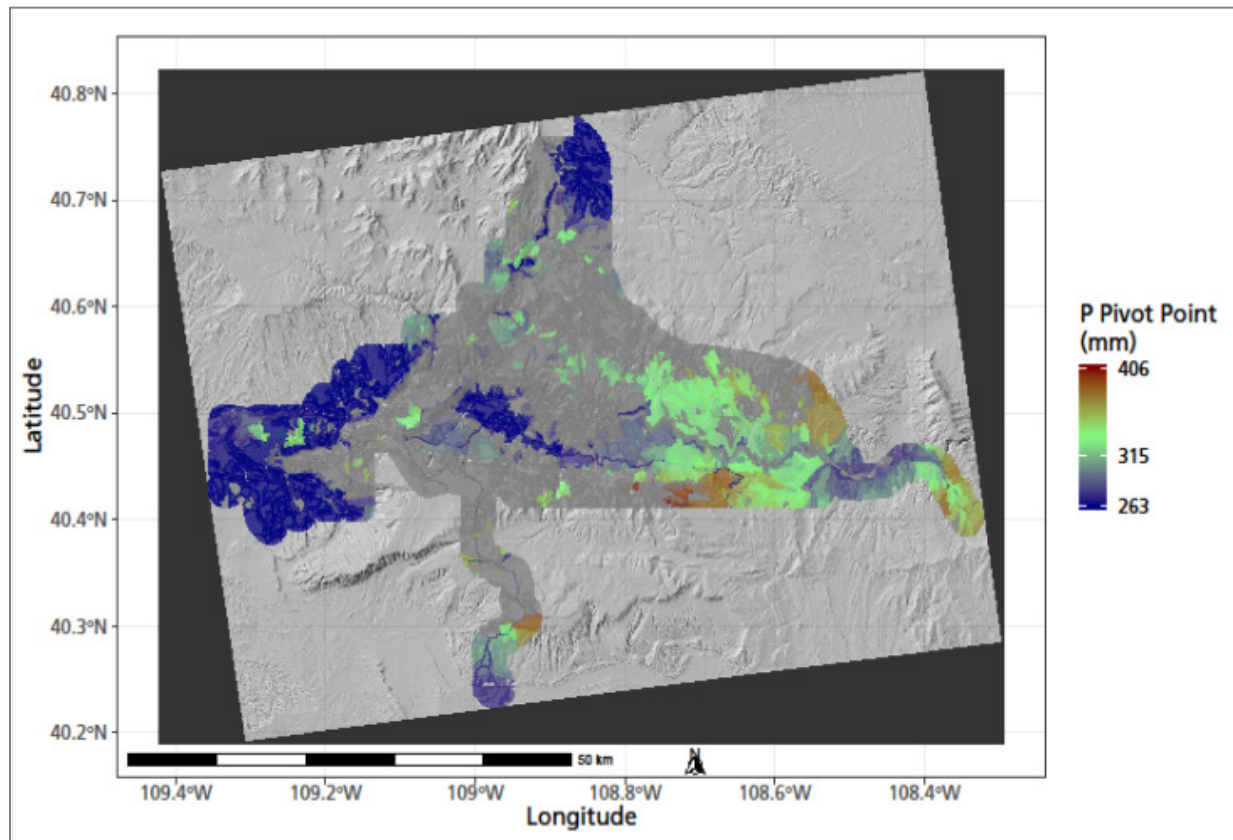


Figure 11. Precipitation pivot points for polygons with a significant relationship (p -value < 0.05) between water-year annual precipitation and change in annual vegetation production, assessed as the interannual difference in iSAVI. The mean precipitation pivot-point values shown here represent spatial patterns in the critical water needs of vegetation. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

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3.6.3 Pivot points for other climate variables

Pivot points for other climate and water-balance variables generally correspond to the average climate conditions where alliance groups were found (Figure 12; Appendix A). However, the range in pivot points within alliance groups, and the variation in species assemblages within and between polygons of each alliance group, reflected some variation beyond a pattern purely determined by elevation gradient. In semiarid environments like Dinosaur NM, pivot points for variables AET, P, SOIL, RAIN, and SNOW are generally lower than the pivot point for D, an indicator of drought. This is because vegetation in these environments is adapted to handle relatively low water availability and high drought stress.

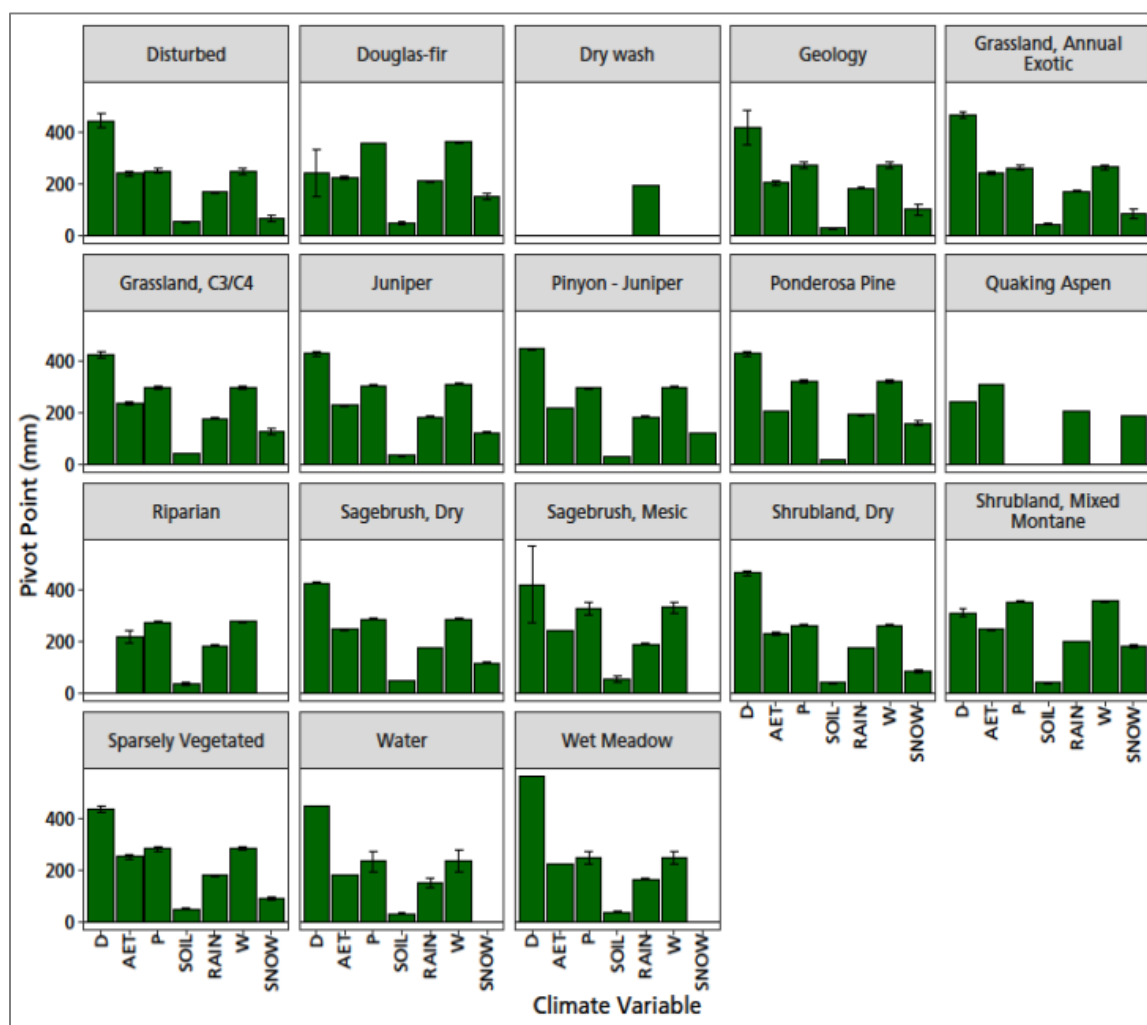


Figure 12. Significant (p -value < 0.05) water-related pivot points by alliance group. See Tables S-2 and S-4 in NPS (2025) for the pivot point values. The magnitude of each pivot point reflects generally average conditions for polygons in each alliance group. The mean pivot-point values are the critical values where annual production switches from below to above average (relative to previous year) for the different alliance groups. D = water deficit (mm), AET = actual evapotranspiration (mm), P = precipitation (mm), SOIL = average soil moisture (mm), RAIN = precipitation as rain (mm), W = snowmelt plus rain (mm), SNOW = precipitation as snow (mm of water).

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All results shown here are statistically significant. For this reason, any of these alliance group-level pivot points can be compared with historic, present, or future projected growing-season climate conditions to determine if those conditions are likely to result in below- or above-average vegetation production.

Pivot points for each climate variable by polygon are provided in Table S-2 of NPS (2025), and by alliance group, in Table S-4. These can be used with data on climate exposure to identify conditions conducive to above- or below-average growth—information useful in vulnerability assessments (see Section 4).

3.7 Vegetation response

3.7.1 Vegetation response and climate sensitivity

When they interact with climate, plant traits determine which species grow in various conditions of water availability. This results in a spatial organization of alliance groups that reflects local climate and the sensitivity of vegetation to climate (Figure 13). The interactions among plant traits, site characteristics, and climate-determined patterns of vegetation distribution in the past will determine how vegetation in Dinosaur NM is shaped by climate in the future.

Vegetation response is a formal component of vegetation vulnerability assessments used in Climate Smart Conservation (Stein et al. 2014). The importance of response is related to the need to understand which vegetation groups may respond sooner or more strongly to a given amount of climate exposure. While a unit change in iSAVI is not quantitatively linked to vegetation cover or biomass in this analysis, it represents changes in both of those attributes. In this way, the iSAVI response indicates where change is likely to happen first and fastest as the climate shifts.

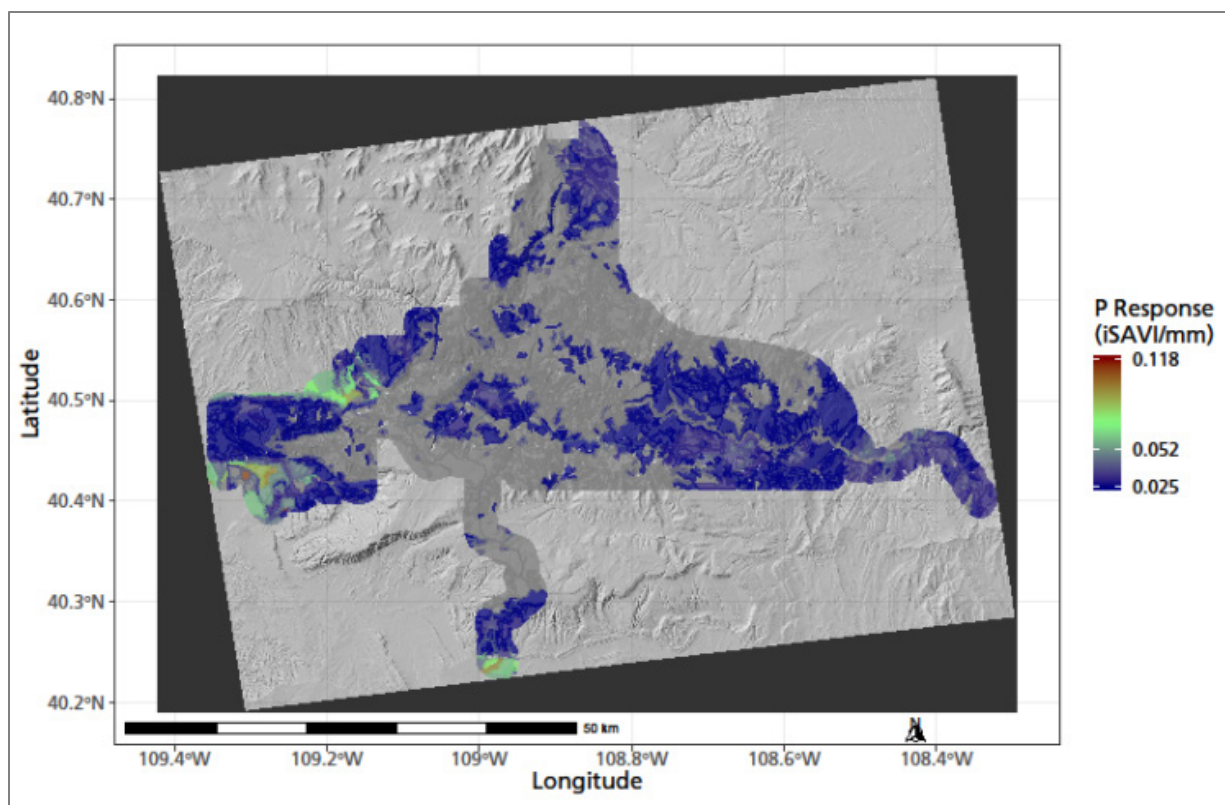


Figure 13. Sensitivity of growing-season vegetation production to annual water-year precipitation. This figure shows where vegetation will likely change as annual precipitation changes. Groups with highest response rates are most likely to see change happen first and fastest as the climate shifts. Response is the slope of the linear-regression relationship between annual precipitation and iSAVI change from the previous year. It is the change in iSAVI expected per millimeter of change in annual precipitation. Areas without color were either smaller than the minimum area required for mapping (< 8.3 ha) or did not have a significant relationship with annual precipitation. Areas that were not significantly related to annual precipitation may be related to other climate variables. Statistics for sensitivity of each polygon to each climate variable, including quality of relationships and regression coefficients, can be found in Table S-2 of NPS (2025).

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At Dinosaur NM, Annual Exotic Grassland and Disturbed alliance groups had the highest response rates, or sensitivity to annual precipitation (Figure 14). Douglas-fir was the least sensitive. Alliance-group sensitivities to other water-balance variables can be found in Appendix A.

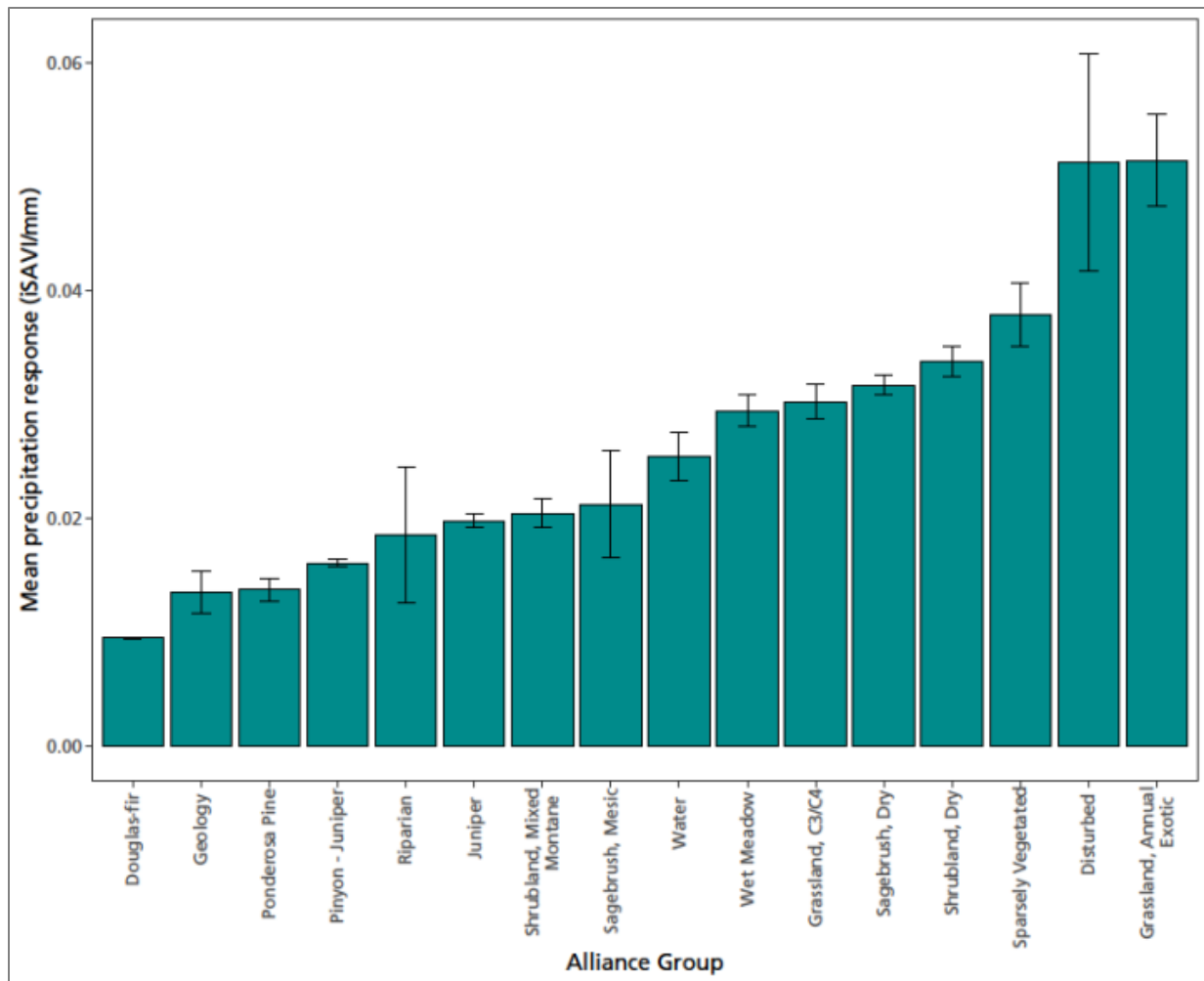


Figure 14. Responses of different vegetation alliance groups to precipitation. Standard error bars indicate range in variability of responses among polygons of an alliance group if more than one polygon of an alliance group had a statistically significant relationship (p -value < 0.05) with precipitation.

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Across the monument, a general pattern emerged: sensitivity increased at lower elevations, where precipitation was least or where invasive species or land-use disturbance occurred. This was partly due to vegetation structure: the woodland alliance groups occur at higher elevations, grasslands and shrublands at lower elevations. If disturbance, such as fire or forest disease, replaced the woodland alliance groups with grassland or shrubland, then the response would adjust to reflect the new dominant vegetation structure.

Higher elevations dominated by slow-growing and slow-responding Douglas-fir woodlands were less sensitive to variation in annual precipitation. This partly explains the pattern of response, also related to duration of greenness, in which species with longer seasons of green leaves or needles were less responsive to weather or water-balance. Annual Exotic Grassland and Disturbed areas responded most rapidly in years with higher annual precipitation. Thus, when precipitation is higher than

normal, vegetation in the Disturbed and Annual Exotic Grassland groups could become management concerns because their rate of response to precipitation is greater than that of native vegetation.

Recent studies suggest a strong interaction between cheatgrass prevalence, weather, and fire. Low precipitation years, following low-severity fires, result in a higher prevalence of cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*) at all elevations in Dinosaur NM. However, at lower elevations, high-severity fire was linked to high cheatgrass cover (Sherril and Rome, 2012). In a Great Basin study, precipitation seasonality and temperature were important predictors of cheatgrass cover. Fall, winter, and spring temperature, as well as May precipitation, were the climate variables most strongly linked with variation in cheatgrass cover in the Great Basin study (Boyte et al. 2016). A study of cheatgrass invasion in Colorado Plateau parks found high cheatgrass cover was associated with deeper plant-available water, lower elevations, colder mean winter temperatures, flatter slopes, higher soil clay content, and lower mean fall precipitation (Bishop et al. 2019). Most of those site/climate interactions are accounted for in the water balance model used in this study that estimates biophysical variables. Climate relations with the production of annual invasive species in this study can be found in Table S-5 of NPS (2025) by filtering for Annual Exotic Grasslands and then sorting on adjusted *r*-squared value (“adjrsq”). This will identify polygon-specific climate relationships. In this case 59% of Annual Exotic Grassland polygons were most responsive to one to three years of soil moisture. The remainder were responsive to precipitation or actual evapotranspiration.

3.7.2 Spatial patterns of response

The pattern of vegetation response to annual average soil moisture was spatially variable, but a larger area was responsive to soil moisture than precipitation. The polygons most sensitive to precipitation were in the western and southernmost areas of the monument (see Figure 13; Appendix A). Additional response maps, found in Appendix A, illustrate spatial patterns in the sensitivity of alliance groups to other water-balance variables.⁵

3.7.3 Influence of site characteristics

Spatial patterns in soil and site properties—including percent sand and clay, depth to root-restrictive layers, water-holding capacity, slope, and aspect—influenced drought tolerance and sensitivity to climate variables. This was apparent from spatial patterns that were similar between the soil properties (Figure 15) and response maps (e.g., Figure 13). For example, in the western and northern portions of the monument higher sand and lower clay content corresponded with higher response rates. These patterns are evidence of the interactions between climate, site properties, and vegetation traits (deep- or shallow-rooted, perennial or annual) that influence vegetation condition and trends.

⁵ Response to soil moisture is greater than sensitivity to precipitation or deficit because incremental changes in soil moisture in this analysis are expressed as a water-year mean, whereas precipitation and deficit are sums (see Table 2). However, the pattern in response to soil moisture is tied to spatial variation in soil properties that play important roles in storing precipitation between events.

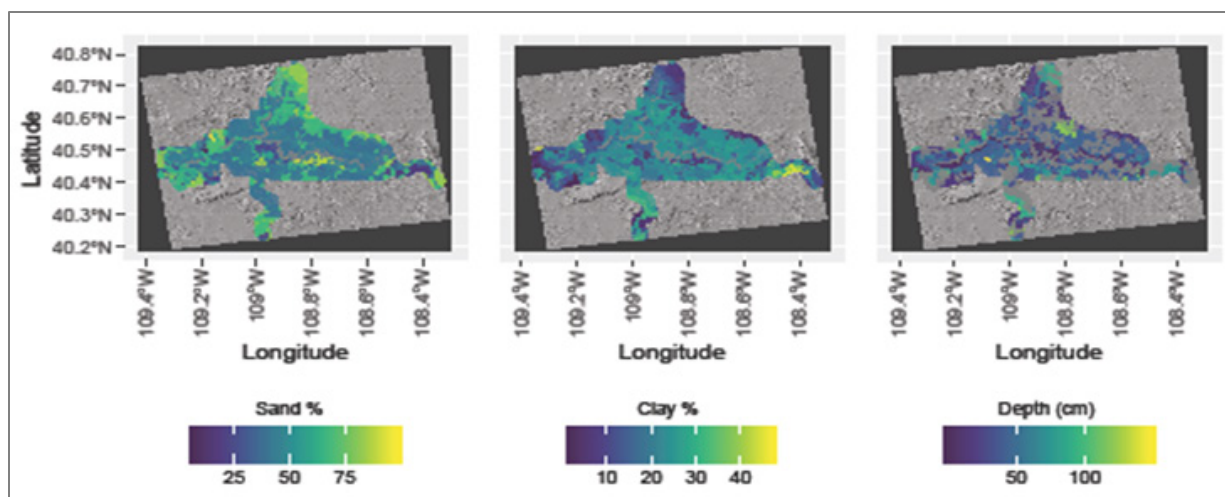


Figure 15. Maps of percentage sand content in top meter of soil, percentage clay content of soil, and depth to restrictive layer in alliance groups. Spatial patterns of soil properties correspond with patterns in vegetation response to climate. Areas of no color fill indicate missing soil properties data or depth is greater than 100 centimeters.

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By relating pivot points and responses with site properties (Appendix A; NPS 2025, Table S-2), we can quantify the strength of influence that site properties have in modifying climate effects. Steeper regression slopes (such as those in Appendix A) indicate a stronger effect of a given site property on either the pivot point or response to climate. For example, more water is necessary to support Mesic Sagebrush on soils with greater water-holding capacity and less water is needed to support Mesic Sagebrush on north aspects. Annual Exotic Grasslands were more responsive to precipitation on deeper soils (see Appendix A). Site properties affected drought tolerance and sensitivity to climate by influencing water retention and distribution in the soil profile, as well as heat loading due to the slope and aspect of the site.

These site-specific properties locally modify the influence of climate and were important determinants of vegetation condition and patterns on the landscape. They can be quantitatively introduced into vulnerability assessments at the polygon scale by using sensitivity reported in Table S-2 of NPS (2025), column labeled “slope”.

3.7.4 Patterns within alliance groups

While pivot points and responses provide different information, they are linked by steeper line slopes: as precipitation pivot points decrease (i.e., cross the horizontal “no change” line further to the left), response rate increases (Figure 16). Alliance groups with steeper slopes (e.g., Annual Exotic Grassland and Disturbed areas) are considered more responsive to changes in water availability. These groups increase production with less precipitation, demonstrating that responsiveness to precipitation is greatest where vegetation is most drought-tolerant. The single polygon in Dry Sagebrush that had an inverse relationship with precipitation was likely altered by disturbance during

the study period. Monument staff may know of disturbance, or a site evaluation of polygon DINO_4638 could identify the cause of the unique relationship with precipitation.

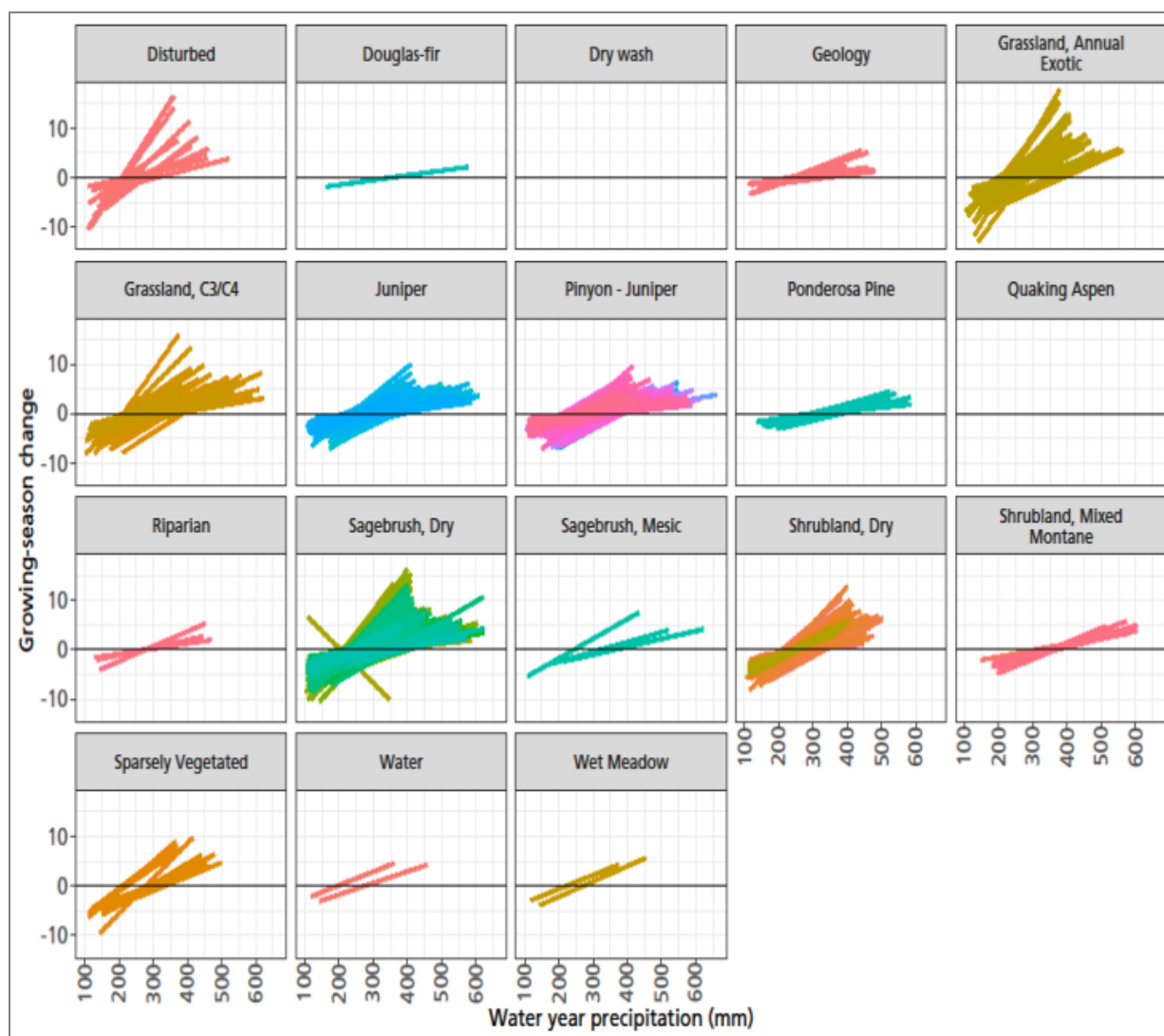


Figure 16. Graphical depiction of the relationship between pivot points and responses in polygons that had a significant relationship ($p\text{-value} < 0.05$) between iSAVI and water-year precipitation (e.g., critical water need vs. rate of growing-season iSAVI change per mm precipitation). Polygon-level pivot points and responses are provided in Table S-2 of NPS (2025). Alliance groups with steeper slopes are considered more responsive to changes in water availability. Alliance groups and alliance polygons within alliance groups that cross the horizontal axis further left are more drought resistant. This is because they shift to above-average condition with less precipitation. Only significant relationships are shown. Panels without lines represent alliance groups with no significant relationships between iSAVI and climate variables. Colors help differentiate individual polygons within alliance groups.

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There was a large range in pivot points and responses, reflecting a wide range of plant traits responding differently to climate variability across the monument. The patterns of pivot points and

responses quantify unique climatic habitats occupied by the different alliance groups in the monument and can serve as a guide to anticipate what, where, when, and why vegetation change may occur. For example, this analysis suggests that positive response to high precipitation will be greater in Annual Exotic Grassland than in shrubland or woodland alliance groups.

Tracking weather conditions during the growing season allows a view into vegetation condition at the polygon or alliance-group scale, depending on management interest (NPS 2025, Tables S-2 and S-4). Generally, within alliance groups, vegetation response increased as precipitation decreased. The degree of responsiveness was determined by traits that allowed plants to either resist drought or rapidly respond to water availability. The result was that vegetation response to climate could be considered coarsely at the alliance-group level, but at higher spatial resolution, and often, with higher accuracy, at the polygon level. For example, in the Dry Sagebrush alliance group, precipitation explained 34% of interannual variation in production. But by polygon ($n = 33$), precipitation explained between 16% and 64% of interannual variation in production (NPS 2025, Table S-2).

Multiple factors can introduce additional variability in pivot points and responses within alliance groups. These include differences in species assemblages, spacing between plants, and soil properties that affect the retention and distribution of water in the soil profile, which is accessible to different growth forms (e.g., plants with shallow or deep roots) (Thoma et al. 2019).

3.7.5 Production response to water and non-water variables

Assemblages with higher responses (steeper regression slopes) were more sensitive to climate. Depending on the climate variable, the slope could be positive (as with semiarid environments and water variables, such as precipitation and actual evapotranspiration), or negative (in response to water deficit or potential evapotranspiration, which are related to temperature) (Figure 17; NPS 2025, Tables S-2 and S-4).

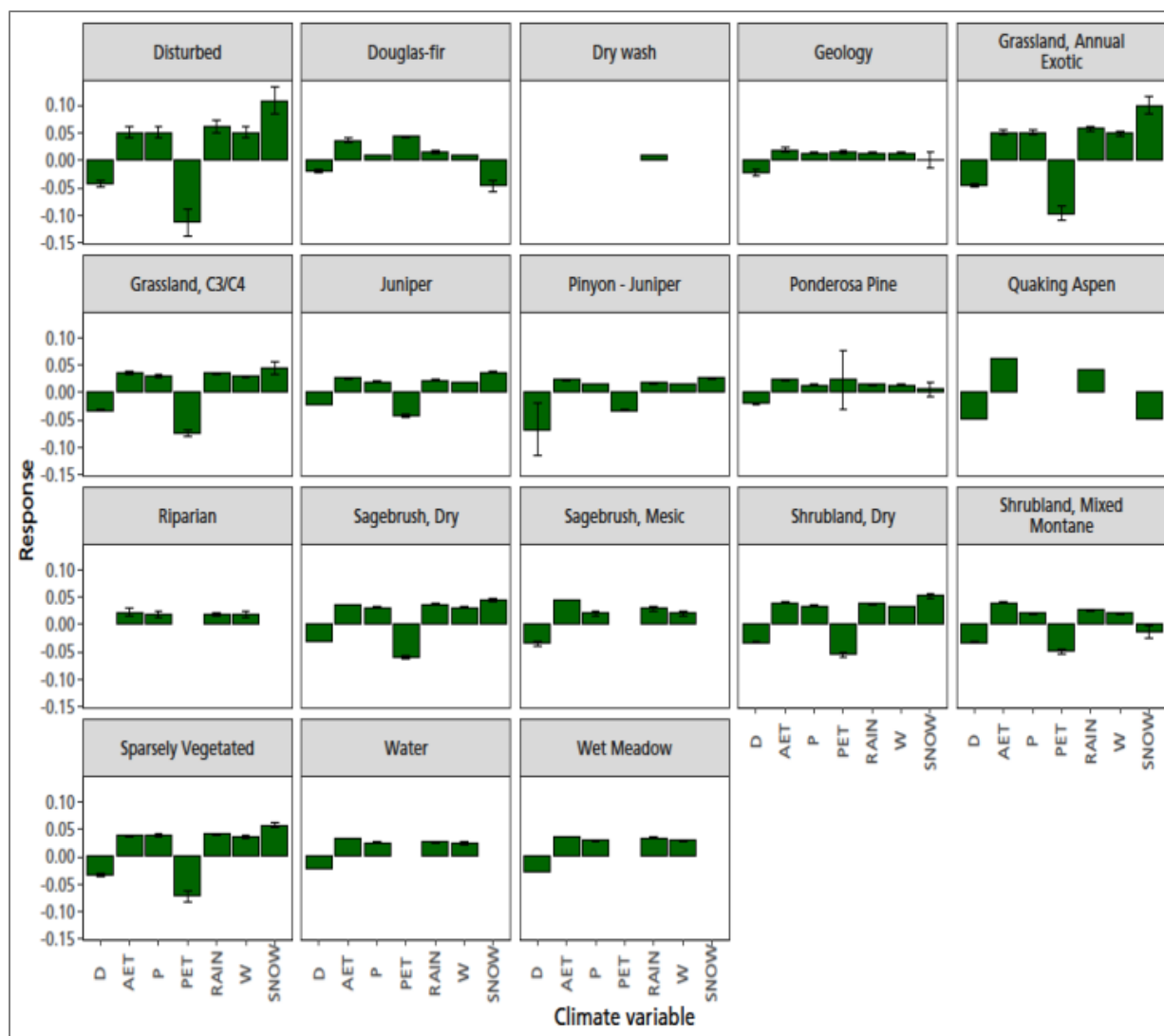


Figure 17. Vegetation response to summed water flux variables (regression slopes from iSAVI versus annual climate-variable sum). Statistics for these relationships and all other variables can be found in Appendix A. D = climatic water deficit (mm), AET = actual evapotranspiration (mm), P = precipitation (mm), PET = potential evapotranspiration (mm), RAIN = precipitation as rain (mm), W = combination of rain and snowmelt (mm), SNOW = precipitation as snow (mm of water).

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Direct comparison of water variables to non-water variables, such as GDD and VPD, is difficult due to their different units of measure. Similarly, it is important to note that response to change in an average annual value, such as soil moisture, is strong partly because this variable is averaged (because soil has an upper limit of water-holding capacity), which weights its effect on vegetation more per unit change than other climate variables that are summed (see Table 2). Therefore, small changes in average soil moisture have a larger effect than small changes in annual precipitation. Responses to temperature variables GDD and T should also be considered similarly, because GDD is a summed variable, while T is averaged. Variable importance is considered in the following sections.

3.8 Multi-variable indicators of annual vegetation production

Pivot points and responses are ecological measures of annual production, but production is affected by multiple aspects of weather before and during a growing season, as well as conditions from prior growing seasons that set the stage for production potential in the current year (Sala et al. 2012).⁶

In the multi-model comparison of climate correlates with interannual differences in growing-season iSAVI across all alliance groups, climate indicators of annual production showed that regardless of alliance group, most (approximately 74%) polygons were influenced by three years of average annual soil moisture. The next most-common indicators of production were two years of soil moisture (Figure 18). Three years of precipitation were a competitive model in 49% of polygons. These patterns generally held within alliance groups where two-to-three years of soil moisture were common indicators of production in most alliance groups (Figure 19). However, in Sparsely Vegetated, Wet Meadow, and Dry Shrubland alliance groups 2–3 years of precipitation were common indicators. A list of top-performing models by polygon can be found in Table S-5 of NPS (2025).

⁶ This is one reason why the annual relationships described above are not as strong as monthly relationships described in some of our earlier work (Thoma et al. 2016).

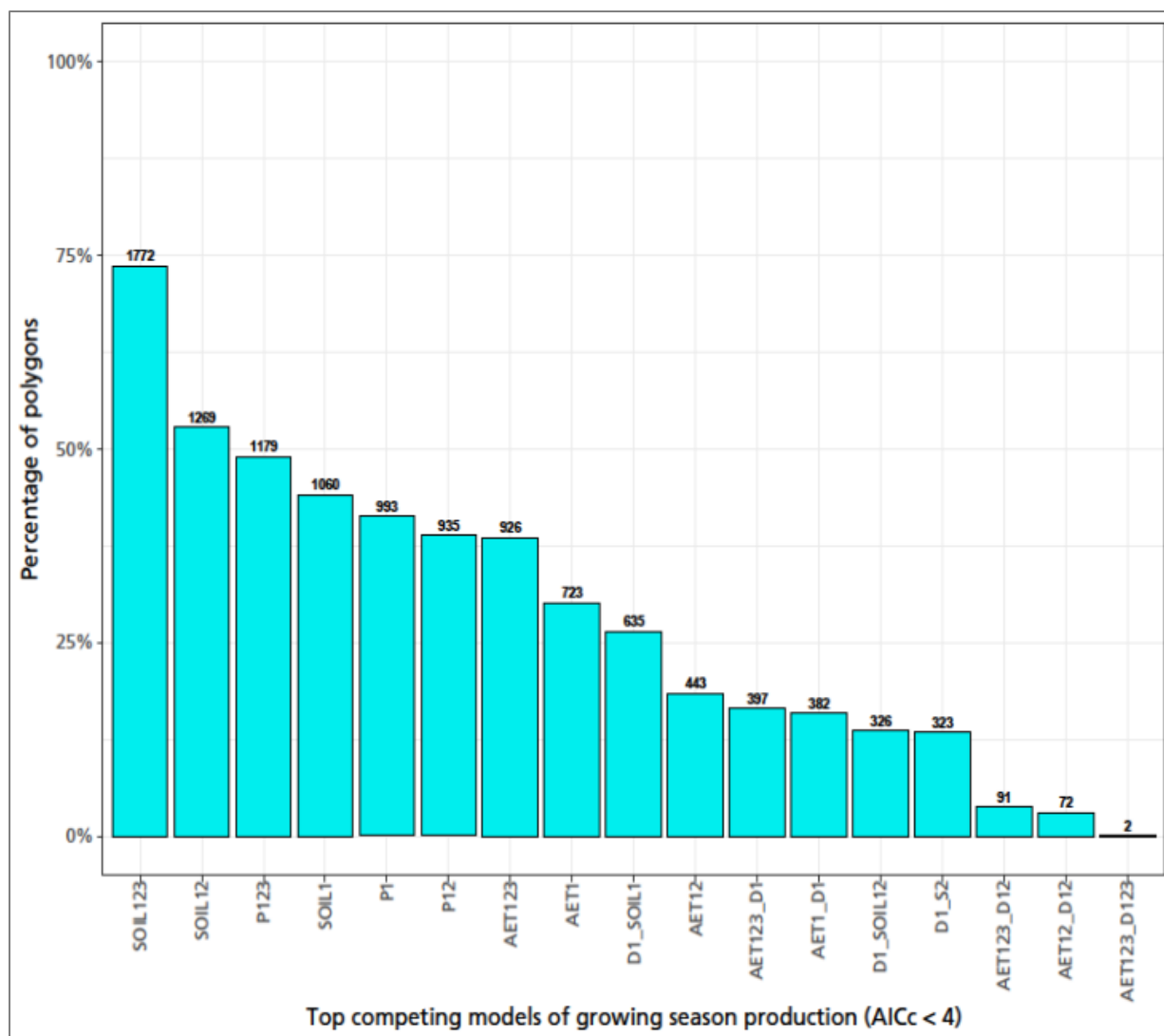


Figure 18. Top models in multi-model comparison of climate correlates with interannual differences in growing-season iSAVI across all alliance groups. Percentages indicate proportion of polygons where each model was competitive. Numbers above bars indicate polygon count. Each polygon may have more than one competitive model; thus, the sum of percentages exceeds 100 across all models. The x-axis labels refer to the *a priori* climate models in Table 3. SOIL = annual average soil moisture (mm); D = annual climate water deficit (mm); AET = annual evapotranspiration (mm); P = annual precipitation (mm). Numbers indicate current and prior years included in each model. 1 = current year; 12 = current and previous year; 123 = current and previous two years.

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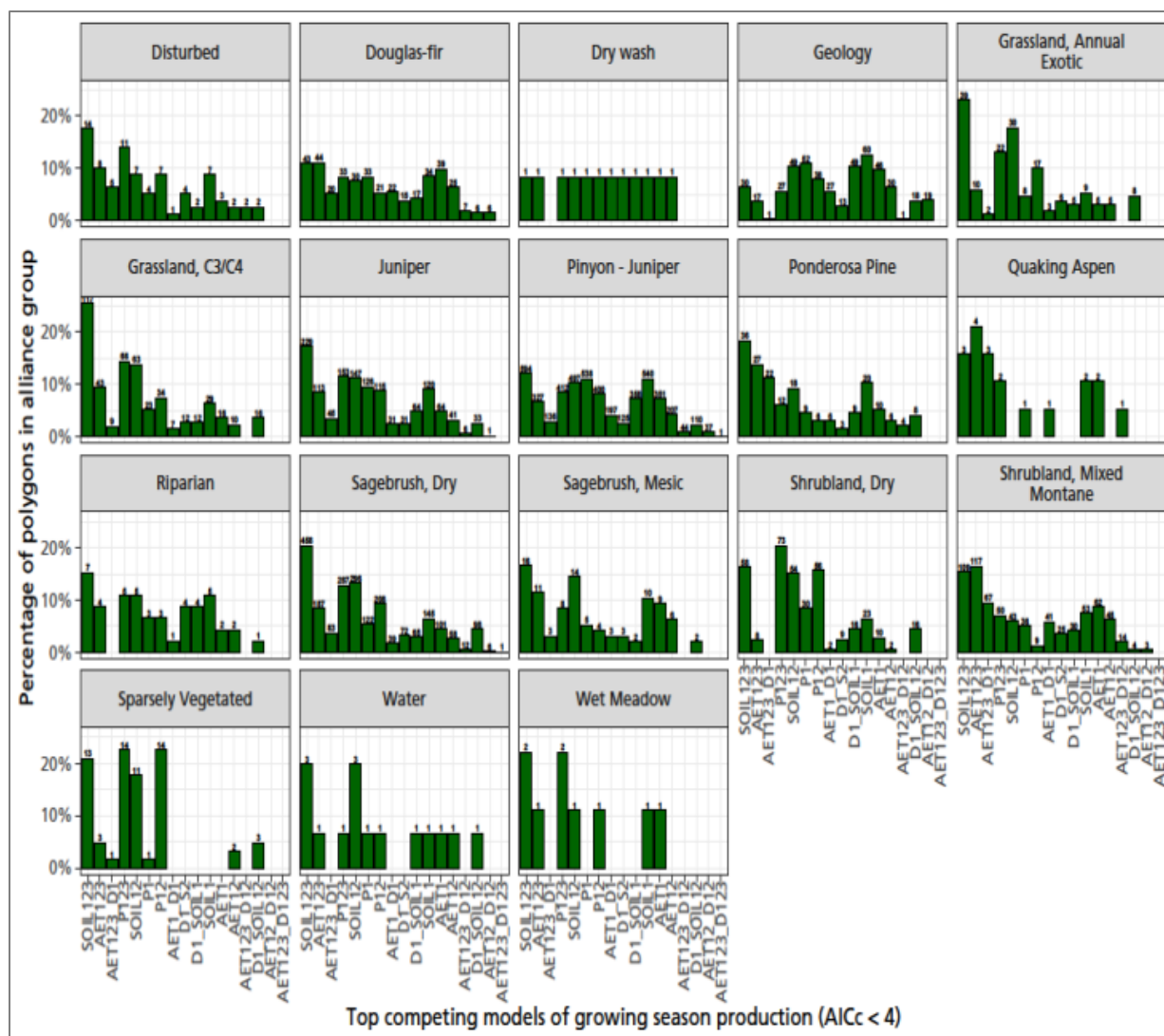


Figure 19. Top models of growing-season production by alliance group in multi-model comparisons of climate correlates with interannual differences in growing-season iSAVI. The x-axis labels refer to the *a priori* climate models in Table 3. The y-axis represents the proportion of polygons in each alliance group where each model was competitive. Numbers above bars indicate polygon count. Each polygon may have more than one competitive model; thus, the sum of percentages can exceed 100 across models. SOIL = annual average soil moisture (mm), D = annual climatic water deficit (mm), AET = annual evapotranspiration (mm), P = annual precipitation (mm). Numbers are 1 = current year, 12 = current plus previous year, 123 = current plus previous two years.

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The majority of alliance groups responded to soil moisture, highlighting the importance of soil as a storage reservoir between precipitation events in a semiarid environment where water is the growth-limiting factor in most years (Bisigato et al. 2013). Soil properties that help sustain higher average soil moisture, perhaps through reduced runoff or deep infiltration, provide additional benefits.

3.9 Land-surface phenology trends at Dinosaur National Monument

On average across all alliance groups, the growing season was starting 4.5 days earlier, the end of the growing season was occurring 14.9 days later, and it lasted 18.8 days longer on average than at the beginning of the study. An earlier start of growth was consistent across all alliance groups, but the end of the season occurred later for all alliance groups except for C3/C4 Grassland and Dry Wash (Table 6; Appendix A). Collectively, these changes resulted in a longer growing season in all groups. The timing of peak growth was variable across alliance groups, but on average occurred 0.3 days earlier near the end of the study (see Table 6).

Table 6. Trends in phenology averaged across polygons in the same alliance group.

Alliance group	Δ SOS	Δ EOS	Δ LOS	Δ POP	Hectares	Polygon count	% area
Pinyon-Juniper	-15.0	10.4	30.6	-1.9	22455.4	92	49.4
Shrubland, Dry	-11.9	12.5	29.1	-2.4	7716.4	179	17
Blackbrush	-14.0	14.5	35.7	-5.5	7031.6	211	15.5
Grassland, Annual Exotic	-11.2	7.3	23.9	-2.2	2455.6	39	5.4
Grassland, C3/C4	-9.0	-0.5	19.0	-8.5	1556.3	52	3.4
Geology	-16.8	18.2	36.7	0.7	973.3	27	2.1
Disturbed	-6.3	3.7	6.2	-1.7	785	2	1.7
Sagebrush, Dry	-16.5	10.3	36.5	3.5	784.2	43	1.7
Shrubland, Wet	-11.1	6.8	17.7	-2.3	675.2	20	1.5
Riparian	-14.2	12.2	28.9	-4.5	546.4	23	1.2
Sparsely Vegetated	-8.4	4.6	23.2	-3.3	213.1	14	0.5
Water	-9.5	39.4	43.1	0.5	189.7	2	0.4
Dry wash	-11.2	-6.5	19.6	-8.4	64.5	5	0.1

These changes in phenology were consistent with rising temperatures and increasing annual growing degree days that can extend the growing season when moisture is available. They were also consistent with increasing CO₂ concentrations that increase vegetation production through a process known as CO₂ fertilization (Sorokin et al. 2017). However, the strength of the relationship between production and annual precipitation, mediated through soil moisture over the study period (see Figure 8) and in findings from Section 3.7, suggested most of the increase in production was related to increases in water availability, rather than CO₂. Patterns in growing season phenology and land area of the monument affected for other vegetation types can be found by filtering Table 6 by vegetation types of interest and summing on columns “Hectares” or “% Area”.

Changes in land-surface phenology result from interactions among temperature, moisture, plant traits that control growth rates, and CO₂ concentrations that affect water-use efficiency. Generally, warming reduces growth rates in semiarid environments, while elevated CO₂ increases water-use efficiency for the same amount of water, which can increase growth rates. Thus, warming may initiate an earlier start to the growing season, and elevated CO₂ may increase water-use efficiency, resulting in a longer growing season. However, efficiency is ultimately limited if conditions become

sufficiently dry and growth ceases. For this reason, and given projected drying on the Colorado Plateau, increases in efficiency may be small and short-lived in the face of disturbance caused by drought or wildfire (Allen et al. 2015). Tracking changes in phenology in NCPN parks and linking those changes to seasonal changes in temperature and CO₂ concentrations, could help further clarify the vulnerability of semiarid vegetation to multiple aspects of climate change (Sorokin et al. 2017).

3.10 Drivers of green-up

3.10.1 *A priori model selection method*

At the scale of both the monument and the alliance group, the most common *a priori* competitive model of green-up timing (see Table 4) was the date of snow melt, cumulative precipitation, and growing degree days between January 1 and the SOS date (Figure 20). Other single-variable competitive models included day of complete snow melt, growing degree days, or actual evapotranspiration. In addition to snow melt, this confirms temperature and moisture conditions are strongly related to the start of growth. At the alliance-group level, there was a great deal of variation in climate correlates with the start of growing season that may be related to variation in plant traits (Figure 21). For example, most C3/C4 grasslands responded to growing degree days and soil moisture, whereas Mixed Montane shrublands responded most strongly to the date of snow melt and precipitation since January 1. The response to precipitation rather than soil moisture or actual evapotranspiration may result from incomplete filling of soil moisture storage capacity prior to January 1 in the fall of the preceding year. In other words, some alliance types may depend on additional soil moisture recharge in spring if the soil is not filled over winter or with spring snow melt.

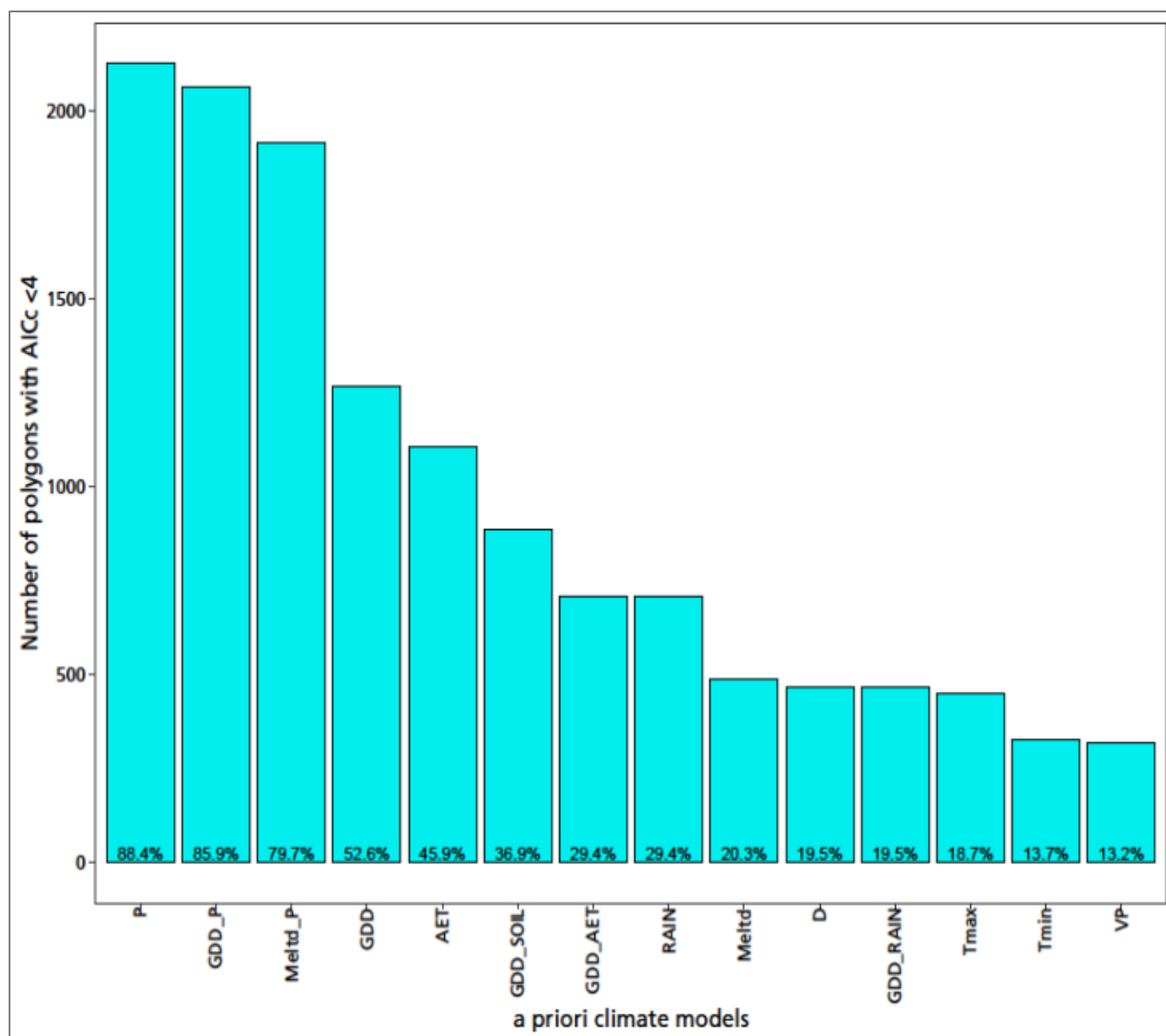


Figure 20. Top-performing *a priori* climate models predicting the start of growing season (SOS) across all polygons in Dinosaur National Monument. Bars represent the number and percentage of polygons for which each model was among the top competing models ($AICc < 4$). Model abbreviations: P = precipitation (mm), GDD = growing degree days ($^{\circ}C$), AET = actual evapotranspiration (mm), SOIL = soil moisture (mm), RAIN = precipitation as rain (mm), Meltd = date of complete snowmelt (day-of-year), D = climatic water deficit (mm), Tmax = maximum temperature ($^{\circ}C$), Tmin = minimum temperature ($^{\circ}C$), VP = vapor pressure (Pa).

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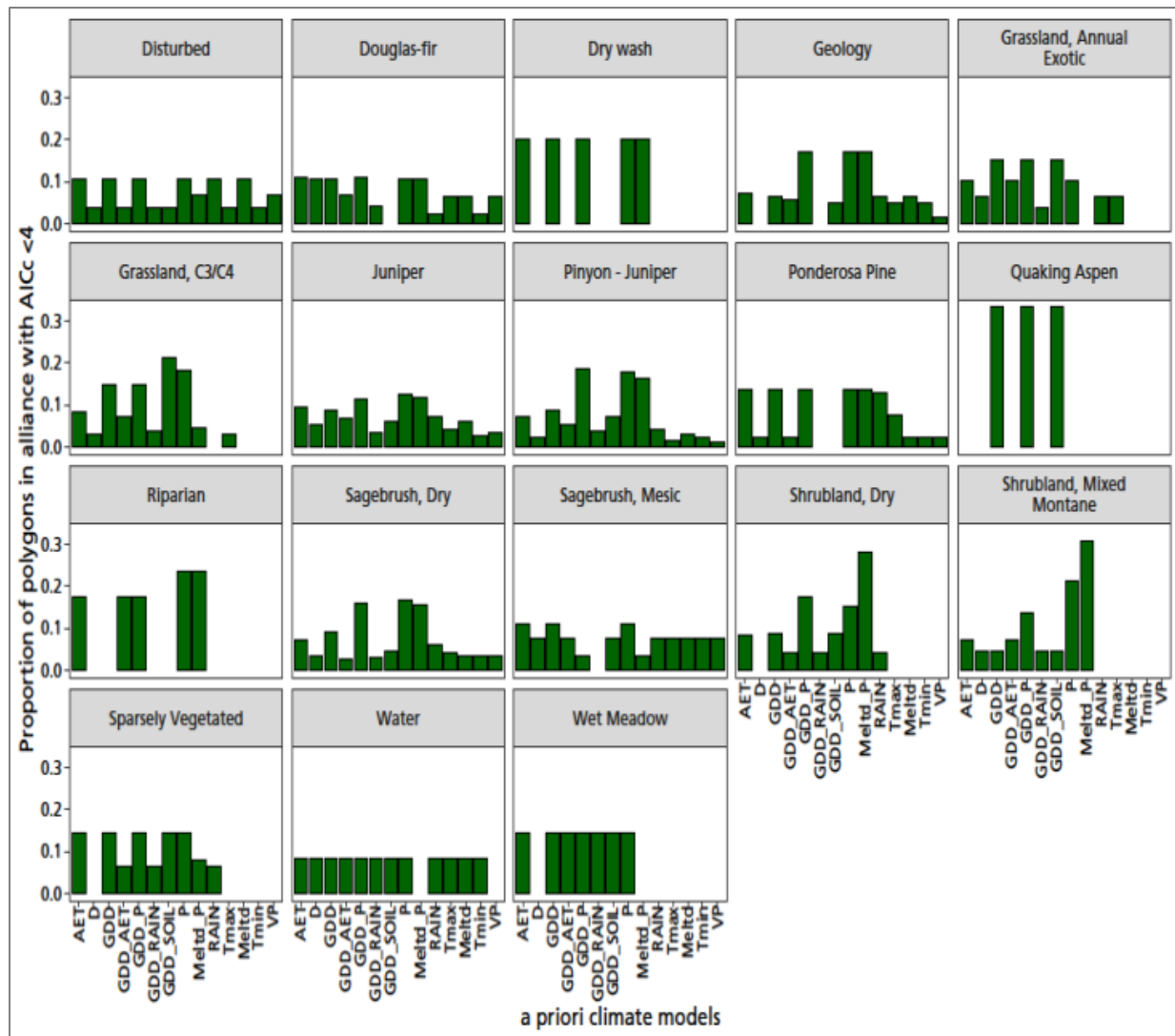


Figure 21. Top models in multi-model comparisons of climate correlates with start of growing season at the alliance-group scale. The x-axis labels refer to *a priori* climate models as determinants of green-up or start of season. AET = actual evapotranspiration (mm), D = climatic water deficit (mm), GDD = growing degree days ($^{\circ}\text{C}$), P = precipitation (mm), RAIN = precipitation as rain (mm), Tmax = maximum temperature ($^{\circ}\text{C}$), Meltd = date of complete snowmelt (day-of-year), Tmin = minimum temperature ($^{\circ}\text{C}$), VP = vapor-pressure deficit (Pa).

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Actual evapotranspiration is a highly integrative variable that includes moisture supply from soil, temperature warm enough for growth, daylength, and solar incidence angle. It commences only after snowmelt is complete. For this reason, it is unclear why AET did not correlate with SOS as well as some of the other climate and water-balance variables. However, it was important in 35% of polygons. Also, see the next section where AET is among the best predictors of SOS. Growing degree days are likely important because spring soil moisture is typically at its highest level after the winter recharge period and therefore not usually limiting. Rather, some amount of heat is needed to

stimulate plant growth after winter dormancy. So, only unusually dry fall and winter periods would result in low moisture levels being a co-limiting factor to temperature.

3.10.2 Random-forests method

Variable importance plots showed the best predictors of start of season were precipitation, vapor pressure, and soil moisture (Figure 22). These findings were similar to those in the multivariable *a priori* regression models, where AET was important, but with the addition of vapor pressure as an important variable.

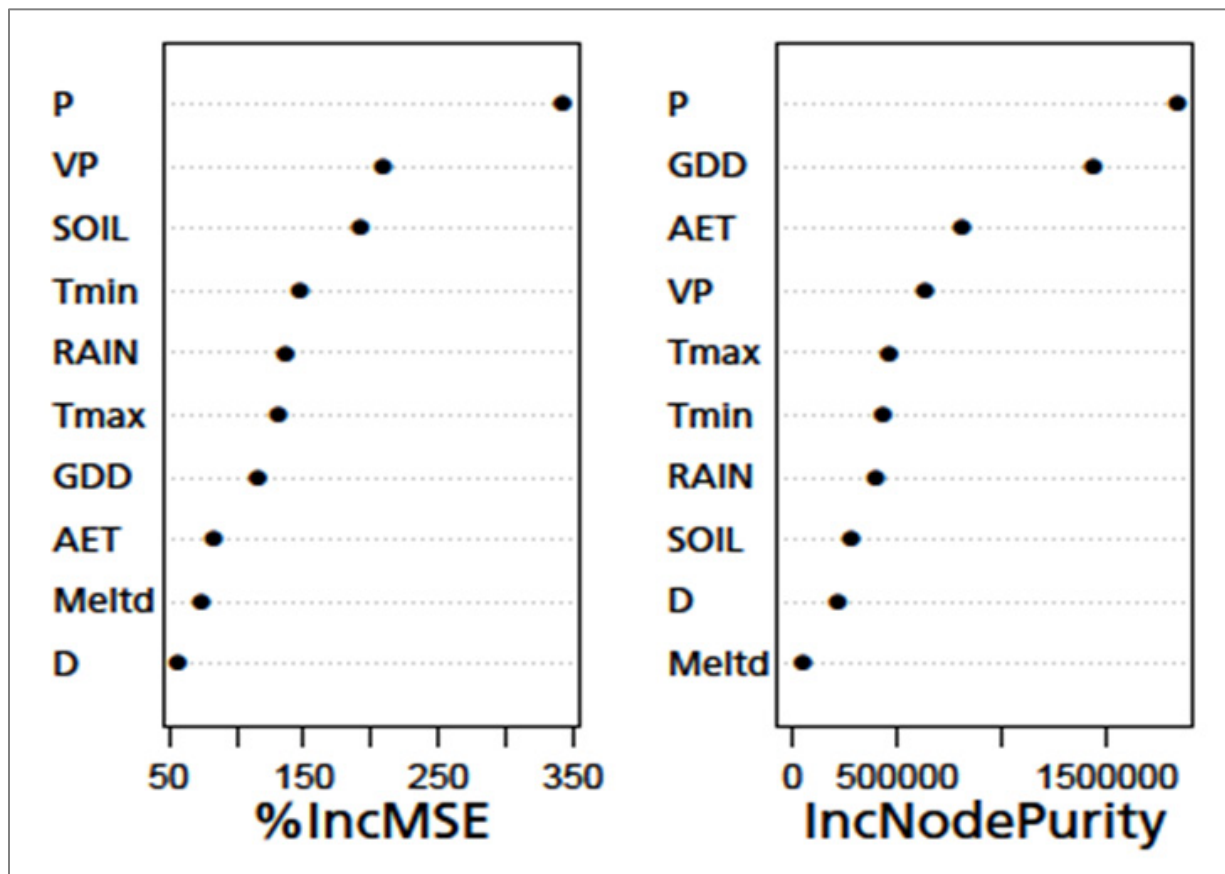


Figure 22. Variable importance in the random-forest model of climate drivers of the start of growing season. Percent increase in mean square error (%IncMSE) is a measure of model performance with each variable. Increase in node purity (IncNodePurity) is the difference in residual sum of squares in regression with or without each variable.

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Findings from the two modeling methods suggested a combination of temperature and moisture is an important indicator of SOS, as is expected in semiarid climates. The loss of snow cover that exposes vegetation to warming and solar radiation in spring makes intuitive sense as a driver for the start of growth, but it was more important than other variables in the *a priori* analysis. The effect of precipitation is less intuitive unless the soil was not sufficiently replenished to meet plant needs for moisture over winter and early spring.

The random forests model obtained from the training dataset was used to model SOS in the validation dataset to determine predictive performance. It predicted SOS date at the monument scale with a mean absolute error of ± 1.7 days (Figure 23). When separated by alliance group, the model also performed well (Figure 24).⁷

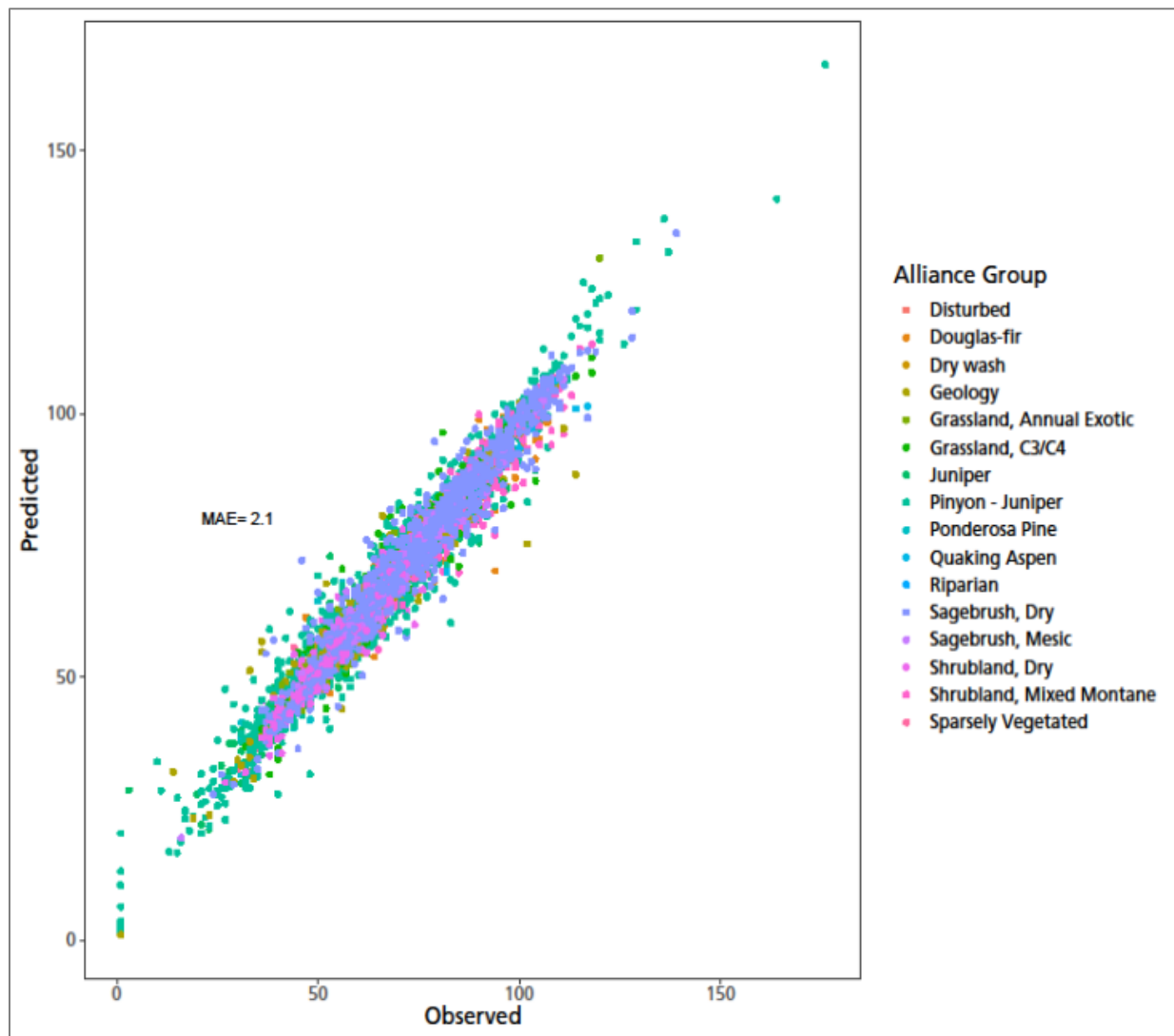


Figure 23. Predicted start-of-season date versus observed start-of-season date in the holdout dataset used for validation of the random-forests model for all polygons in Dinosaur NM. MAE is mean absolute error of prediction in days. Polygons with annual peaks (POP) occurring between November 1 and April 1 were removed prior to this analysis (Norris and Walker 2020).

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⁷ The analysis was conducted at the park scale, rather than by polygon (as in Section 3.9) to increase sample size for the modeling process.

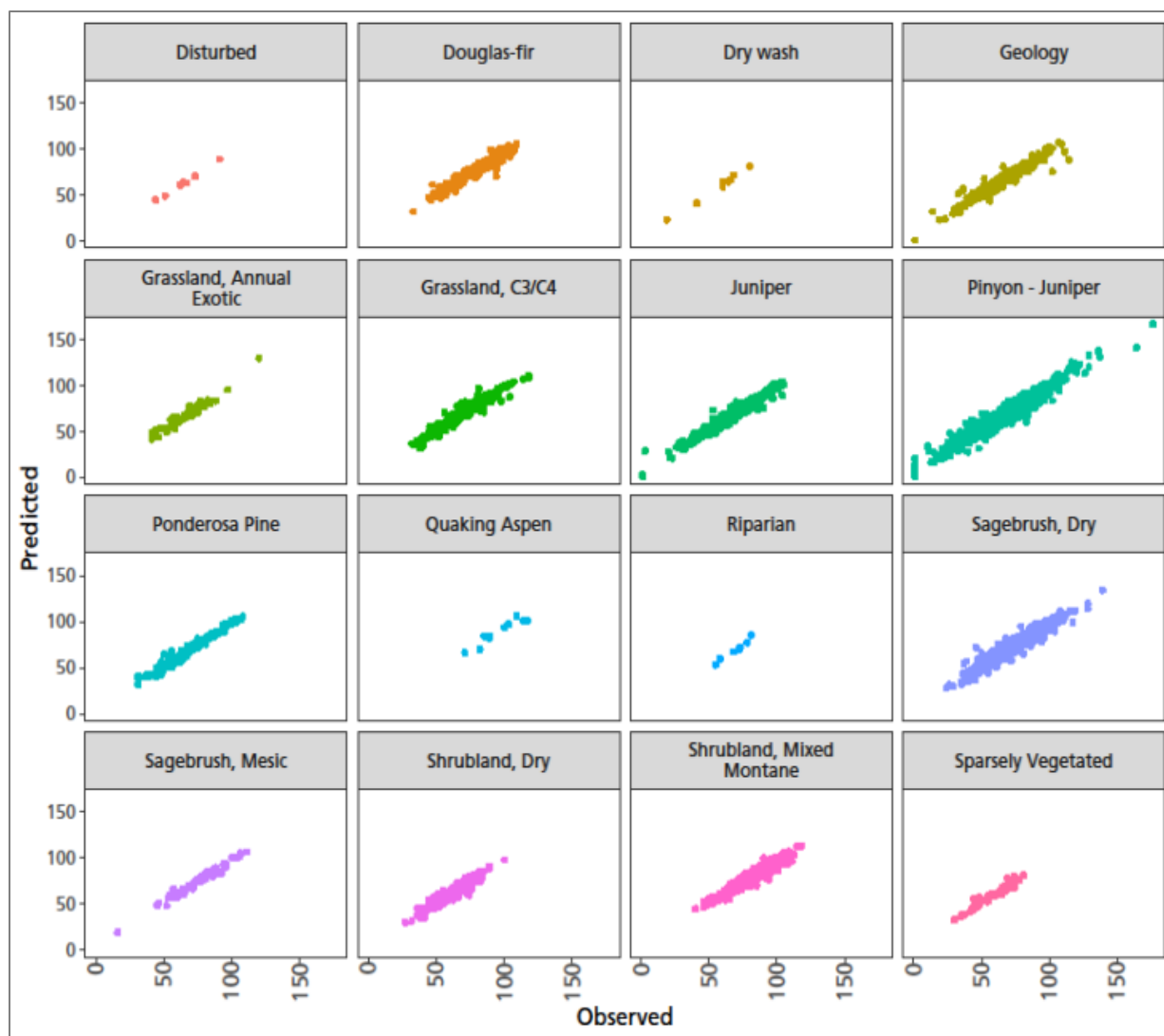


Figure 24. Predicted start-of-season date versus observed start-of-season date in the holdout dataset used for validation of the random-forests model for alliance groups. Polygons with annual peaks (POP) occurring between November 1 and April 1 were removed from this analysis. Outliers are likely due to difficulty in discriminating SOS when SAVI changes monotonically during a growing season in low productivity years.

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Inspection of SOS outliers in Figures 23 and 24 suggests they may have resulted from low amplitude and monotonic increase (straight line) in SAVI in some years. This combination may make it difficult to identify meaningful SOS dates using the derivative method that relies on changes in the acceleration of growth rate in spring to determine when growth starts. Even though polygon/year combinations with winter SAVI peaks were screened out of the analysis (Norris and Walker 2020), it is not clear how SOS may be affected by the shadowing noted in pinyon-juniper and shrubland habitats by Norris and Walker. This is because the shadowing effect is partially dependent on vegetation structure and spacing, which is a continuum of conditions across landscapes. For this

reason, modeled SOS dates should be considered with skepticism in the Pinyon-Juniper, Juniper, and all shrubland alliance groups, as well as in polygons that yield outliers in the model of SOS.

Despite these potential shortcomings, the validation demonstrates a strong predictive model of SOS using climate data for most of the Dinosaur NM landscape. This means climate projections could be used to model SOS dates in the future. This could be helpful in assessing potential vulnerabilities caused by phenological mismatch between pollinators and flowering species, as well as potential impacts to migrating birds and mammals, such as deer. Mule deer in some western states “surf the green wave” of vegetation as it greens up progressively across gradients of latitude and elevation (Aikens et al. 2017; Merkle et al. 2016; van Wijk et al. 2012). Presently, it is unknown if animal species in NCPN parks time their movements with SOS or the green wave thereafter, but this information could be used to help assess if animals are keyed into this land-surface process.

3.11 Climate patterns

Annual temperature, precipitation, and estimates of AET, climatic water deficit, and soil moisture derived from the water-balance model for 1980–2019 exhibited high interannual variability (Figure 25; Appendix A). This variation caused large interannual changes in annual vegetation production.

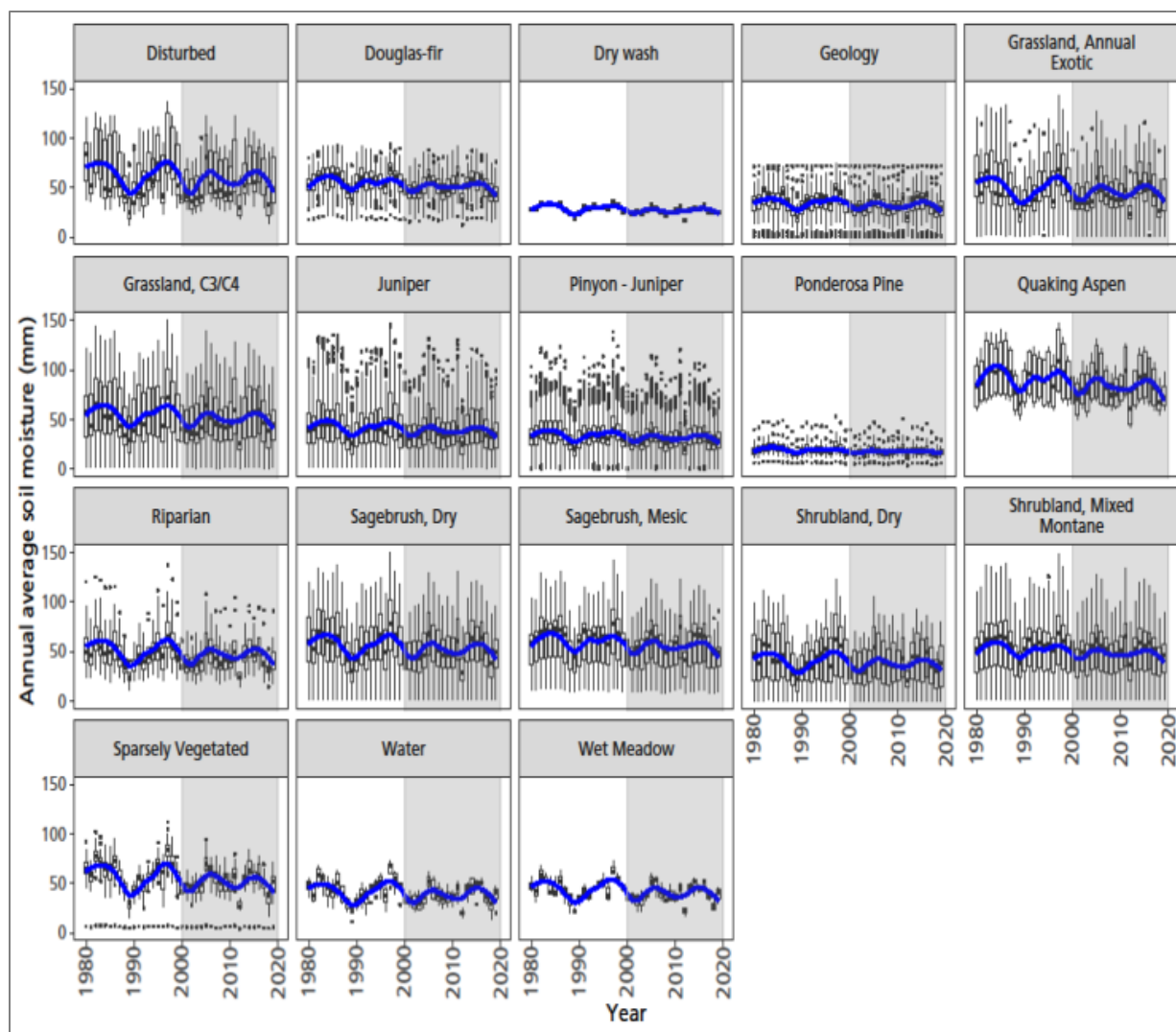


Figure 25. Long-term temporal patterns and variability in soil moisture in vegetation alliance groups at Dinosaur NM. Box plots demonstrate the range of variation by year. The line is a loess smooth with a 25% span to illustrate multi-year patterns. Gray shaded area includes the period between 2000 and 2019, investigated for relationships between production and climate when satellite imagery and climate data were both available. Study-period trends and associated statistics for the other water-balance variables are presented in Appendix A.

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During 2000–2019, precipitation and temperature increased, but the trend was not statistically significant. For this reason, the trends in annual production (growing-season iSAVI and maximum and mean annual SAVI; Table 5; Figure 6) and sensitivity analyses that depend on interannual variations (NPS 2025, Tables S-2) are the primary management-relevant findings in this report. This also suggests that tracking vegetation condition via remote sensing is a better indicator of vegetation change than climate data alone.

Taking a longer view, an interesting pattern in oscillation of precipitation was evident since 1980: the formation of peaks and troughs played out over multi-year intervals. These patterns translate to similar peaks in other water-balance variables. The same pattern was apparent in soil moisture, AET, and water deficit (Figure 26), although for deficit the peaks (maximum drought stress) coincided with the times of least precipitation (Appendix A). If the periodicity of these cycles continues in the future, it could serve as a useful guide for timing restoration efforts that require substantial planning efforts, long-term investments, and multiple years of minimal drought stress for germination and establishment. This is especially relevant given the finding that up to three consecutive years of soil moisture are the most important indicators of vegetation production.

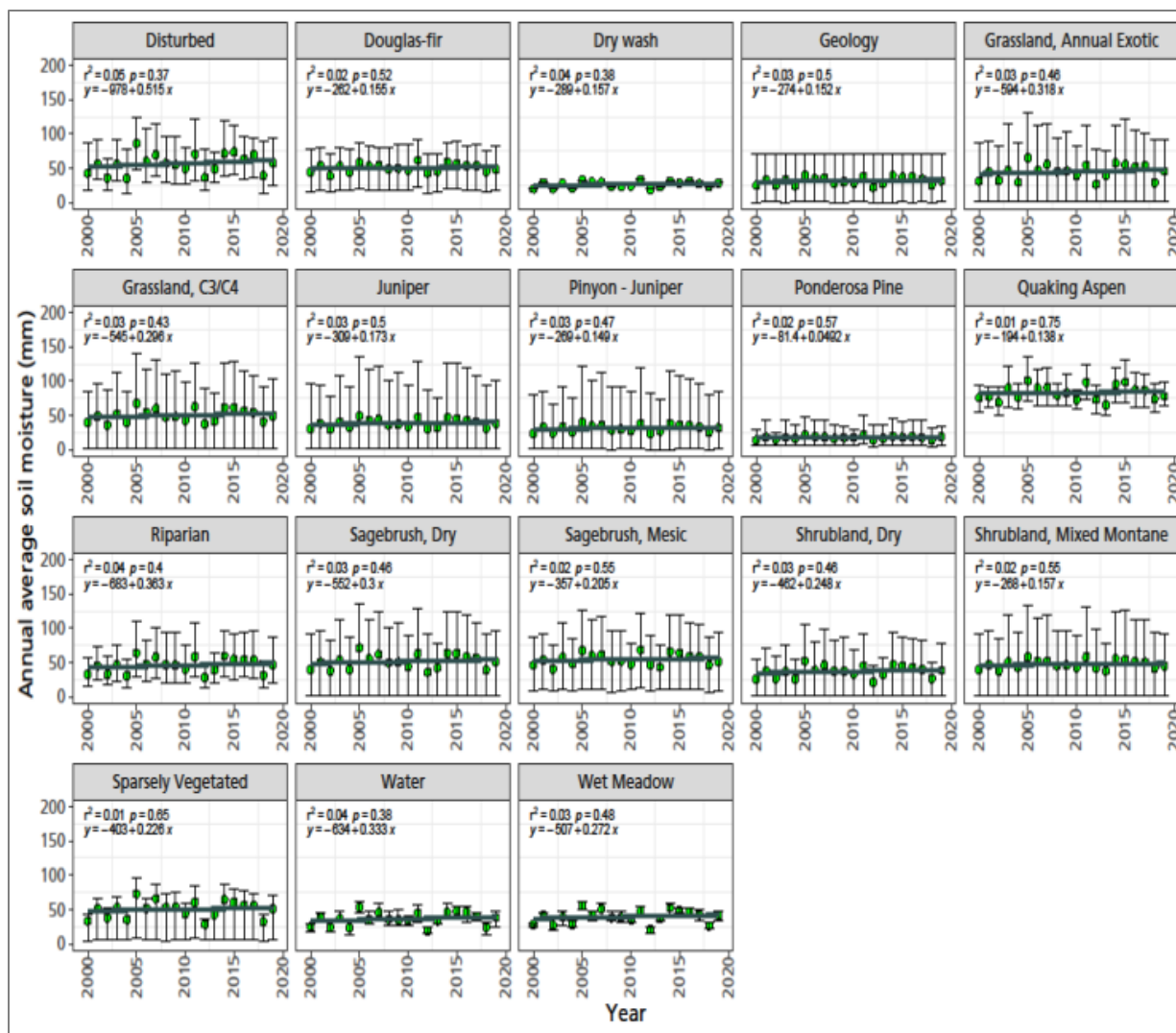


Figure 26. Soil-moisture trend over time, 2000–2019. Error bars are standard error.

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4 Tools to inform near-term management

Tracking weather conditions that lead up to or surpass pivot points during the growing season is a useful climate-based tool for assessing vegetation condition—but it provides an indirect assessment. Additional tools can provide real-time assessments of vegetation condition by identifying both trends in vegetation greenness and the vegetation anomaly (a comparison of current growing conditions to past conditions). With these tools, users can iteratively identify the spatial pattern and strength of trends and determine where disturbance or unusual events are happening in near-real time.⁸

Interpreting the link between those patterns and climate requires contemporaneous climate data. Gridded climate data used in this report were created from weather-station data, typically in the year following a full year of data collected at weather stations. Weather-station data are better suited for investigations of real-time change in conditions, especially extreme events that garner interest as they happen or soon after—as was the case when monument managers noted juniper mortality in 2018 and 2019.

The NCPN supports [ClimateAnalyzer.org](https://climateanalyzer.org), which makes accessing weather-station data easy. Data from the monument weather station and other sources can be used to determine how weather and vegetation condition vary together in near real-time. This could be the basis for real-time condition assessments used in the tactical decisions needed to achieve long-range management goals.

⁸ More information on these tools can be obtained from the author of this report.

5 Conclusions

Since 2000, primary production has increased at Dinosaur National Monument. The increase coincided with a slight but statistically insignificant increase in precipitation over the same period. However, over this period, there were dry years and dry periods extending for several years that resulted in substantial declines in vegetation cover that largely rebounded by the end of the study.

The variation in vegetation condition across wet and dry years was evaluated to identify which alliance groups were most drought-tolerant (Water and Wet Meadow), and which were least drought tolerant (Douglas-fir). Similarly, variation in climate over the study period was used to determine that Annual Exotic Grassland was most sensitive to precipitation, while Douglas-fir was least sensitive.

The climate variable most strongly correlated with vegetation production was two or three years of average annual soil moisture. Spring precipitation and growing degree days were also important determinants of green-up timing. Over the study period, the start of growing season shifted earlier, and the length of growing season increased, likely due to increasing water availability during the growing season. The variation in weather conditions and corresponding vegetation response provide a window into the past that will inform understanding and management of vegetation that always has and will continue to respond to climate at Dinosaur NM.

Much of the information in this report will soon be outdated. However, some of the findings described here have long-term value and are unlikely to change until vegetation composition changes in the future, such as pivot points and sensitivity of vegetation to weather and climate. Those factors are mostly inherent to the vegetation and where it grows. However, climate is changing rapidly, and extreme weather events are becoming more frequent. The tools developed for these analyses can help National Park Service managers anticipate and plan for changes in climate, and manage change as it happens. This report demonstrates how combining satellite observations of vegetation condition with climate data can help determine the right time and place for action needed in the near term to help achieve long-range management goals for stewarding monument resources through continuous change.

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Appendix A. Supplemental Figures for Landscape Phenology, Vegetation Condition, and Relations with Climate at Dinosaur National Monument, 2000–2019

Figures 27 to 87 present information about the landscape phenology, vegetation condition, and relations with climate that were observed in Dinosaur National Monument during the study period from 2000 to 2019.

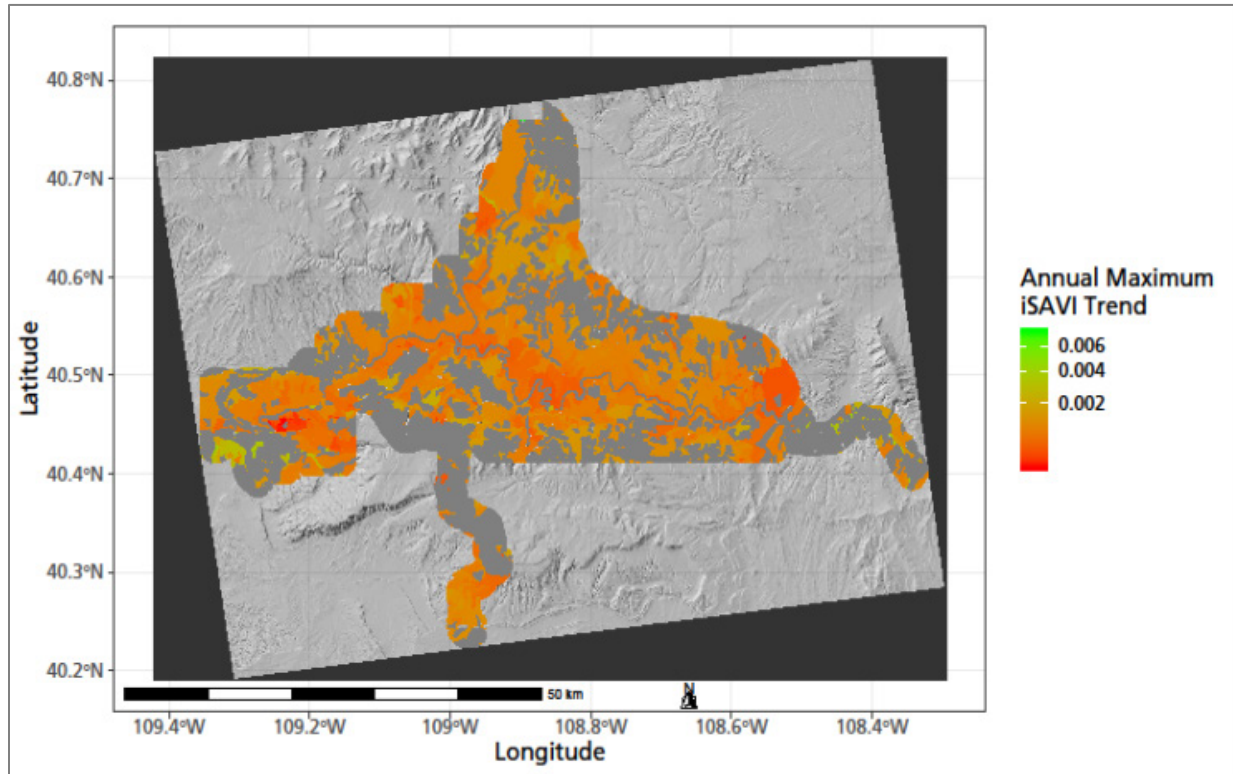


Figure 27. Spatial pattern of trends in maximum annual iSAVI. Trend is average change in iSAVI per year for the period 2000–2019. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

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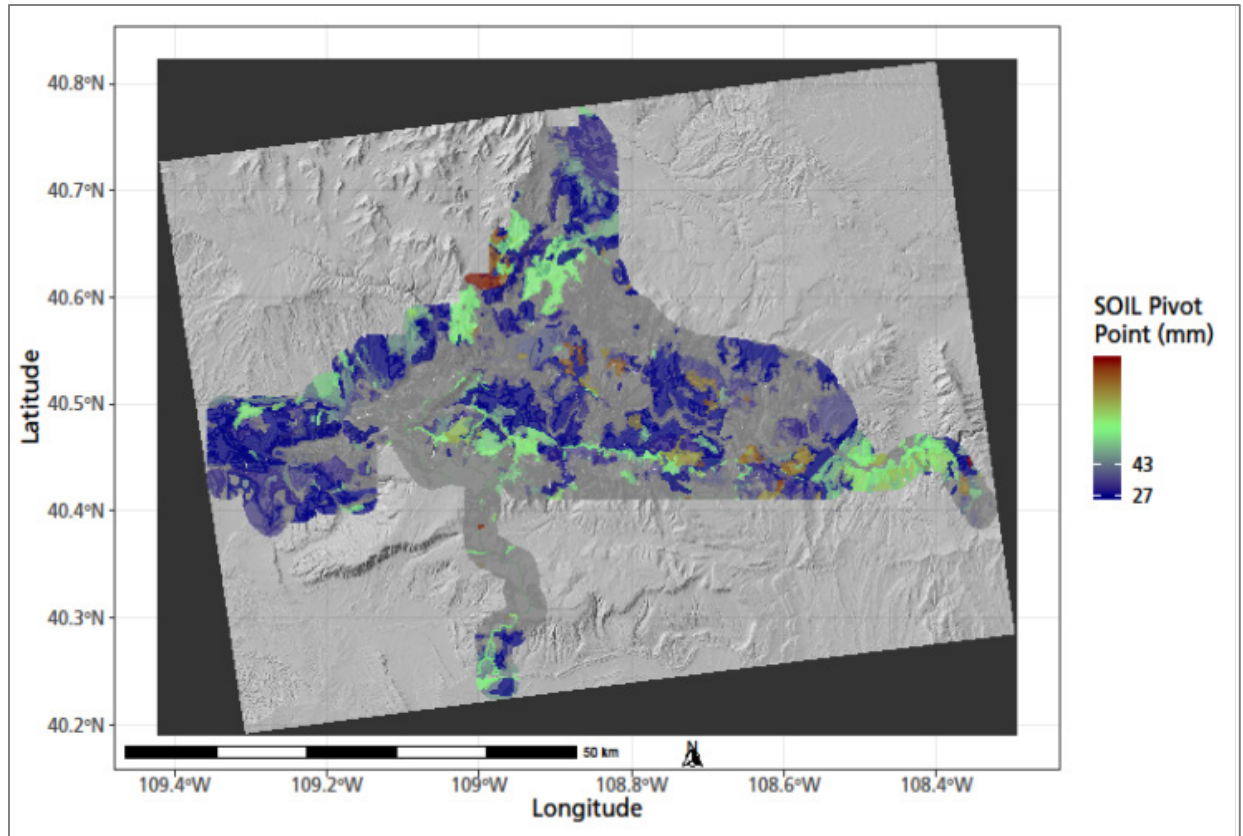


Figure 28. A map of Dinosaur National Monument showing the locations of polygons where soil moisture was significantly related to interannual variation in production ($p\text{-value} < 0.05$). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

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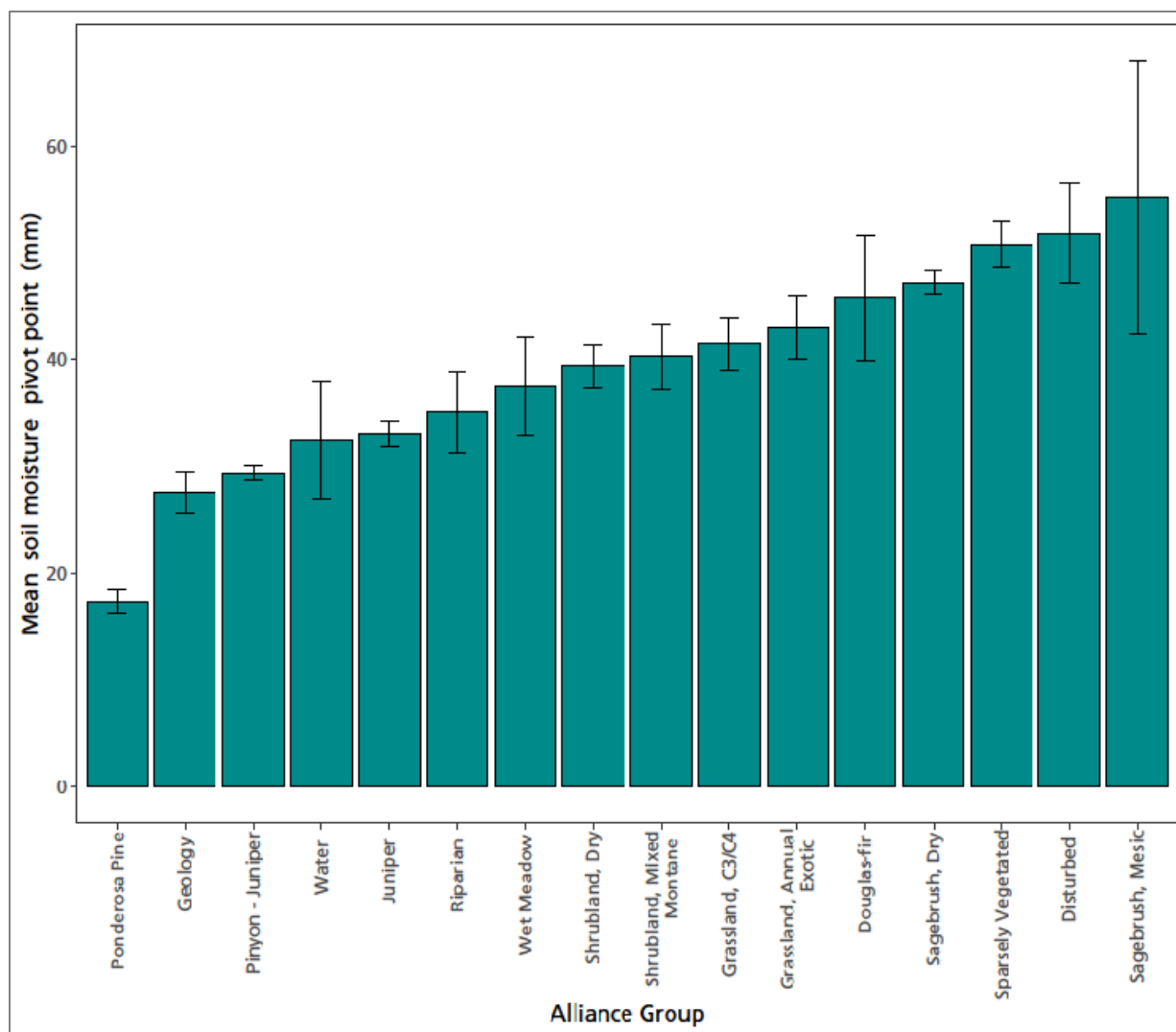


Figure 29. Soil pivot points for polygons where climate variables were significantly related to interannual variation in production (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Error bars show standard error.

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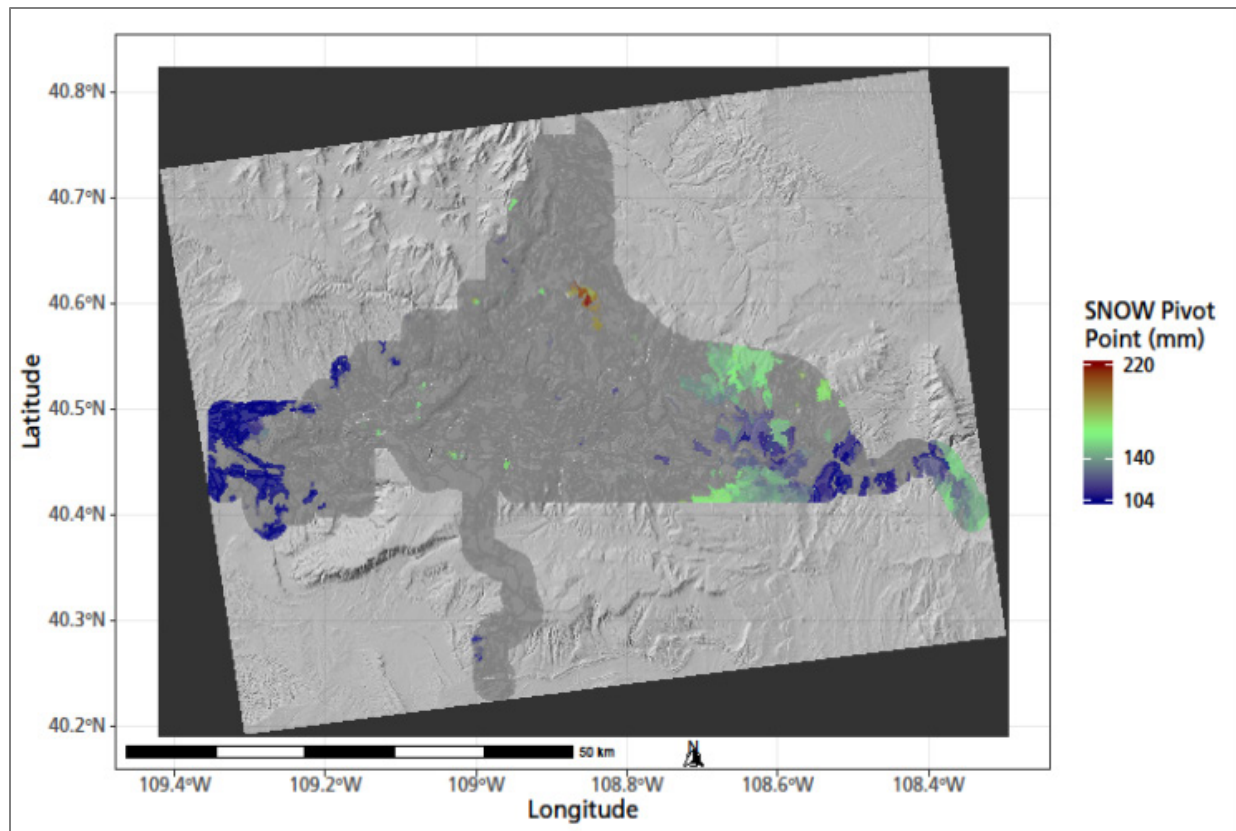


Figure 30. A map of Dinosaur NM showing the locations of polygons where snow water equivalent was significantly related to interannual variation in production (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

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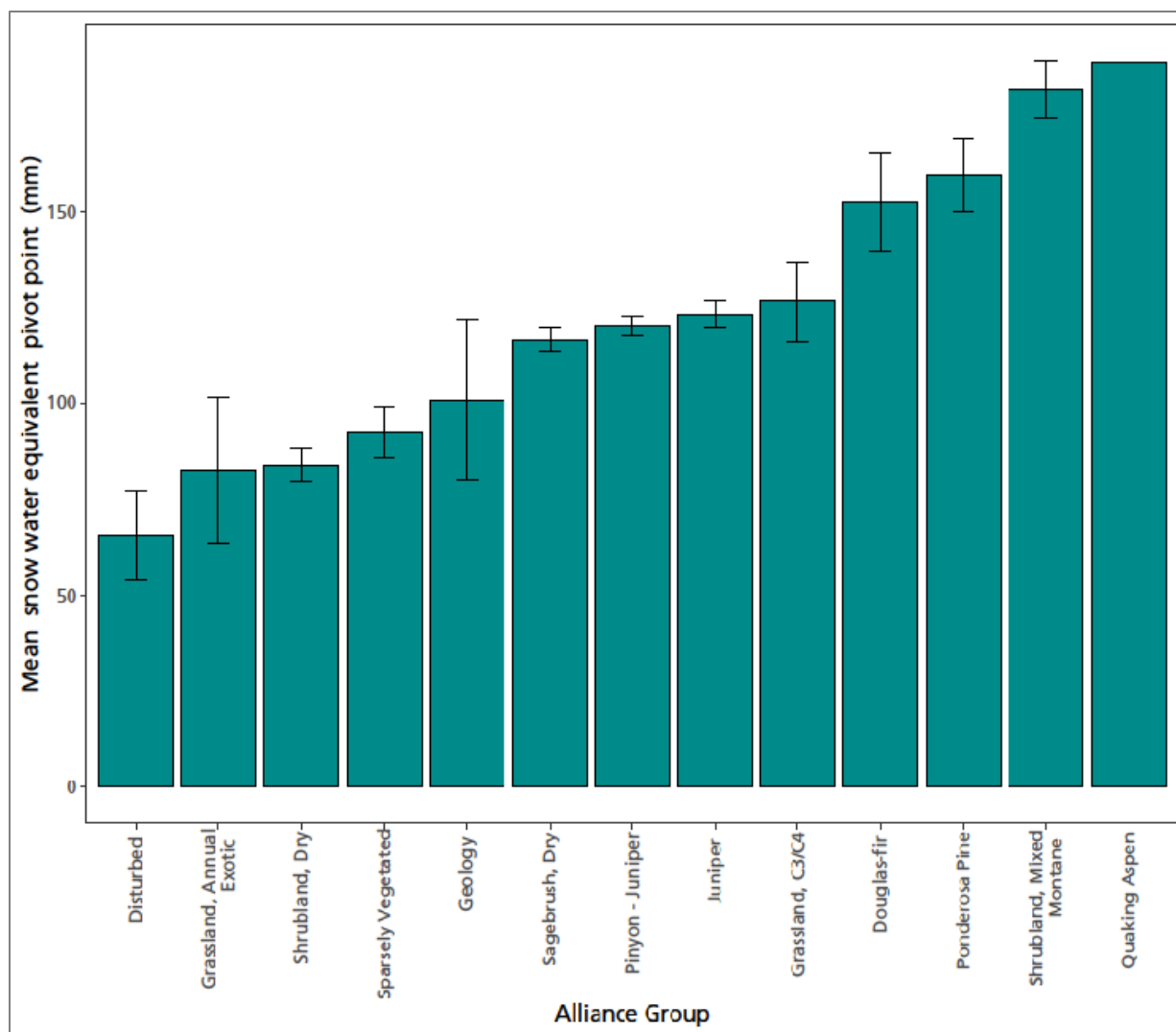


Figure 31. Snow pivot points for polygons where climate variables were significantly related to interannual variation in production (p-value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Error bars show standard error.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

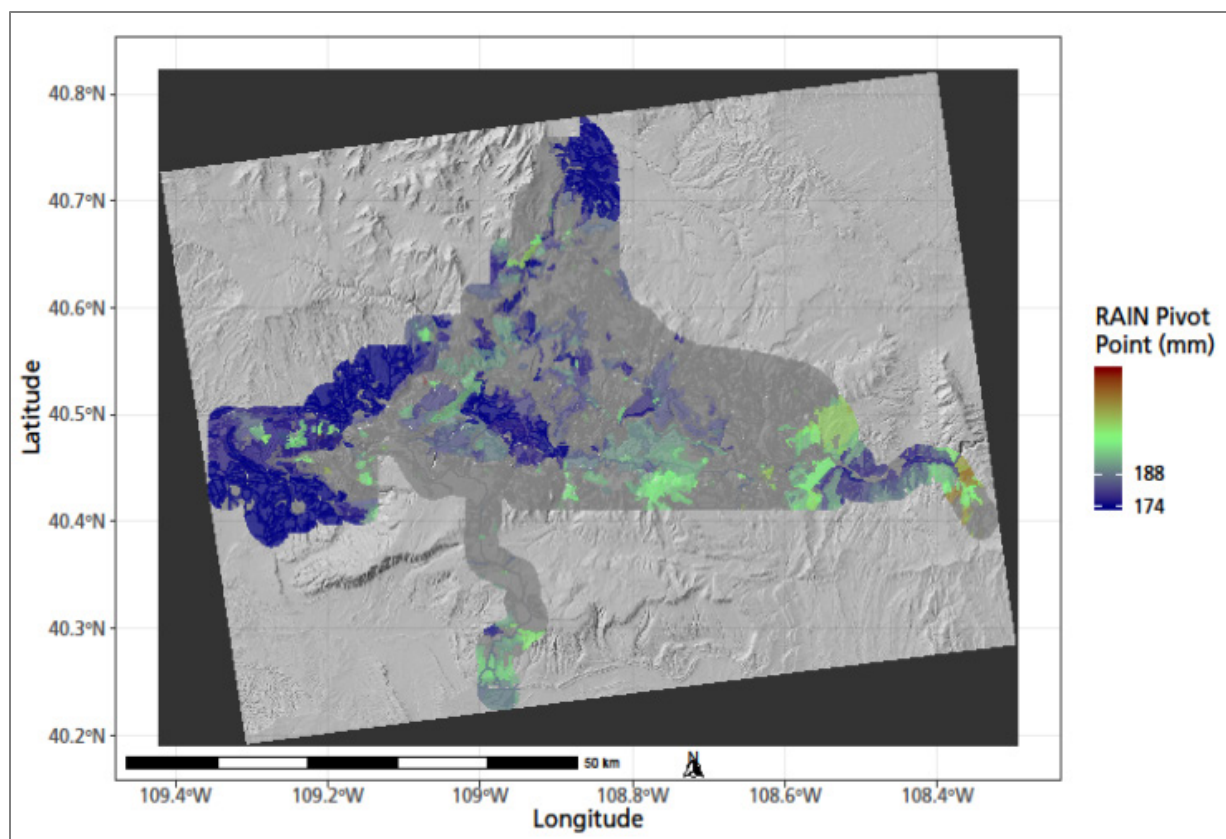


Figure 32. A map of Dinosaur National Monument showing the locations of polygons where rain was significantly related to interannual variation in production (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

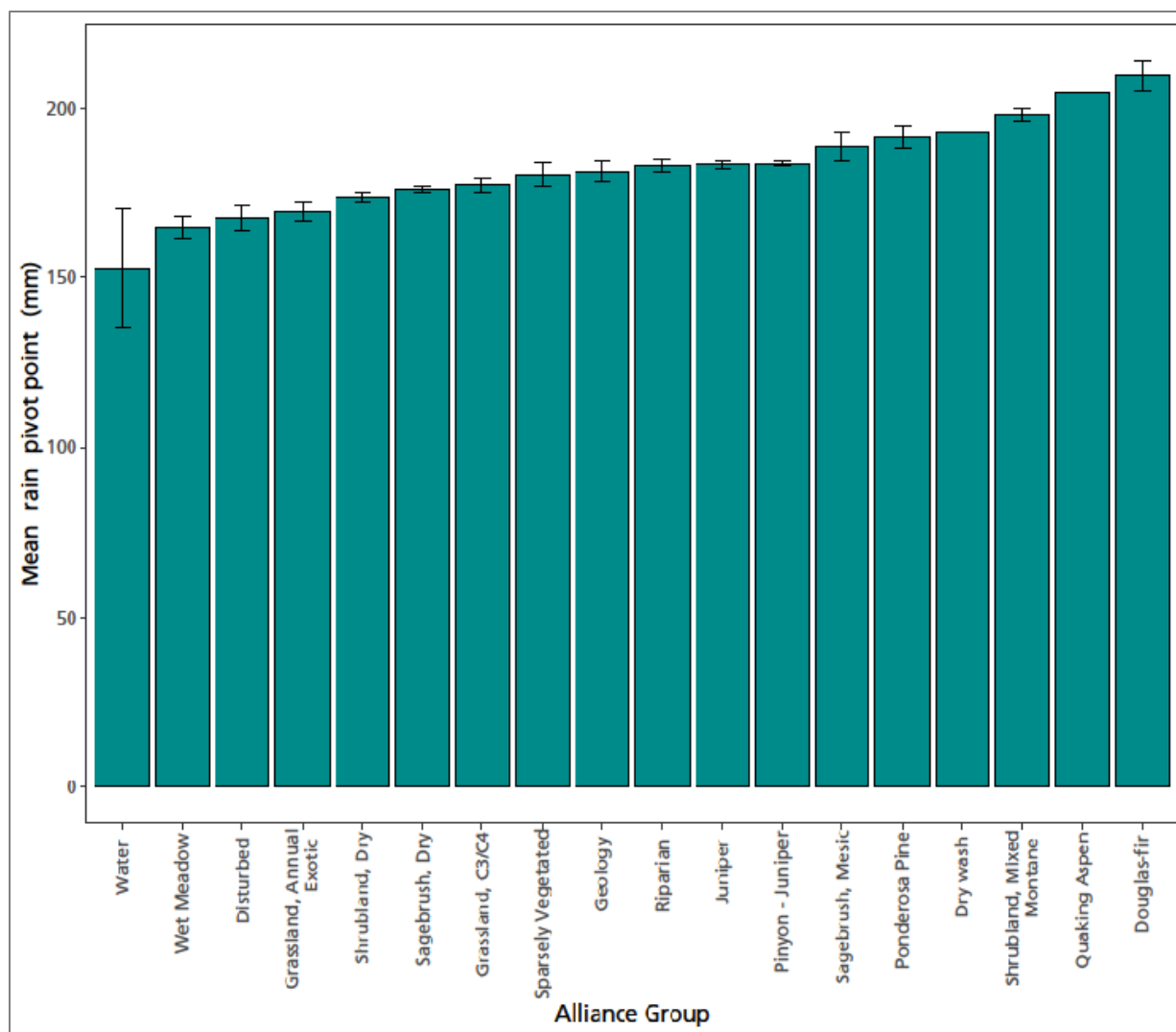


Figure 33. Rain pivot points for polygons where climate variables were significantly related to interannual variation in production (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Error bars show standard error.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

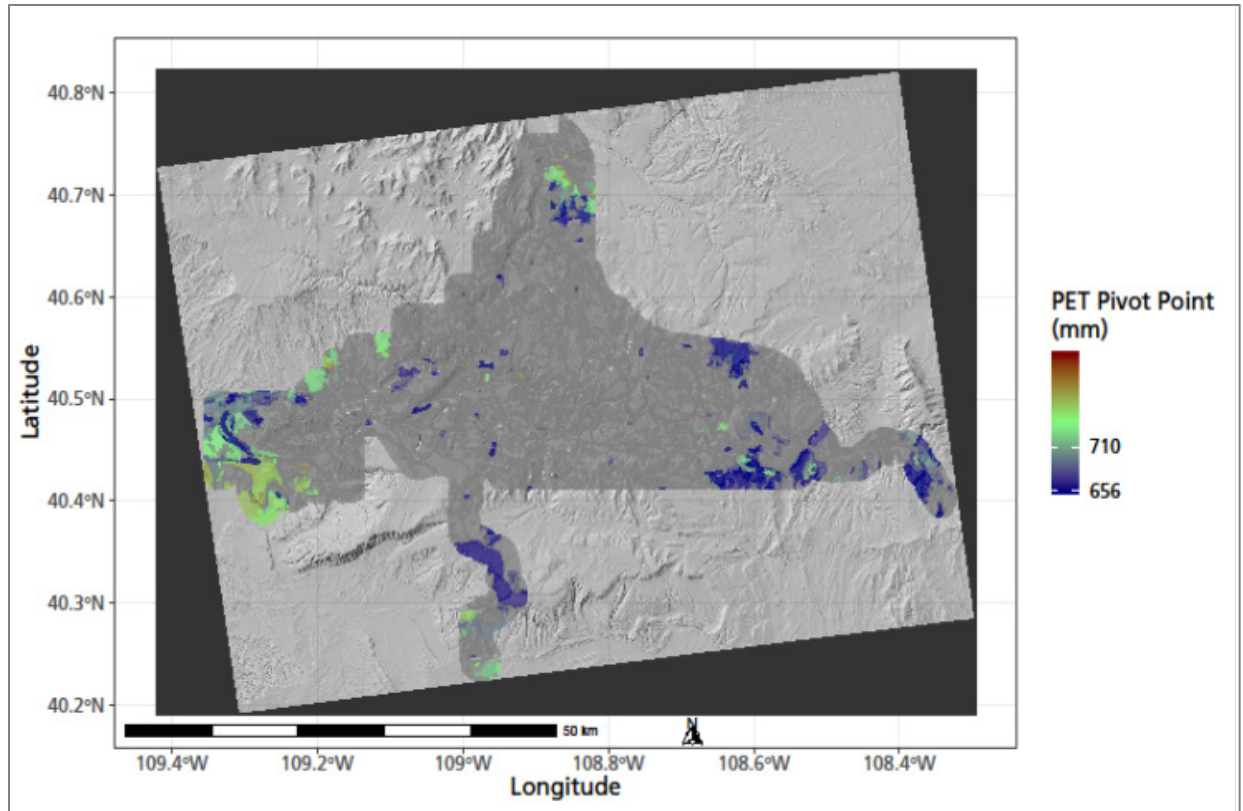


Figure 34. A map of Dinosaur National Monument showing the locations of polygons where potential evapotranspiration was significantly related to interannual variation in production (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.
NPS / DAVID THOMA

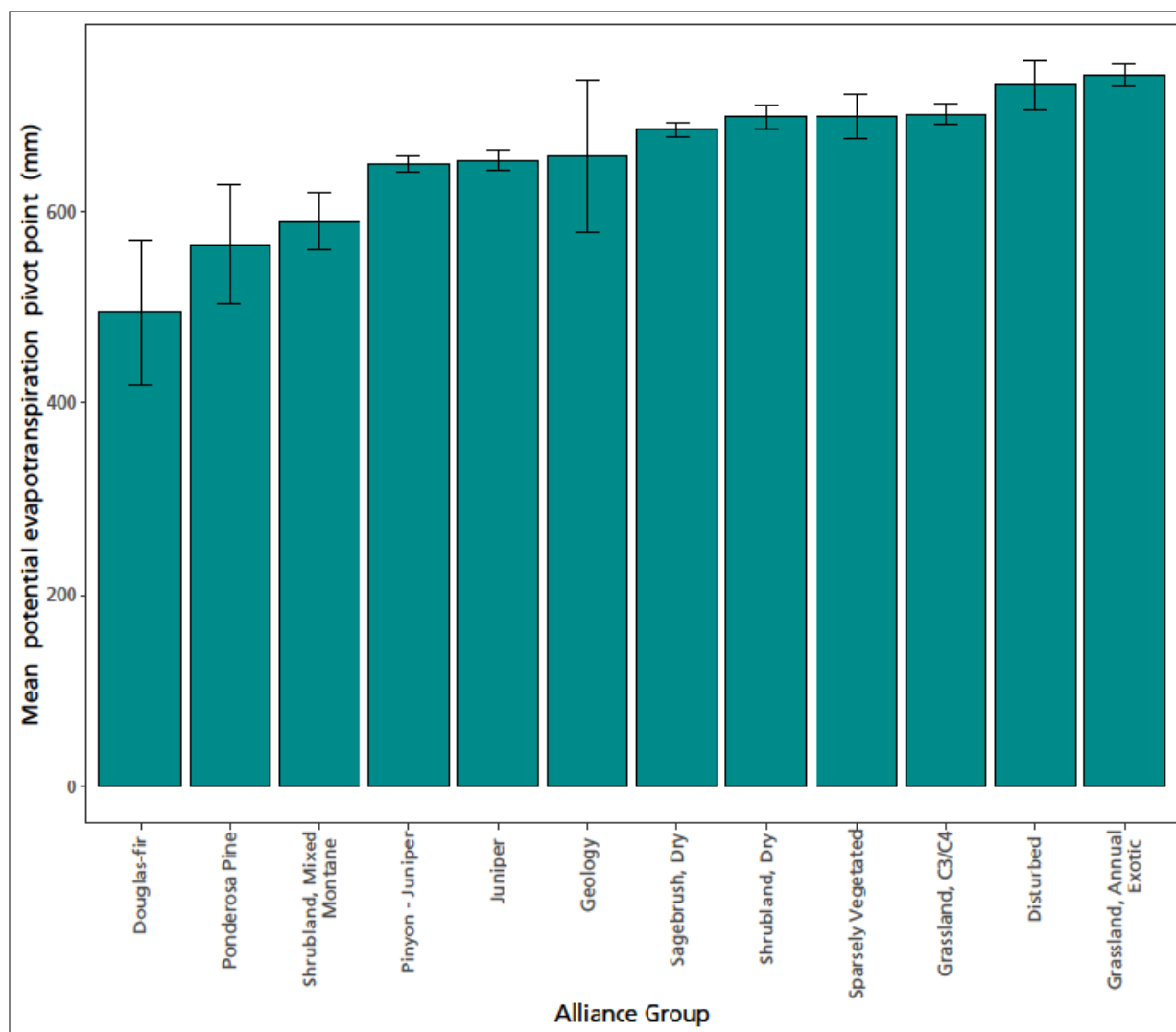


Figure 35. Potential evapotranspiration pivot points for polygons where climate variables were significantly related to interannual variation in production (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Error bars show standard error.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

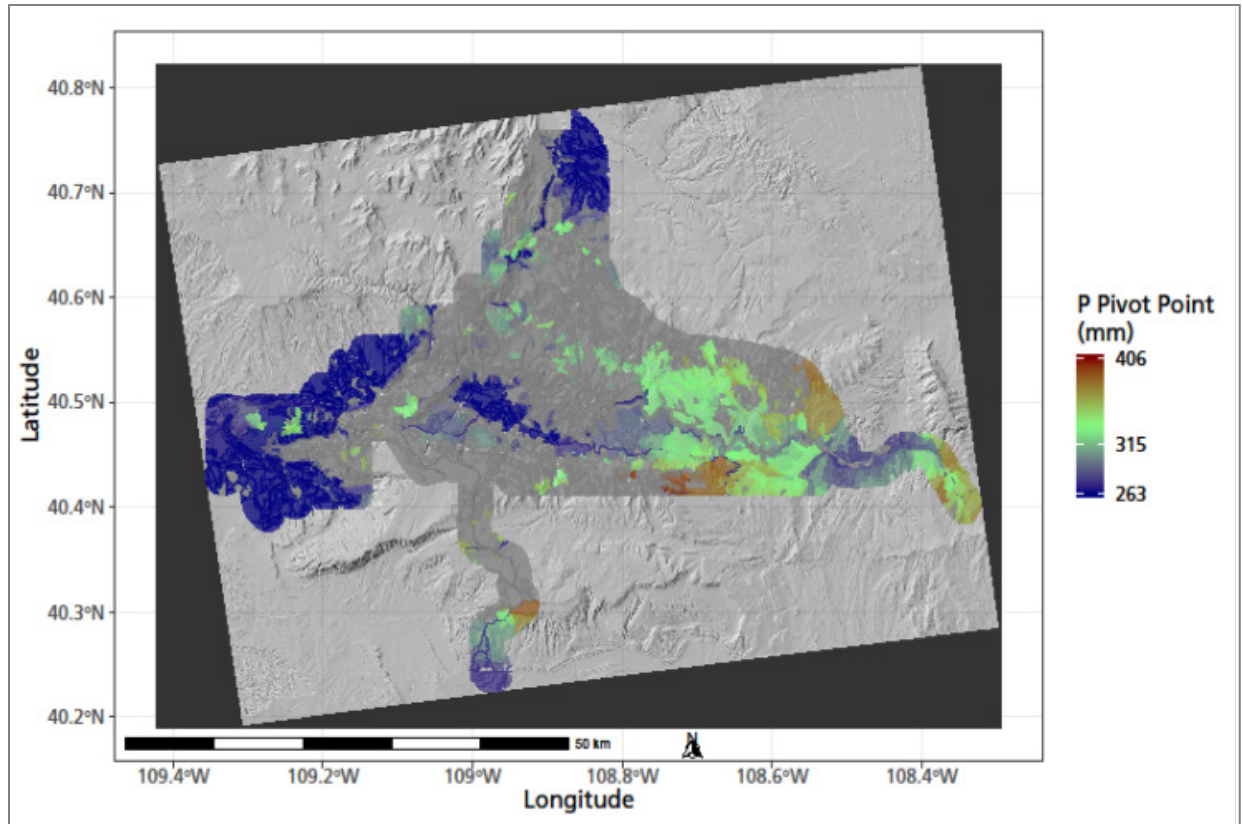


Figure 36. A map of Dinosaur National Monument showing the locations of polygons where precipitation was significantly related to interannual variation in production (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

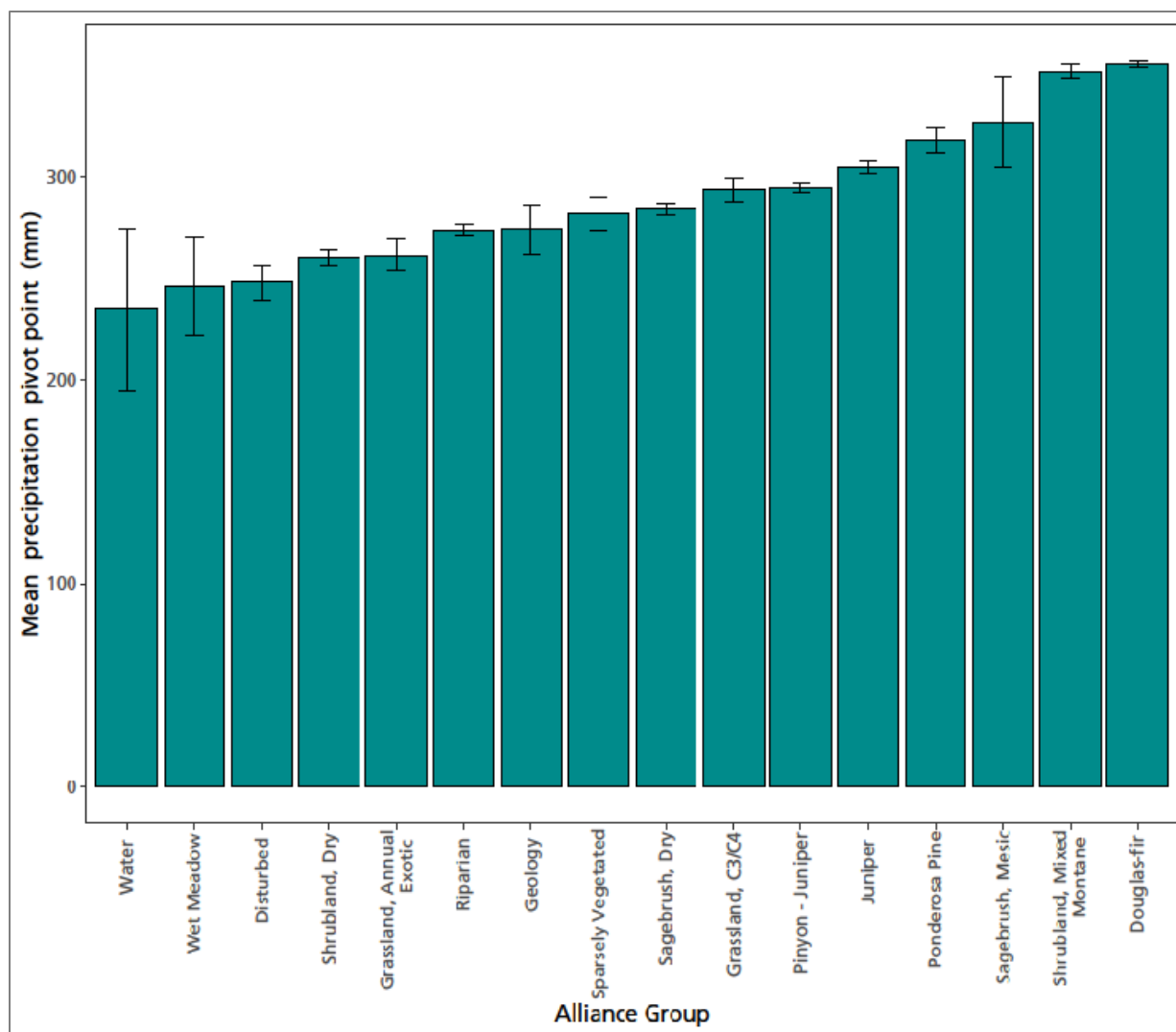


Figure 37. Precipitation pivot points for polygons where climate variables were significantly related to interannual variation in production (p-value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Error bars show standard error.

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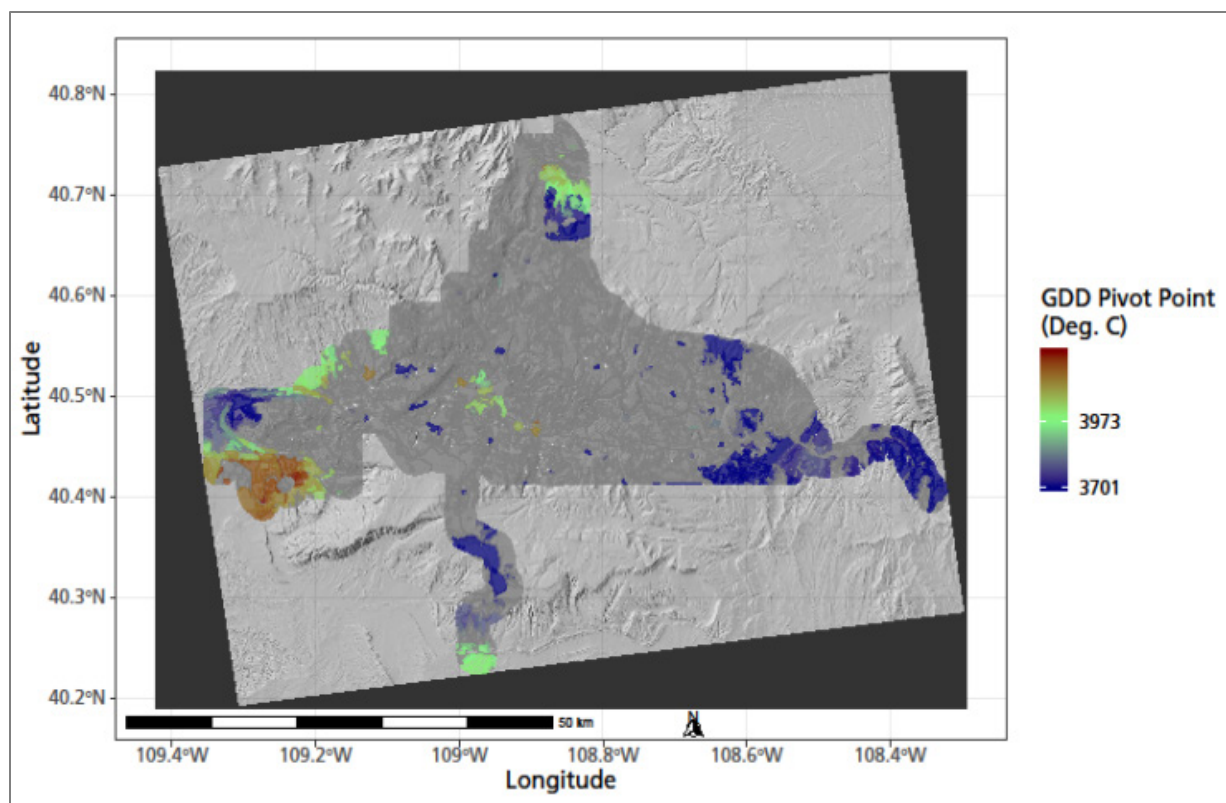


Figure 38. A map of Dinosaur National Monument showing the locations of polygons where growing degree days were significantly related to interannual variation in production (p-value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

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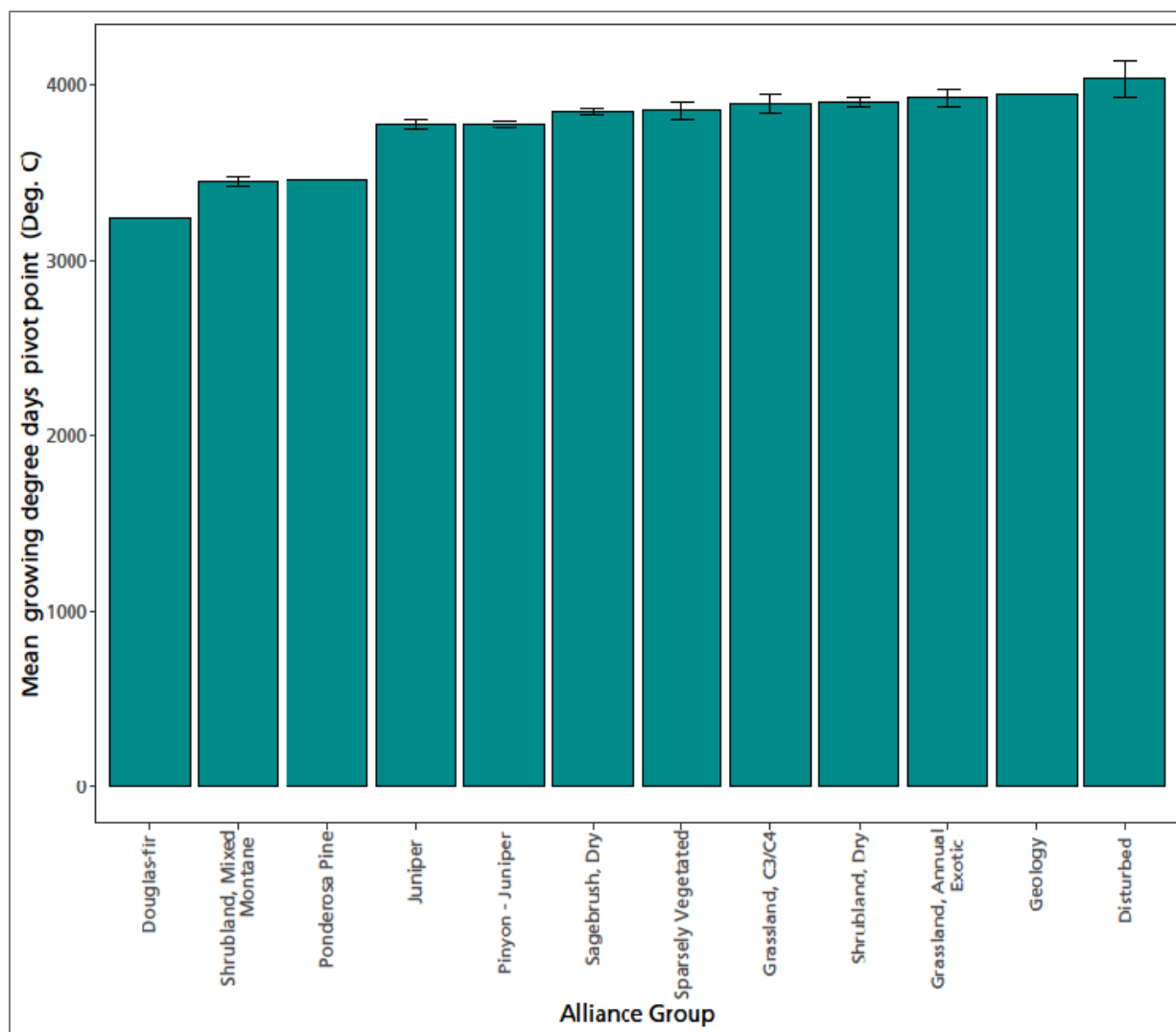


Figure 39. Growing degree day pivot points for polygons where climate variables were significantly related to interannual variation in production (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Error bars show standard error.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

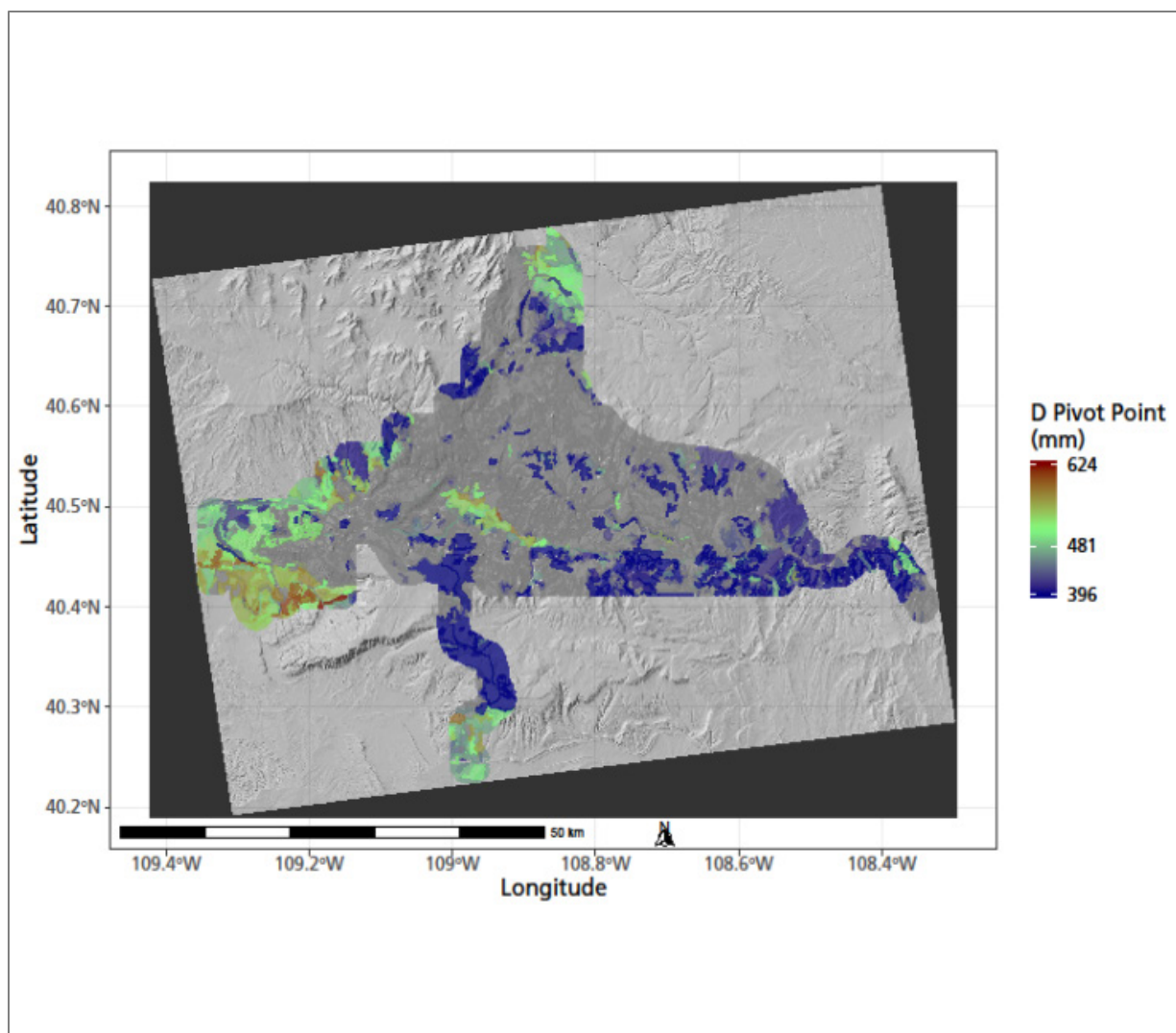


Figure 40. Pivot points for polygons in Dinosaur National Monument where water deficit was significantly related to interannual variation in production (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

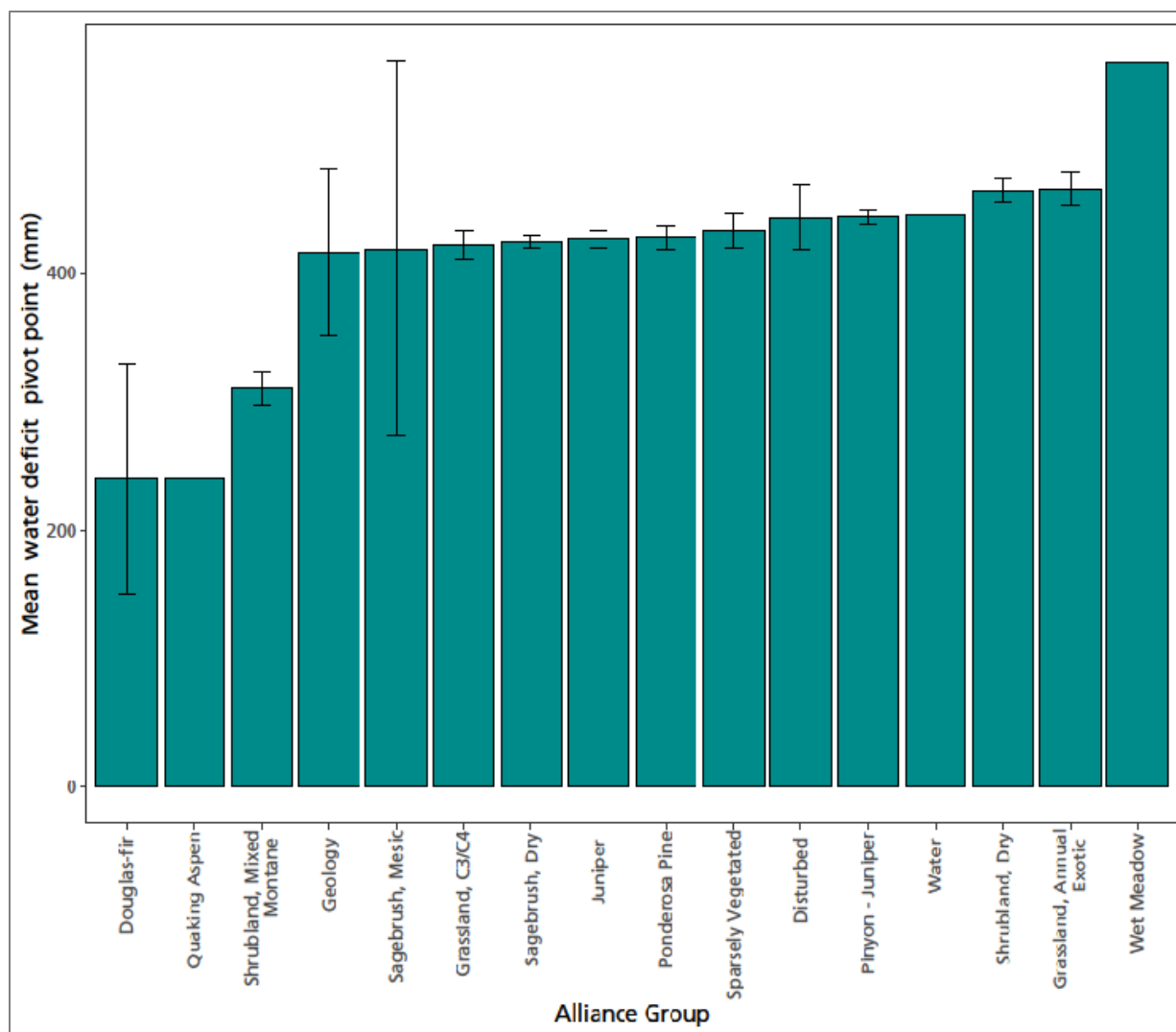


Figure 41. Deficit pivot points for polygons where climate variables were significantly related to interannual variation in production (p-value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Error bars show standard error.

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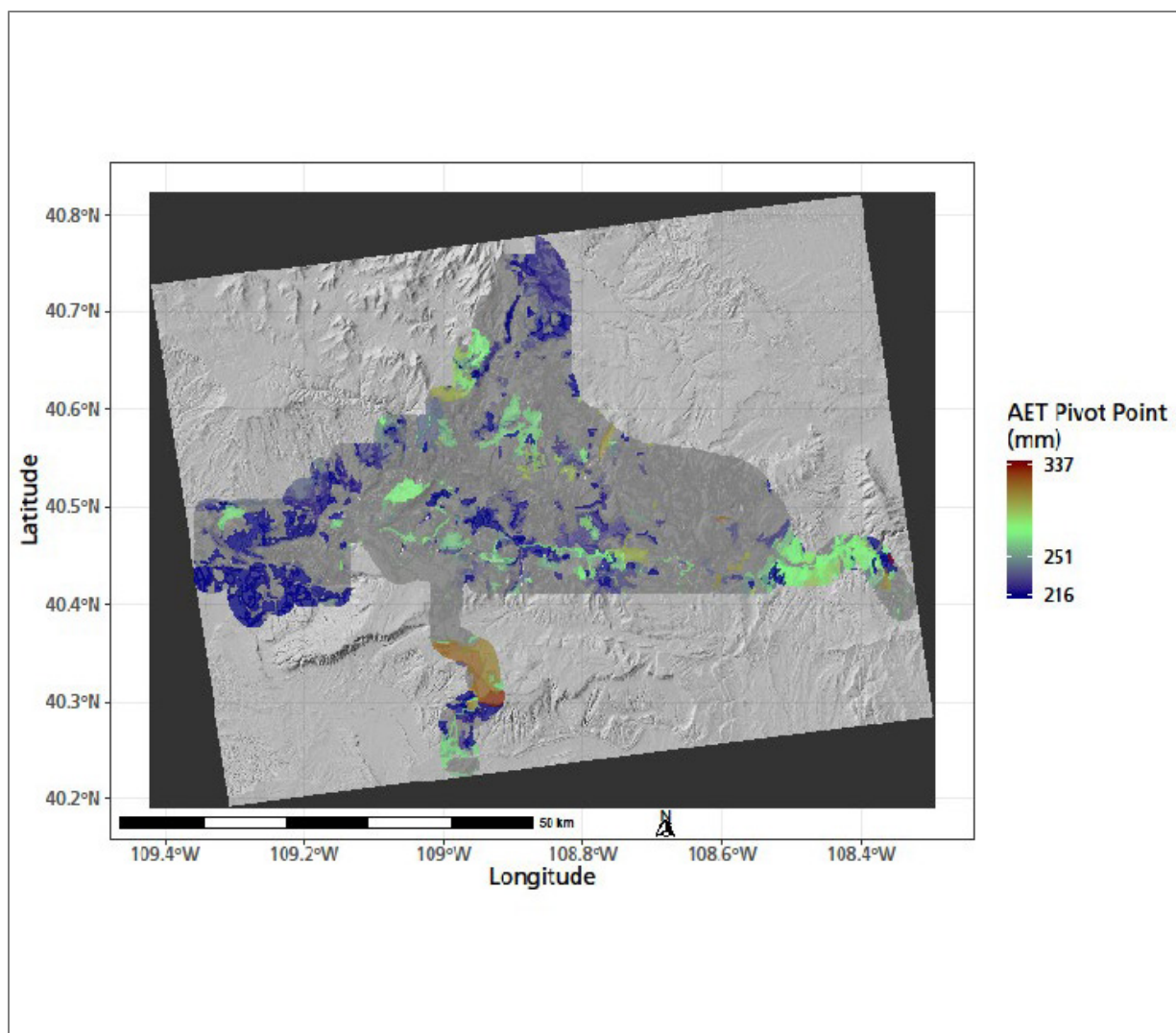


Figure 42. A map of Dinosaur National Monument showing the locations of polygons where actual evapotranspiration was significantly related to interannual variation in production (p-value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.
NPS / DAVID THOMA

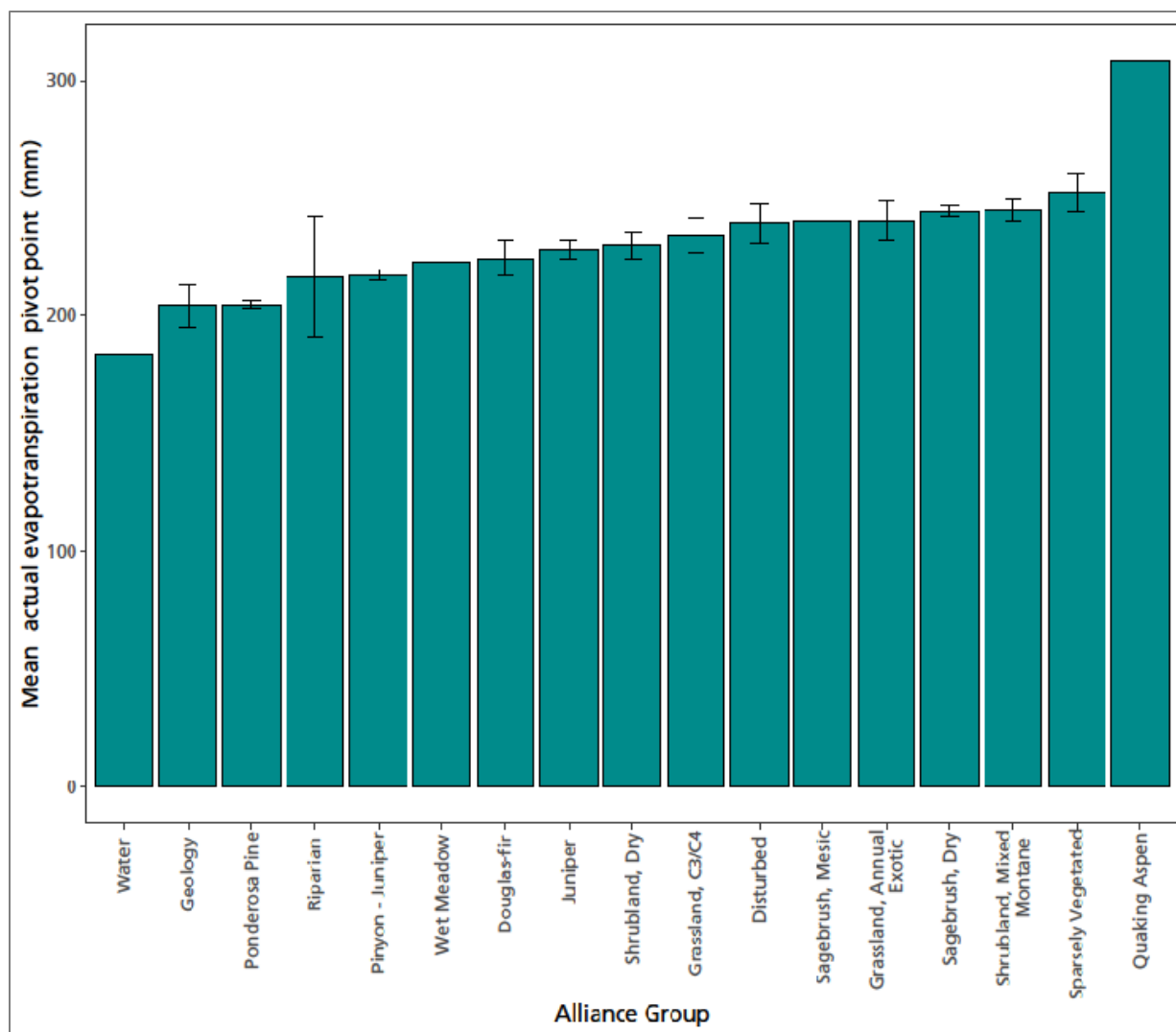


Figure 43. Actual evapotranspiration pivot points for polygons where climate variables were significantly related to interannual variation in production (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Error bars show standard error.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

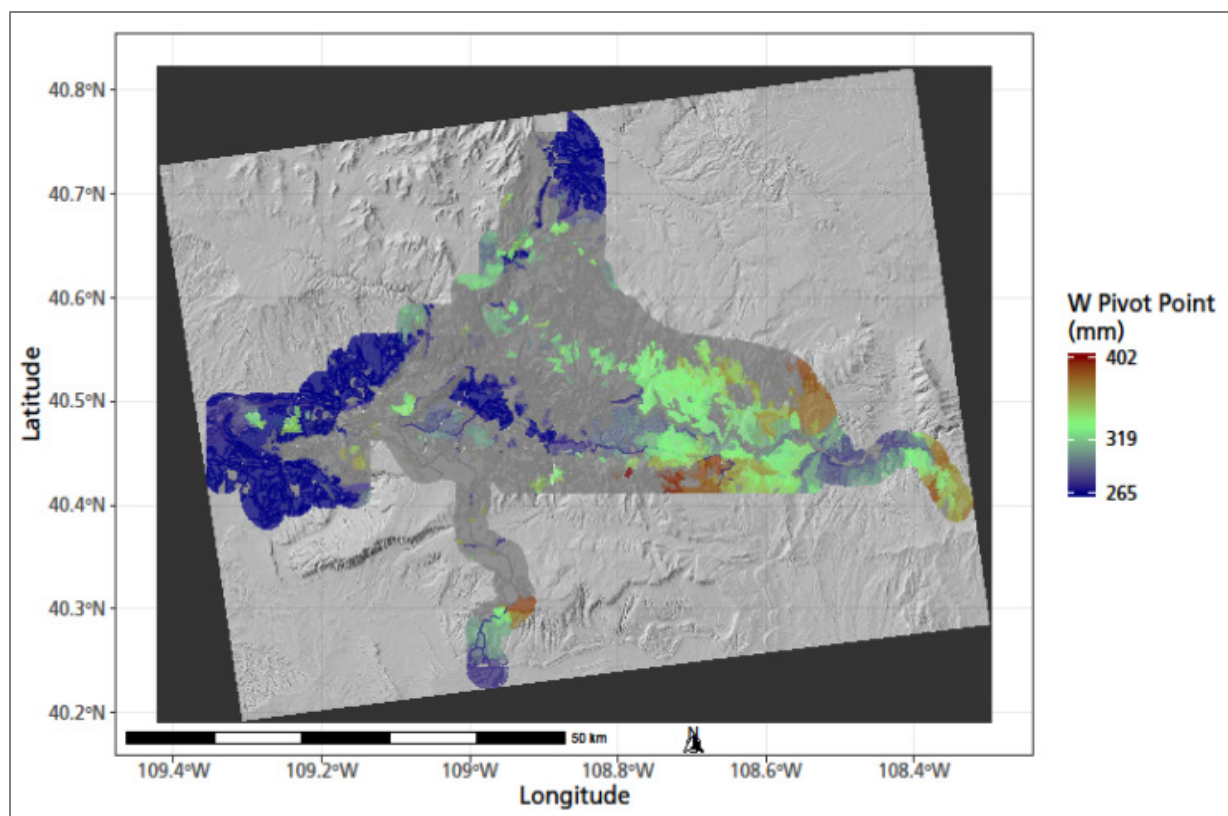


Figure 44. Pivot points for polygons in Dinosaur National Monument where water (rain plus snowmelt) was significantly related to interannual variation in production (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

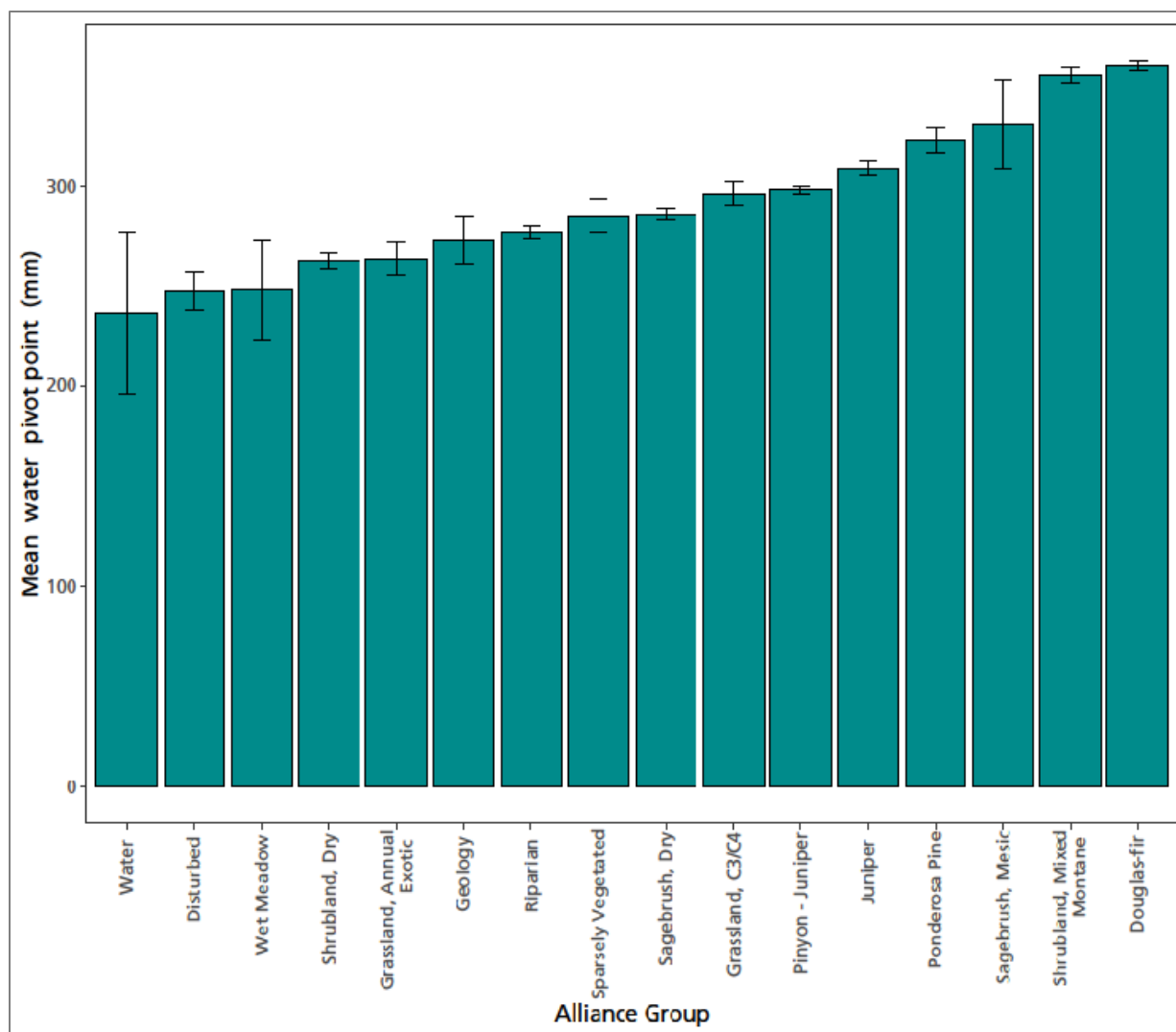


Figure 45. Pivot points for polygons in Dinosaur National Monument where water (rain plus snowmelt) was significantly related to interannual variation in production (p-value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

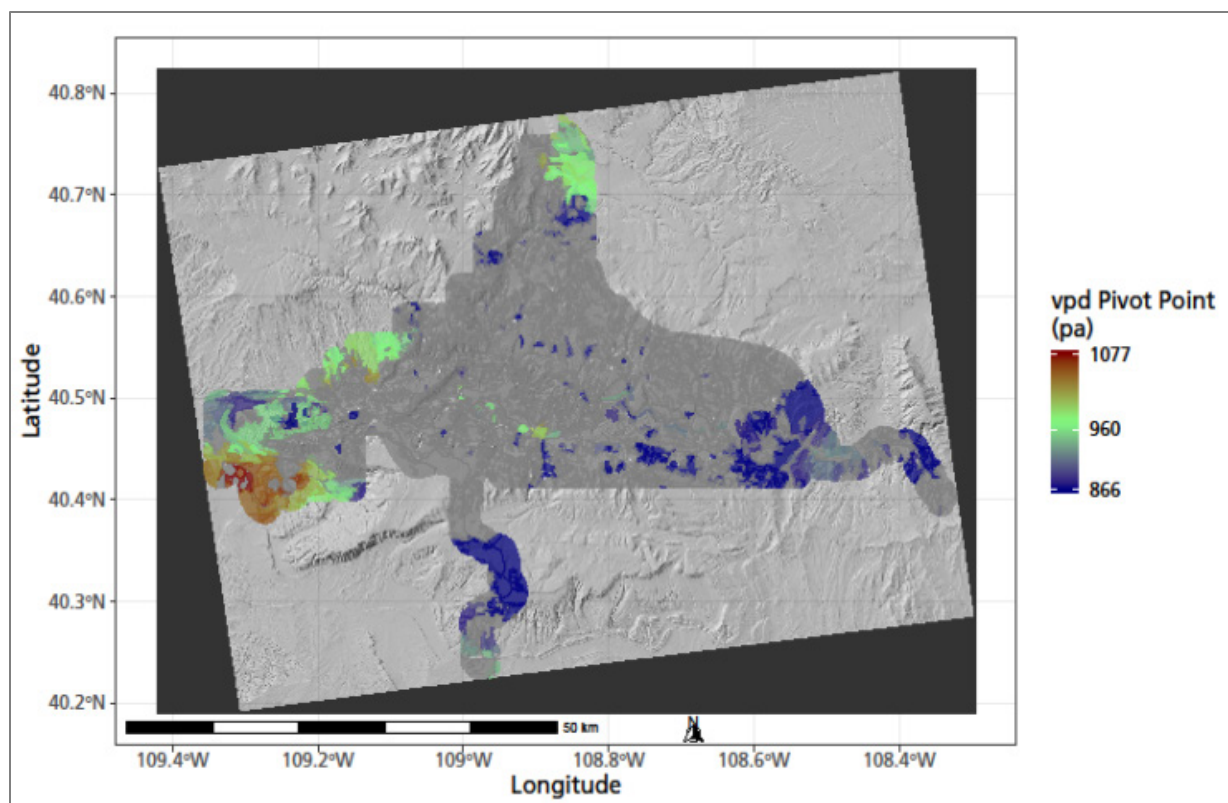


Figure 46. A map of Dinosaur National Monument showing the locations of polygons where vapor pressure deficit was significantly related to interannual variation in production (p-value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.
NPS / DAVID THOMA

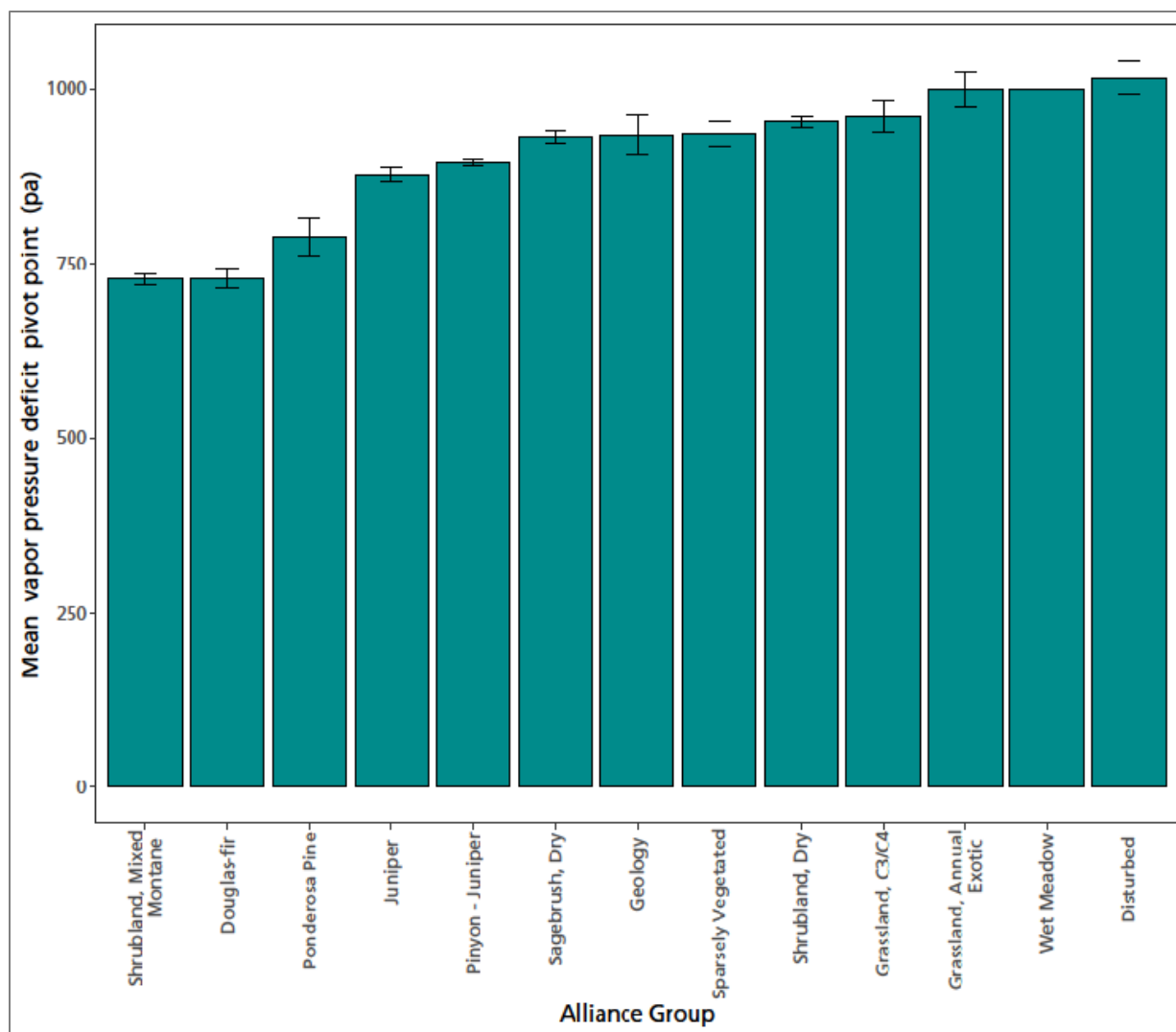


Figure 47. Pivot points for polygons in Dinosaur National Monument where vapor pressure deficit was significantly related to interannual variation in production (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

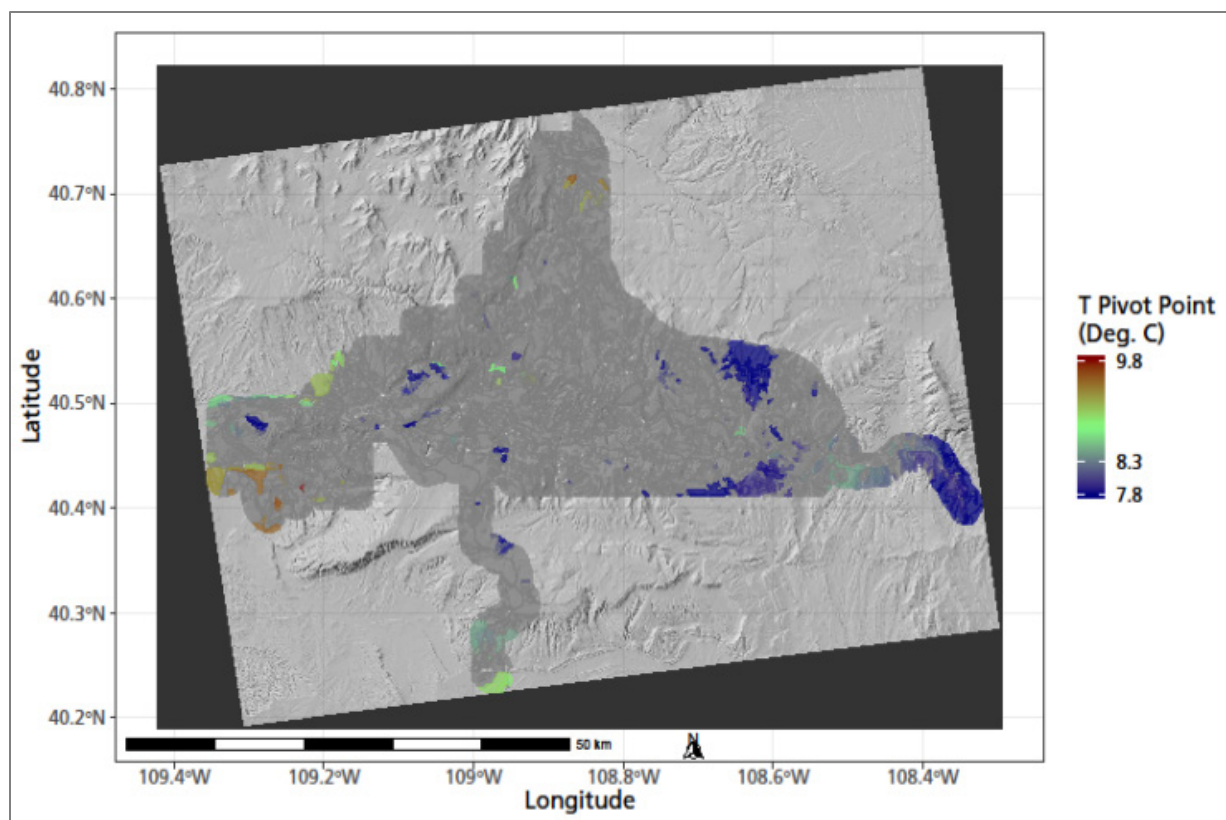


Figure 48. Pivot points for polygons in Dinosaur National Monument where temperature was significantly related to interannual variation in production (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

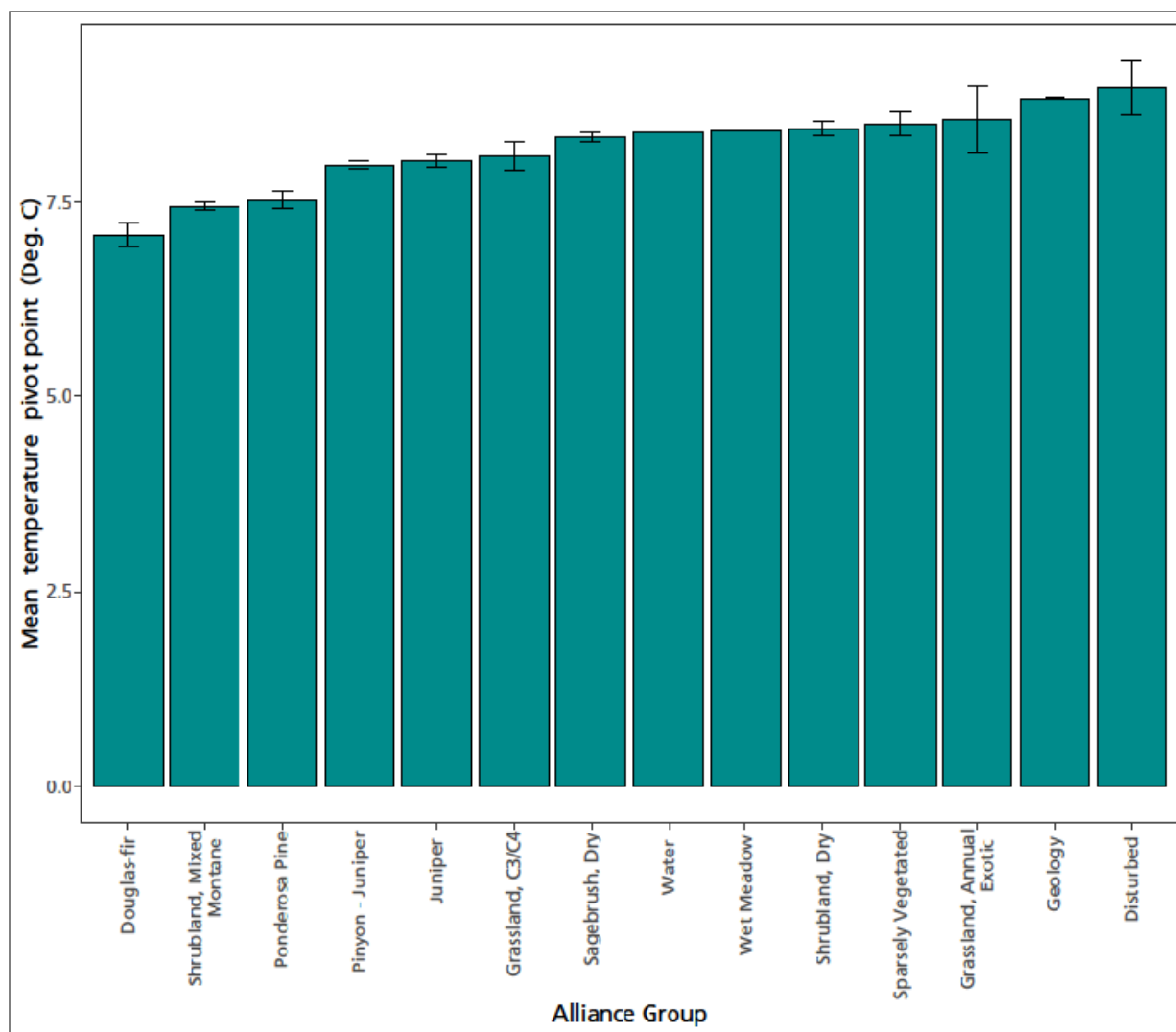


Figure 49. Pivot points for polygons in Dinosaur National Monument where temperature was significantly related to interannual variation in production (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.
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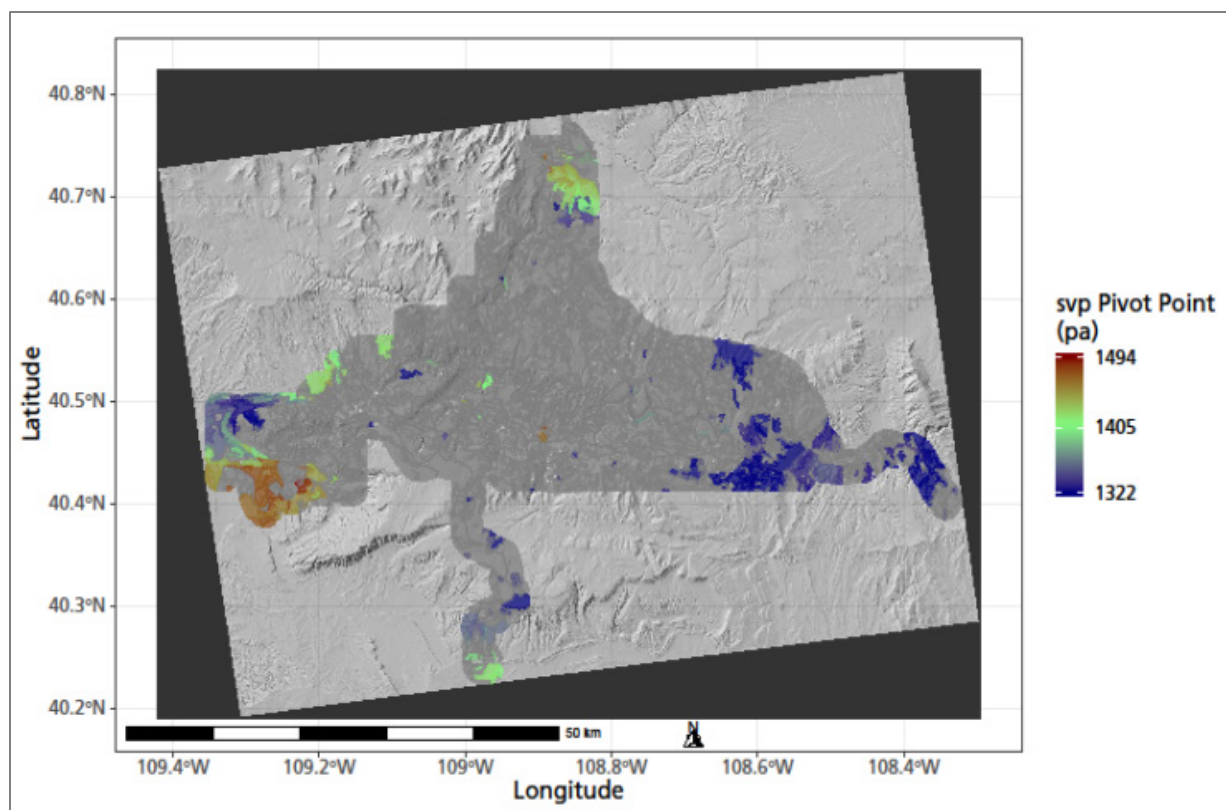


Figure 50. Pivot points for polygons in Dinosaur National Monument where saturation vapor pressure was significantly related to interannual variation in production (p-value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

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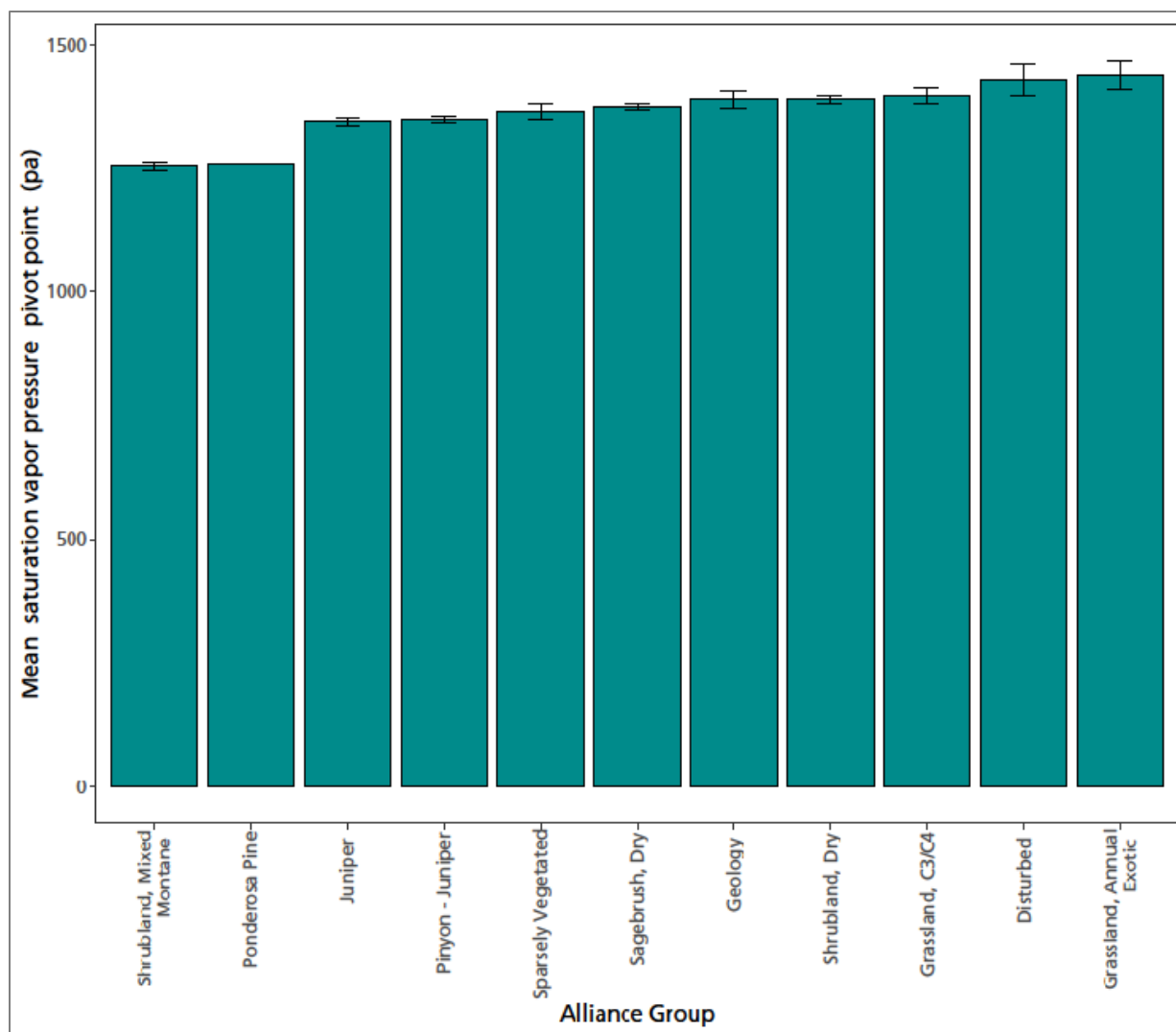


Figure 51. Pivot points for polygons in Dinosaur National Monument where saturation vapor pressure was significantly related to interannual variation in production (p-value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.

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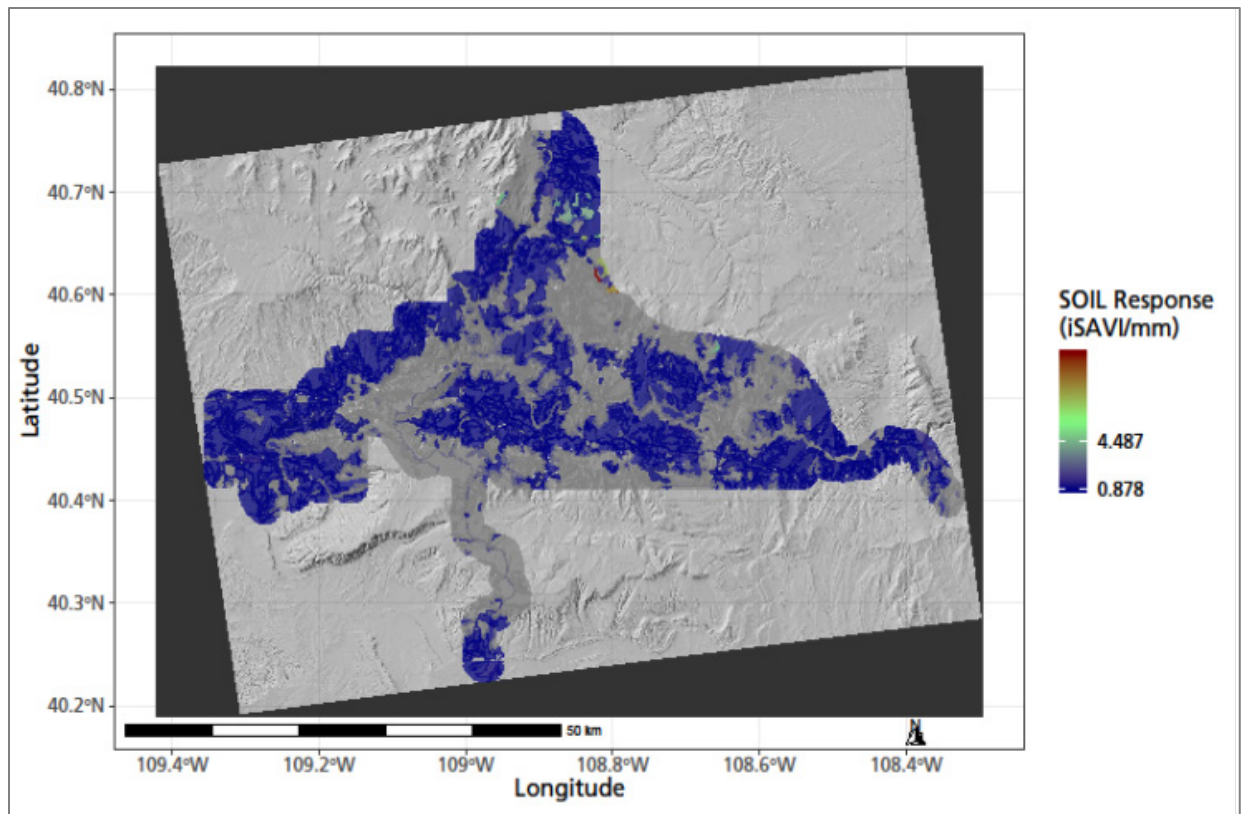


Figure 52. A map of Dinosaur National Monument showing the sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to soil moisture in polygons where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.
NPS / DAVID THOMA

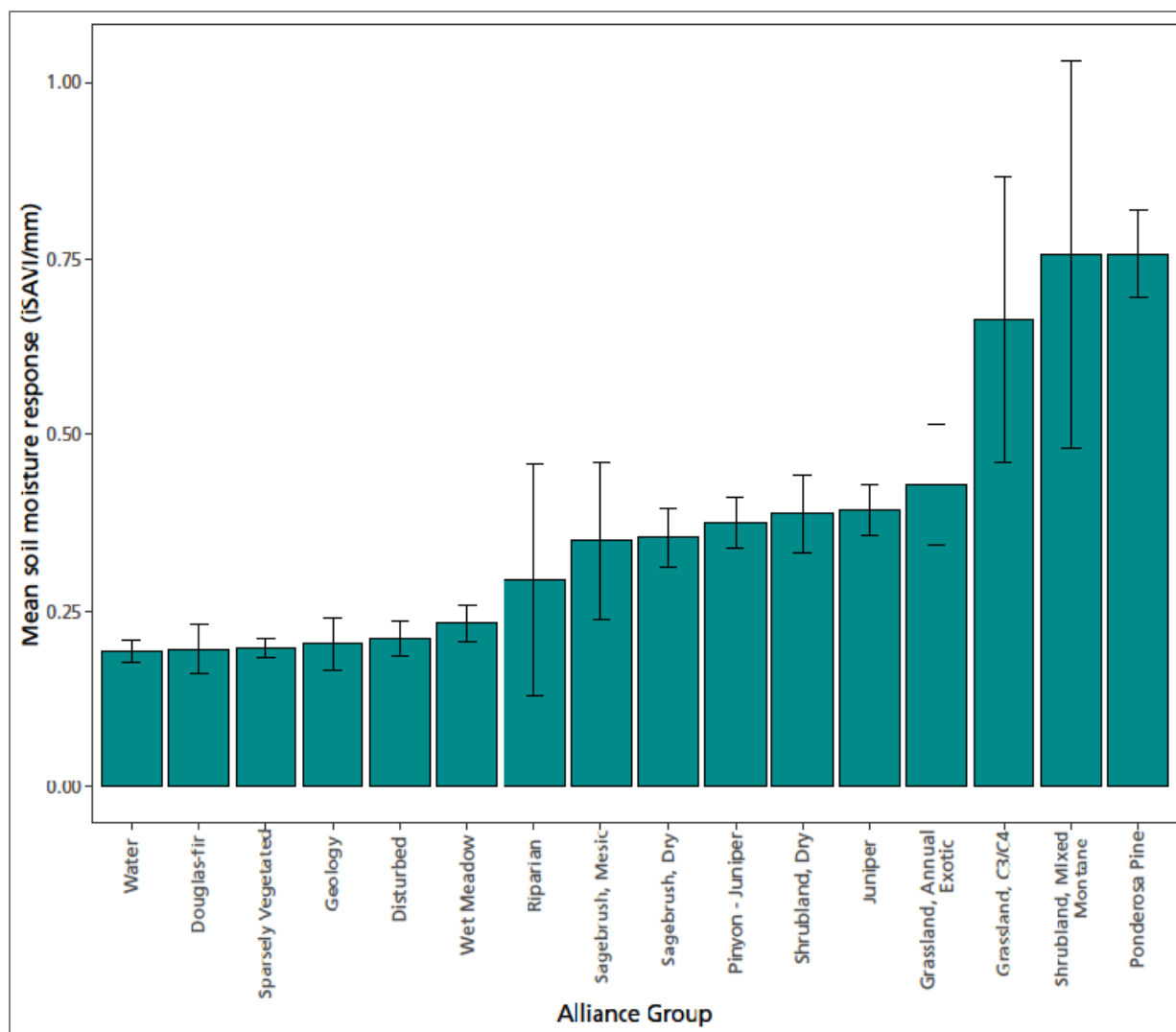


Figure 53. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to soil moisture where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

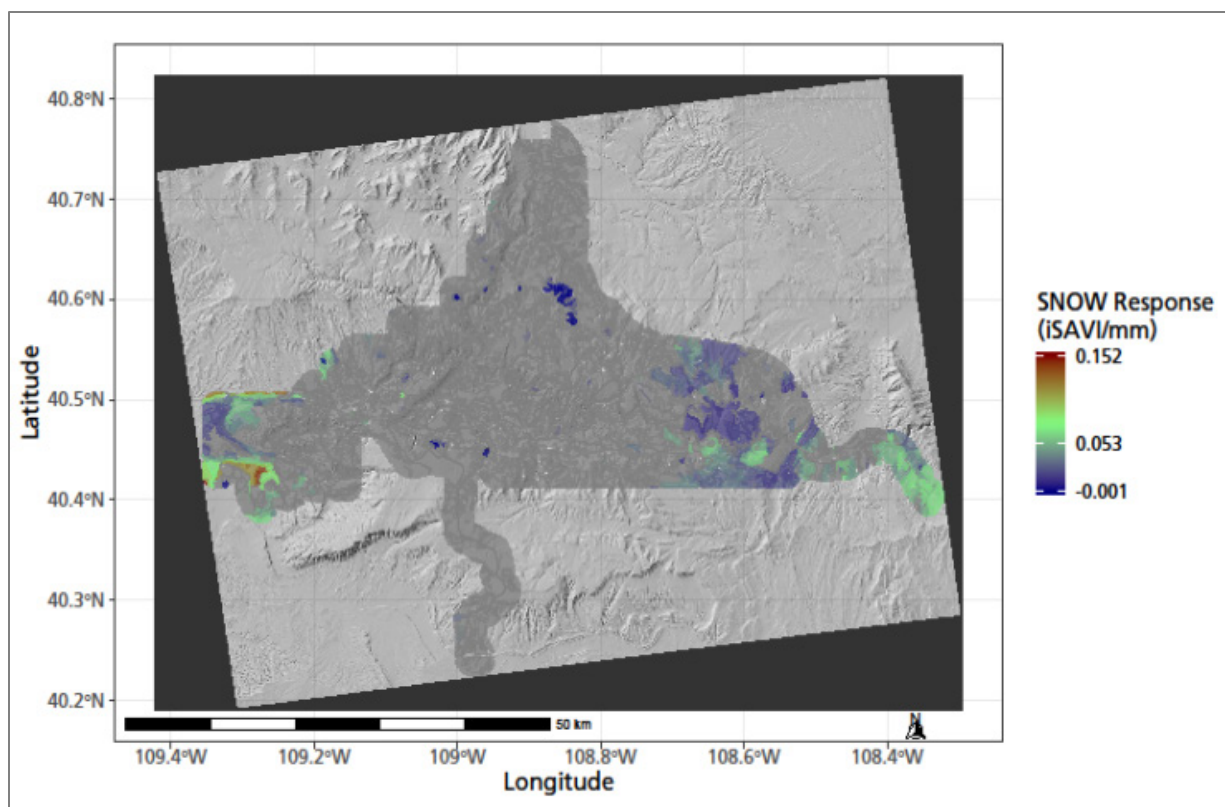


Figure 54. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to snow water equivalent in polygons at Dinosaur NM where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

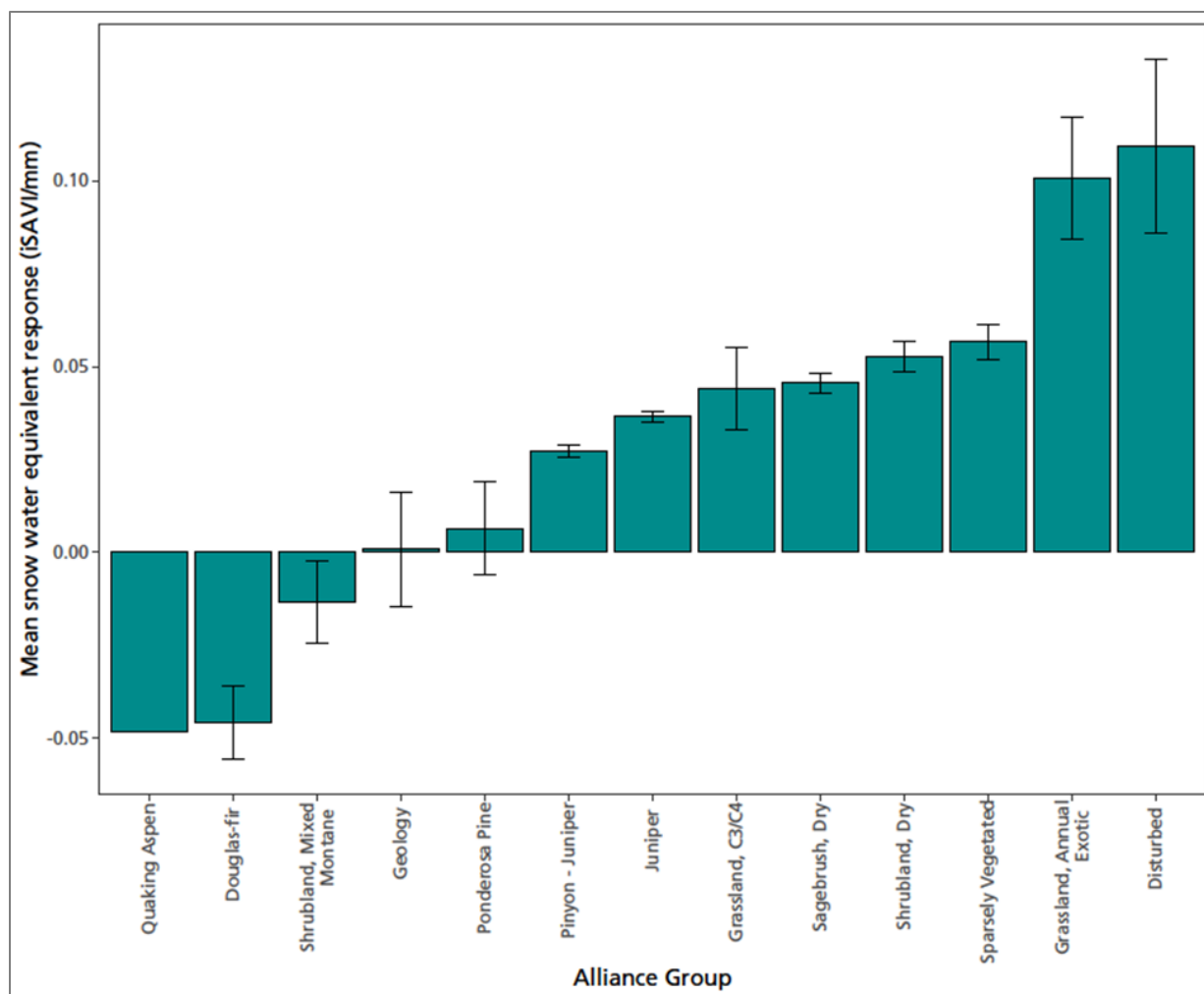


Figure 55. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to snow where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.

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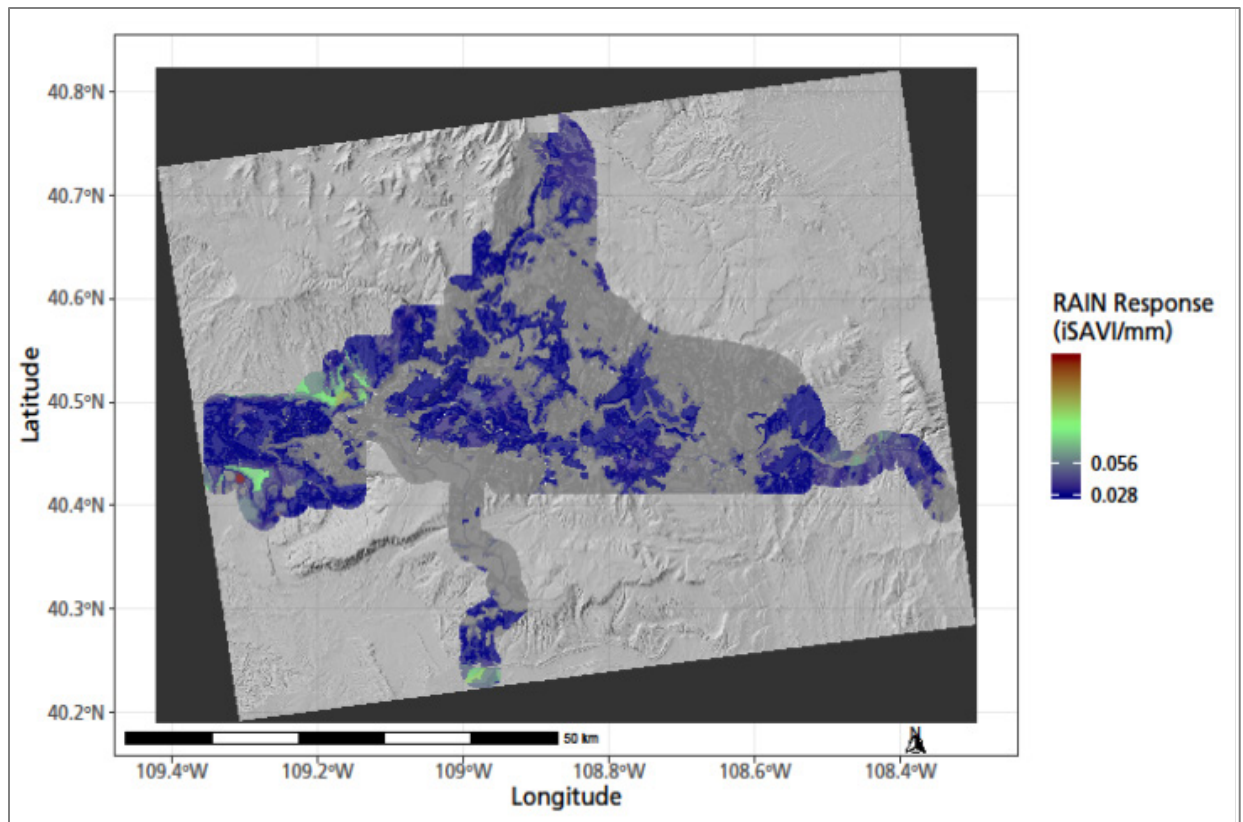


Figure 56. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to rain where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

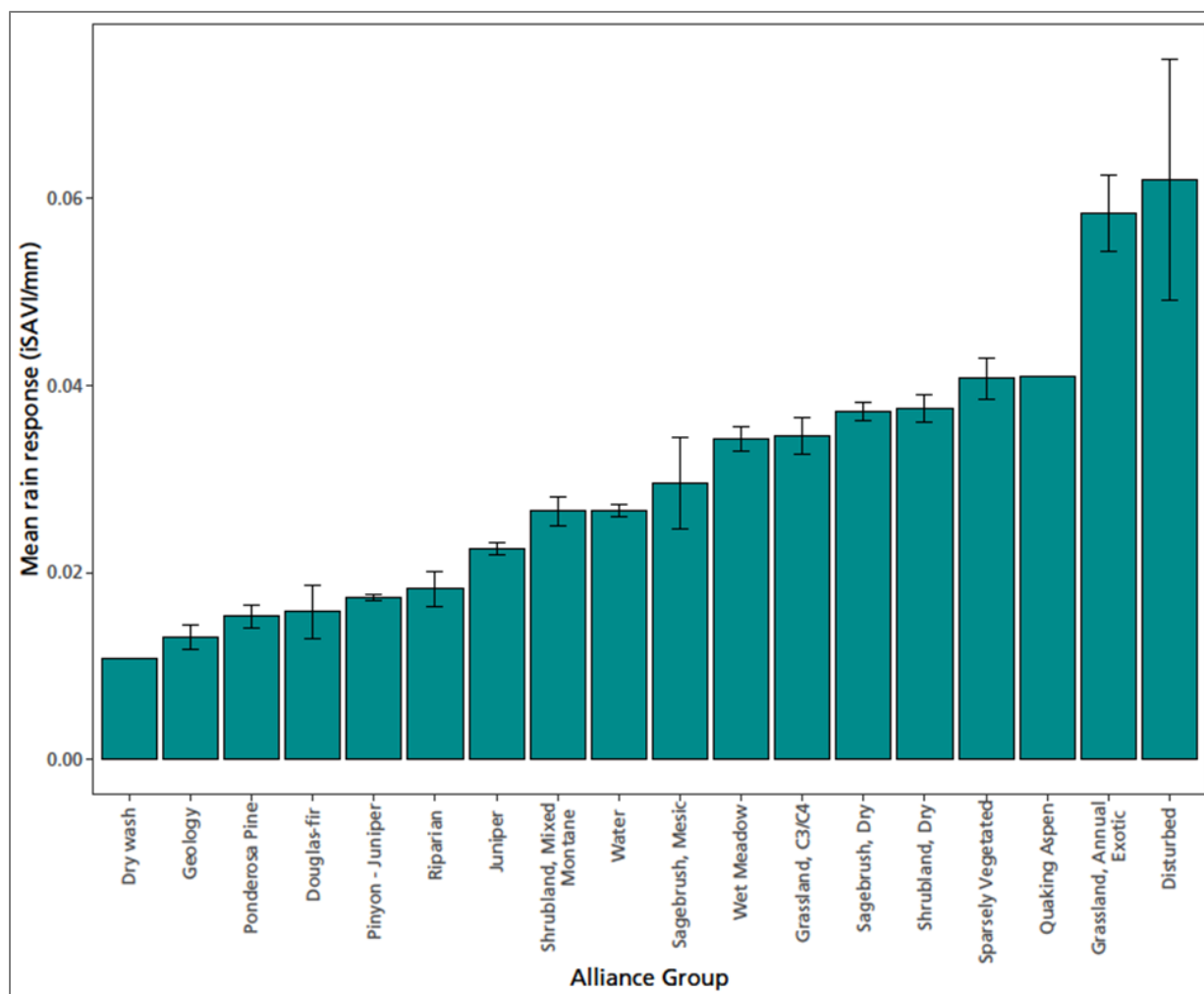


Figure 57. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to rain where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

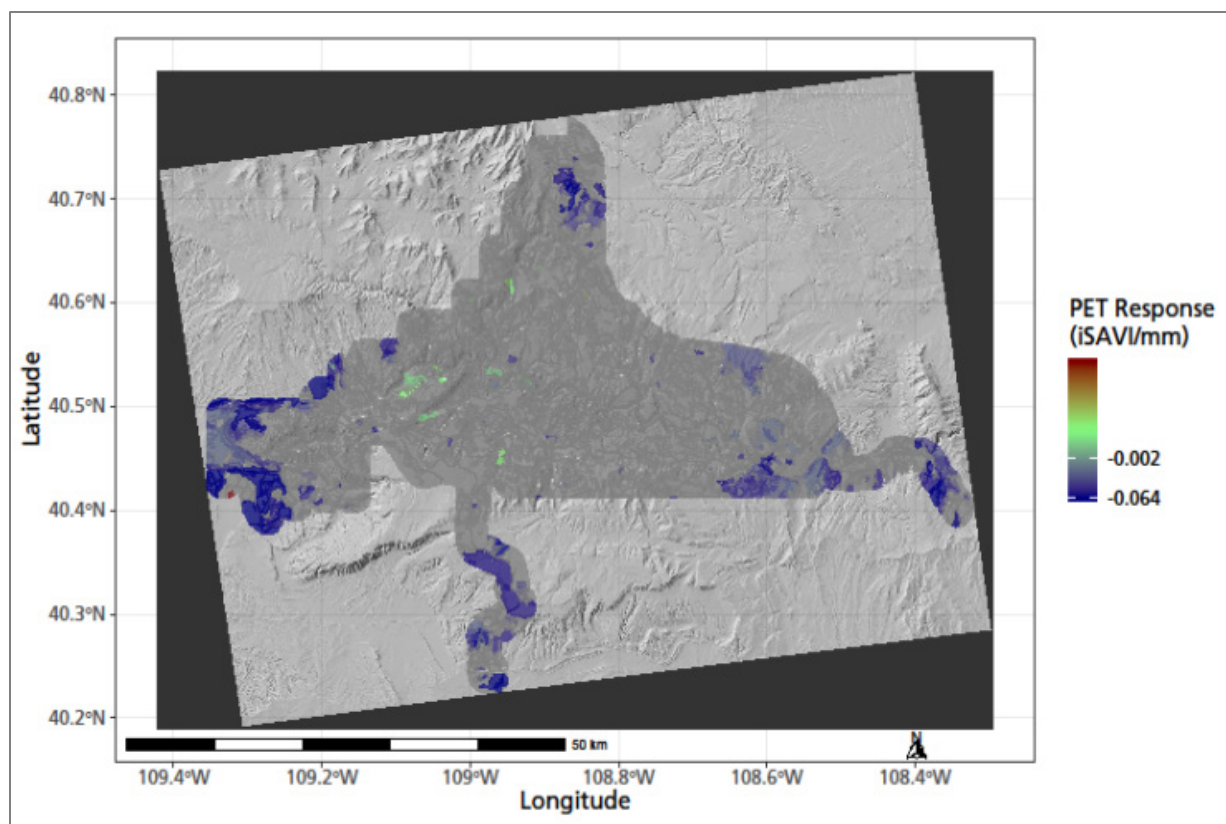


Figure 58. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to potential evapotranspiration where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

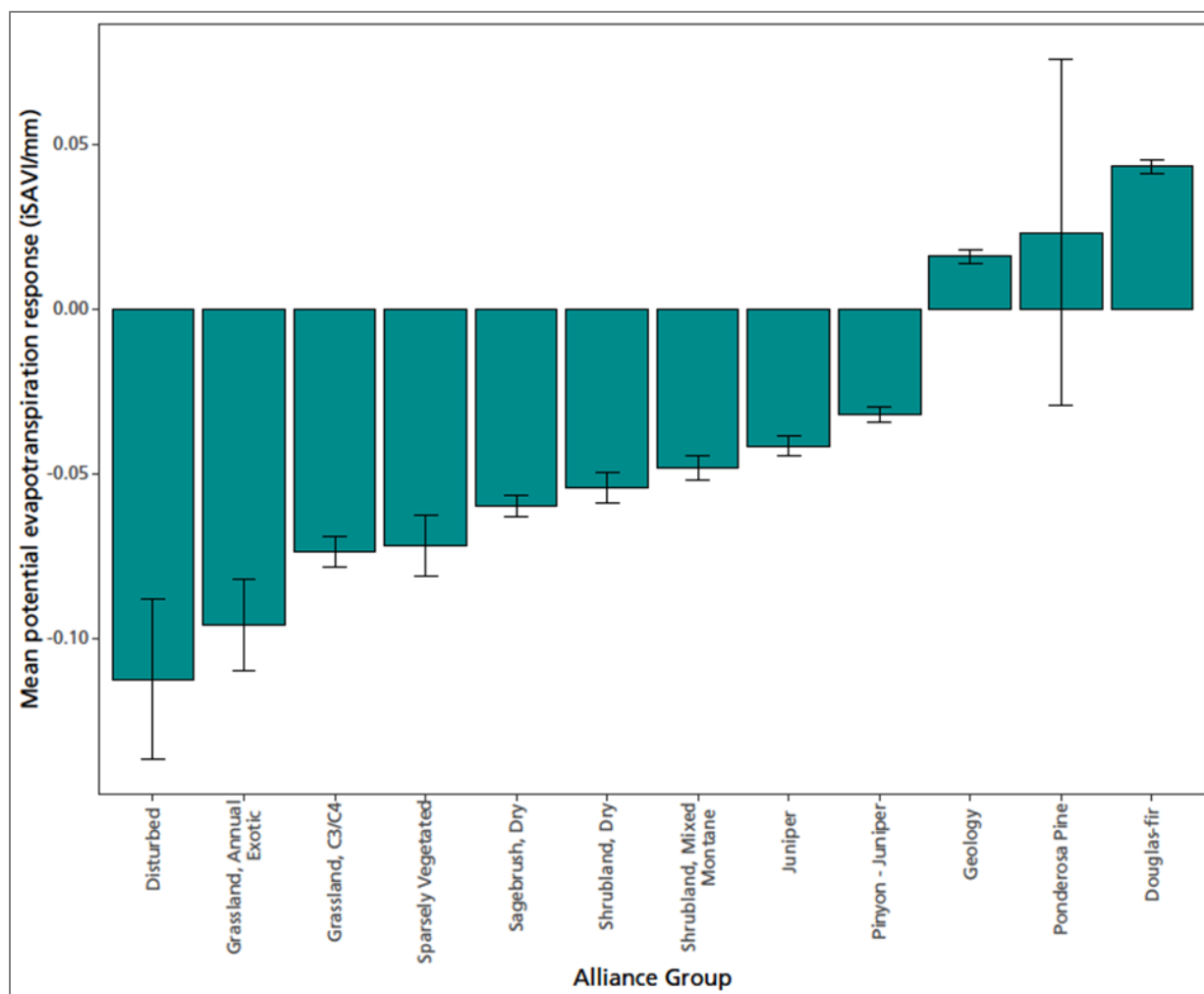


Figure 59. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to potential evapotranspiration where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

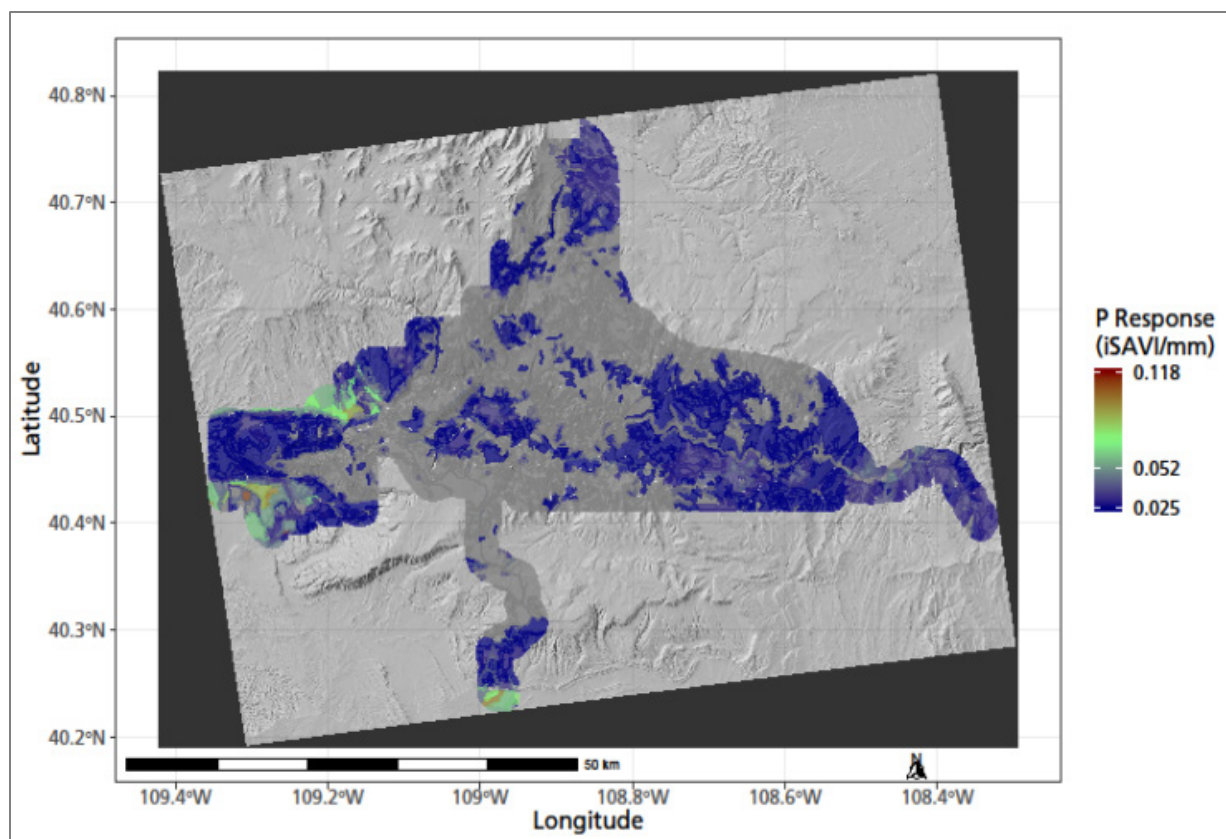


Figure 60. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to precipitation in polygons where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

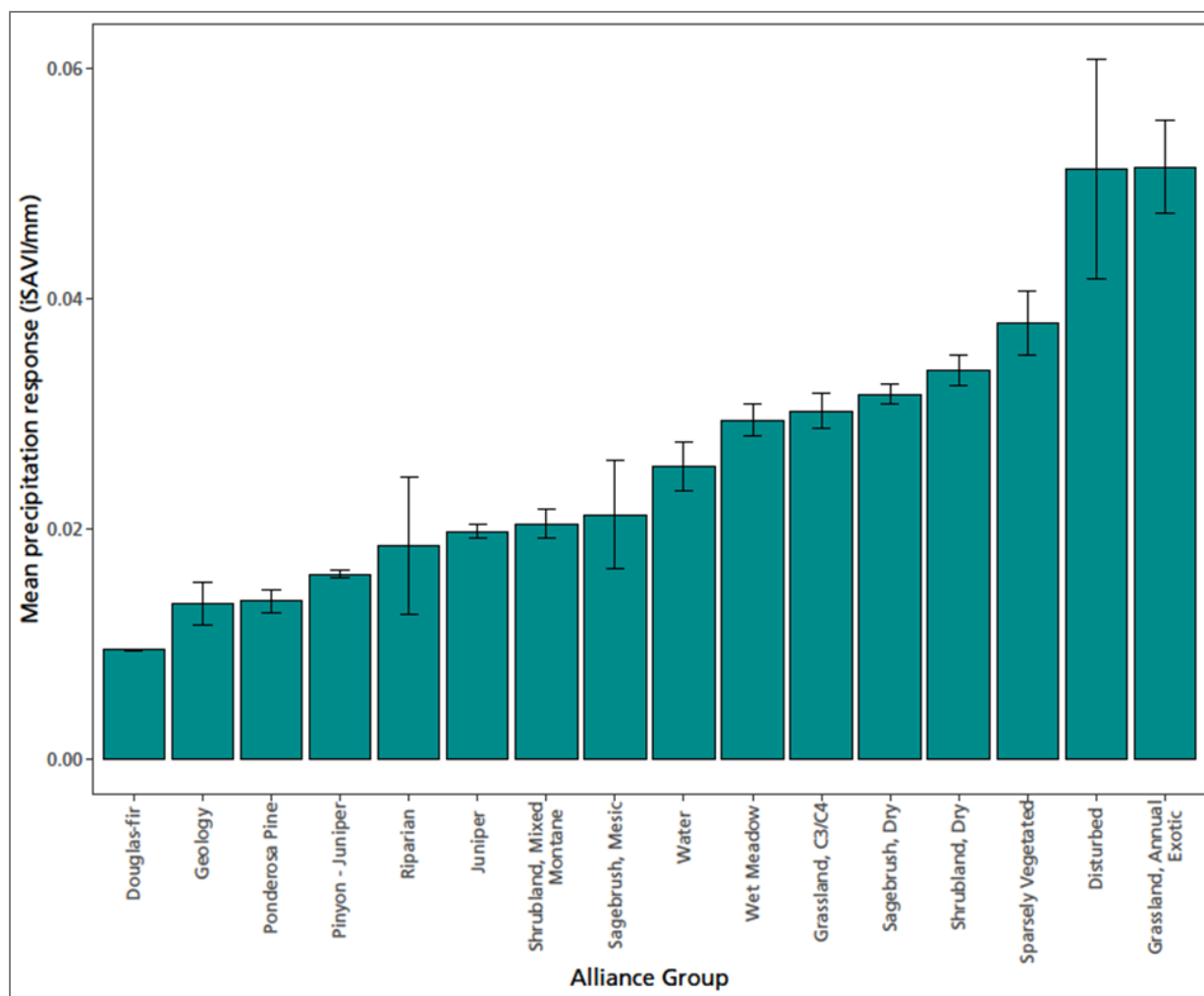


Figure 61. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to precipitation, where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

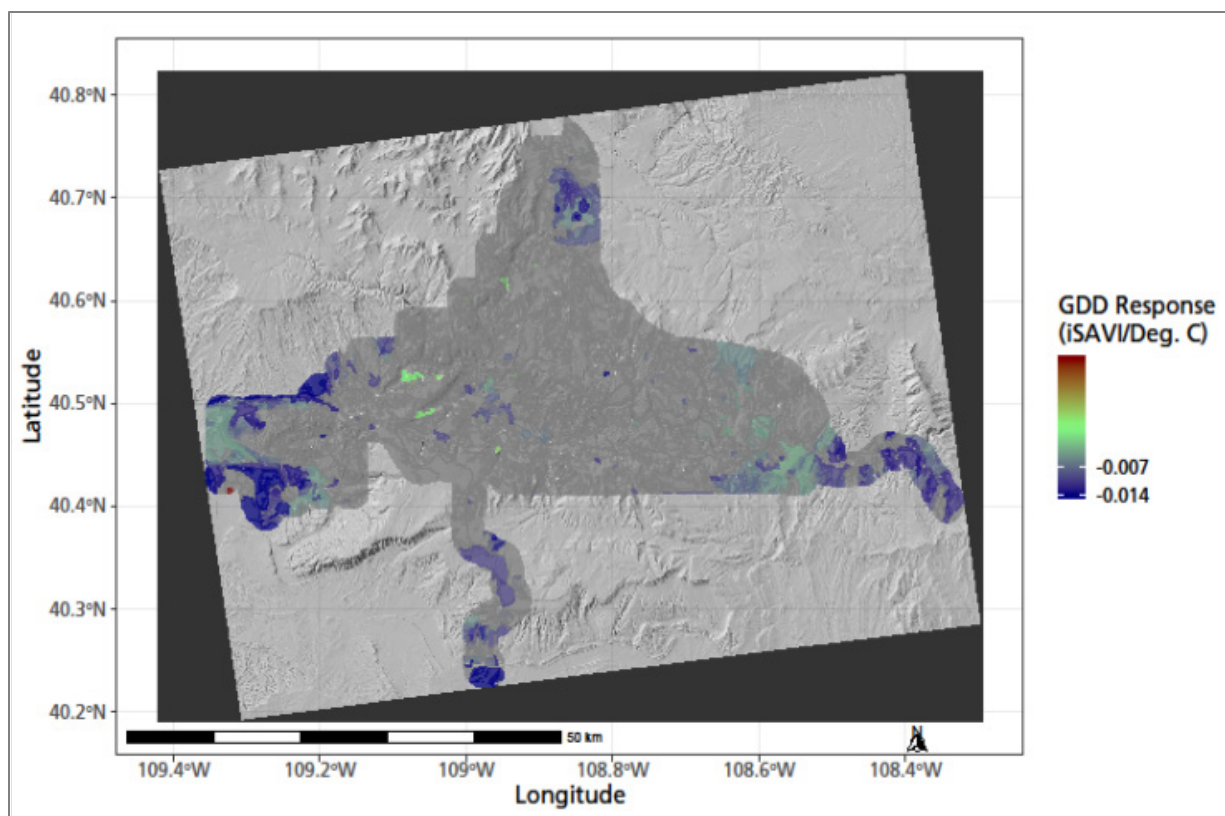


Figure 62. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to growing degree days in polygons where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

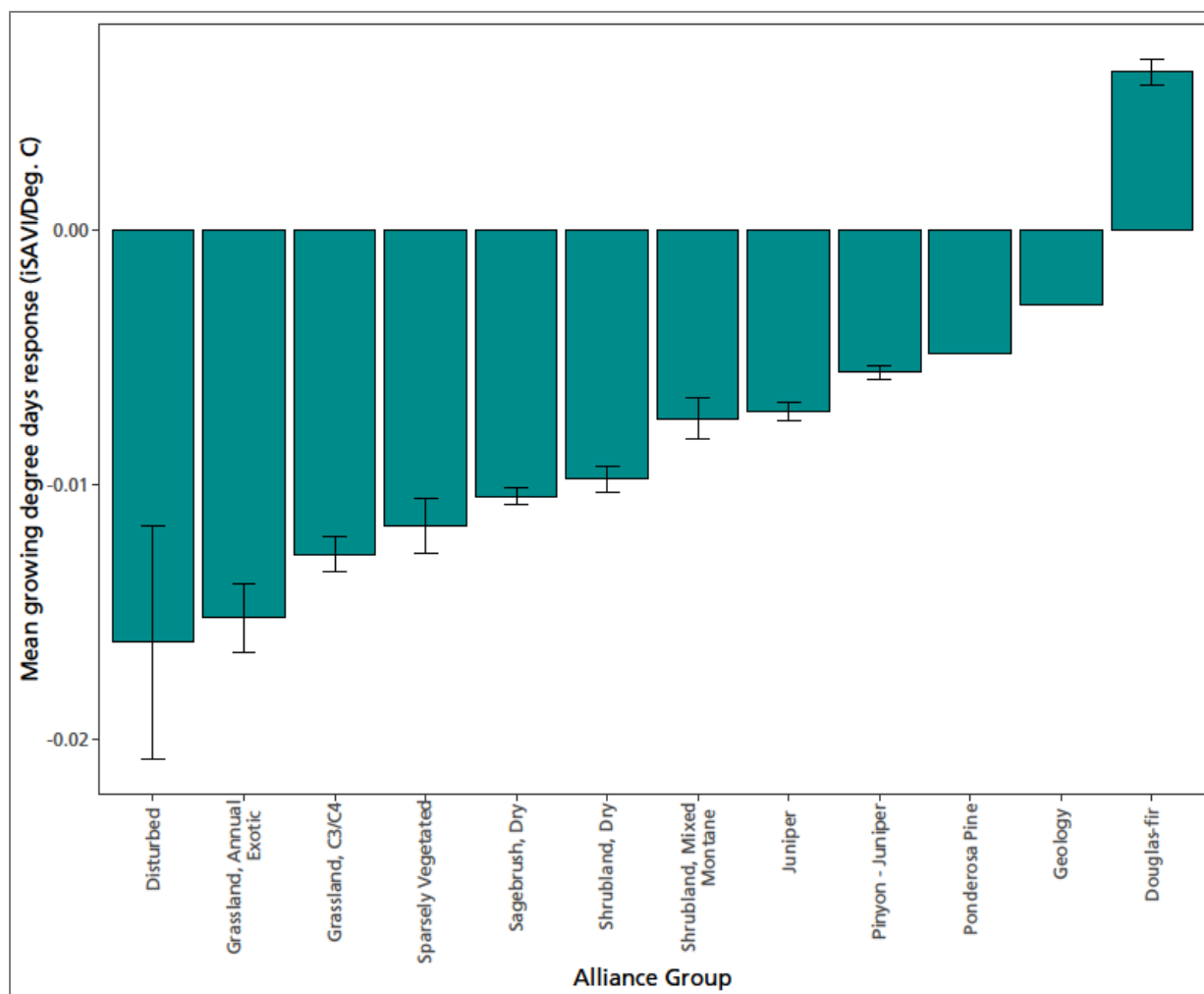


Figure 63. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to growing degree days where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

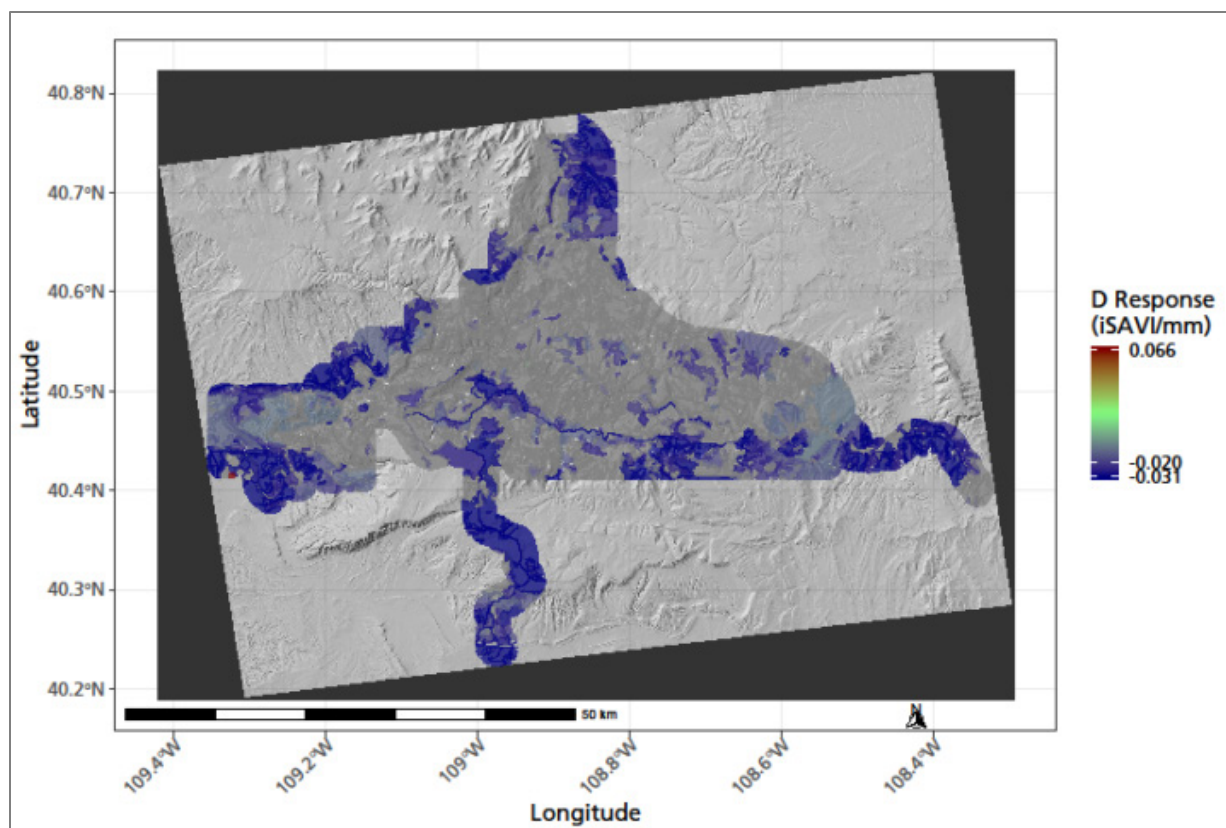


Figure 64. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to water deficit among polygons where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

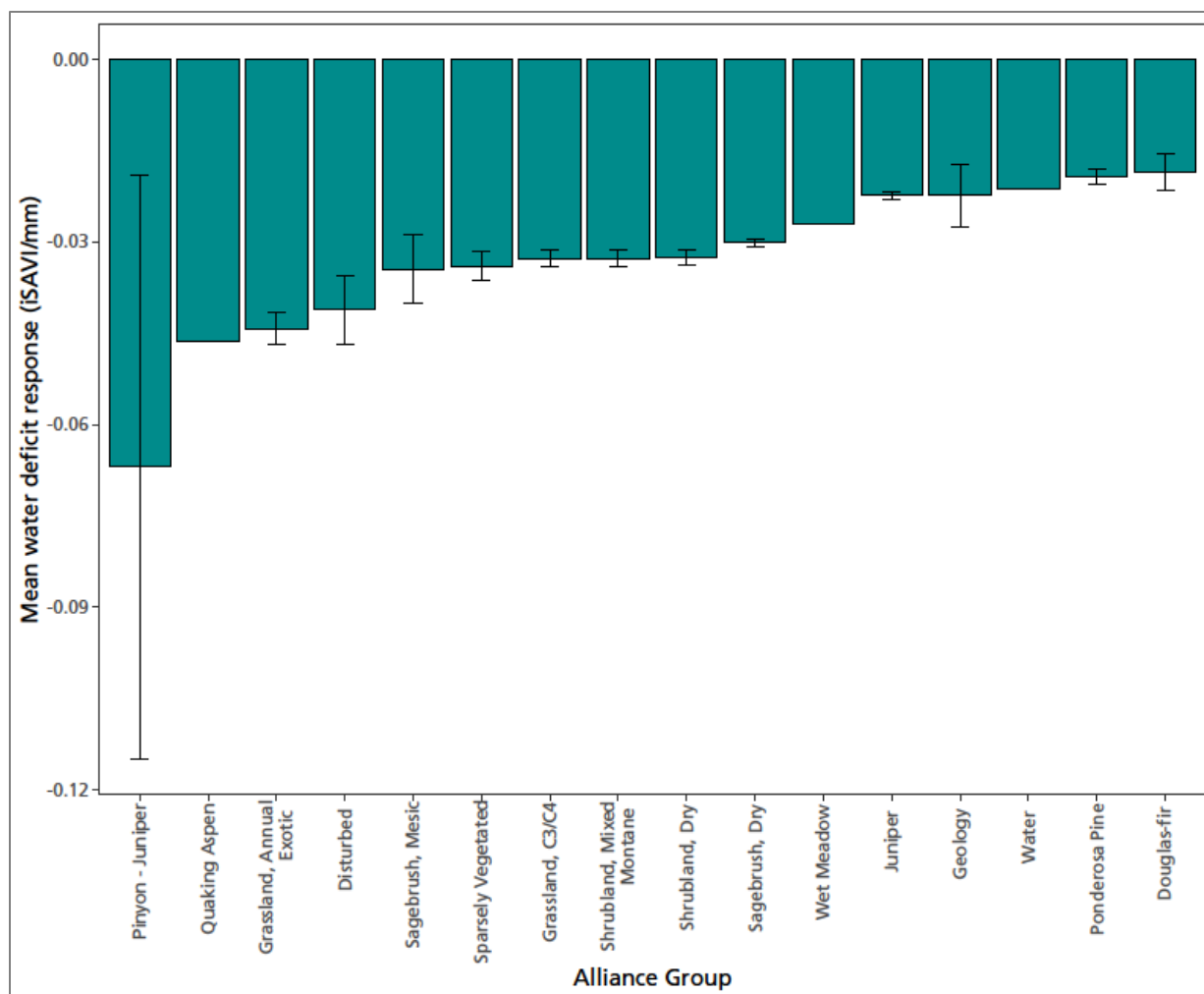


Figure 65. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to deficit, where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

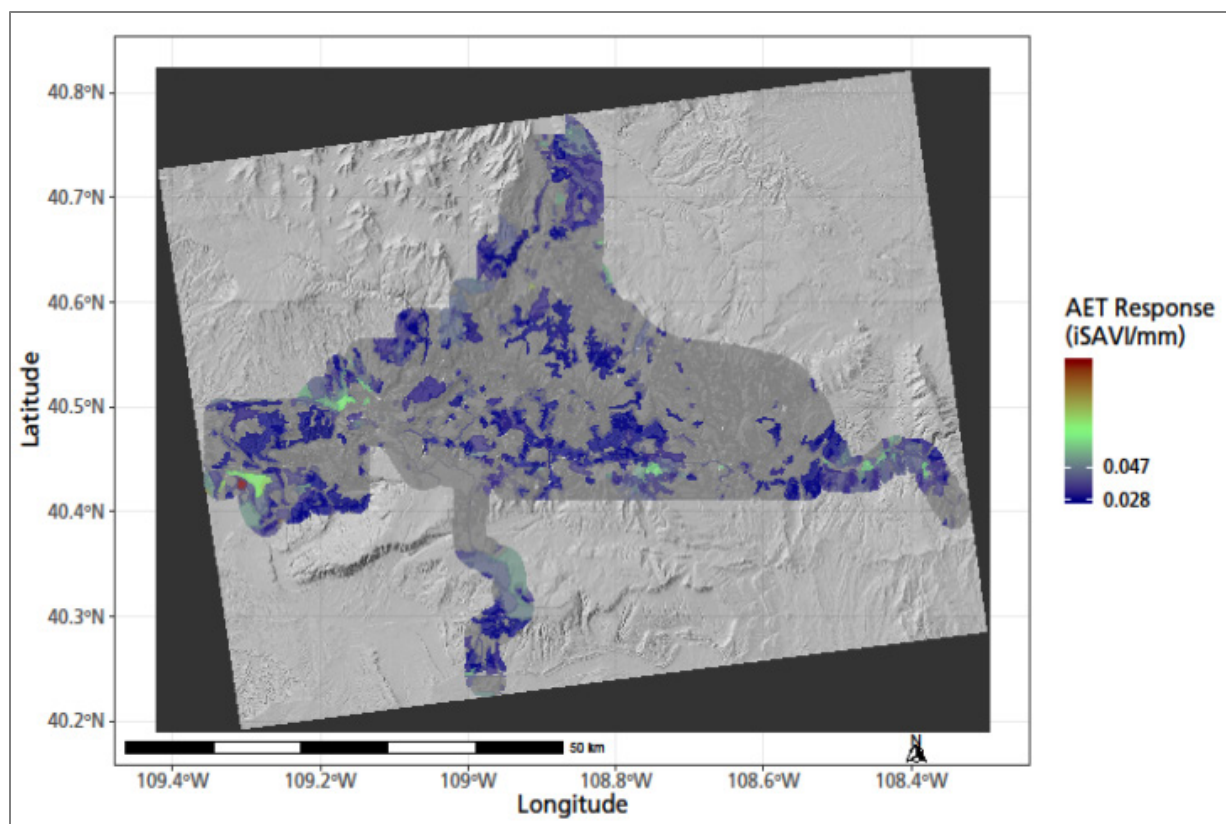


Figure 66. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to actual evapotranspiration among polygons where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

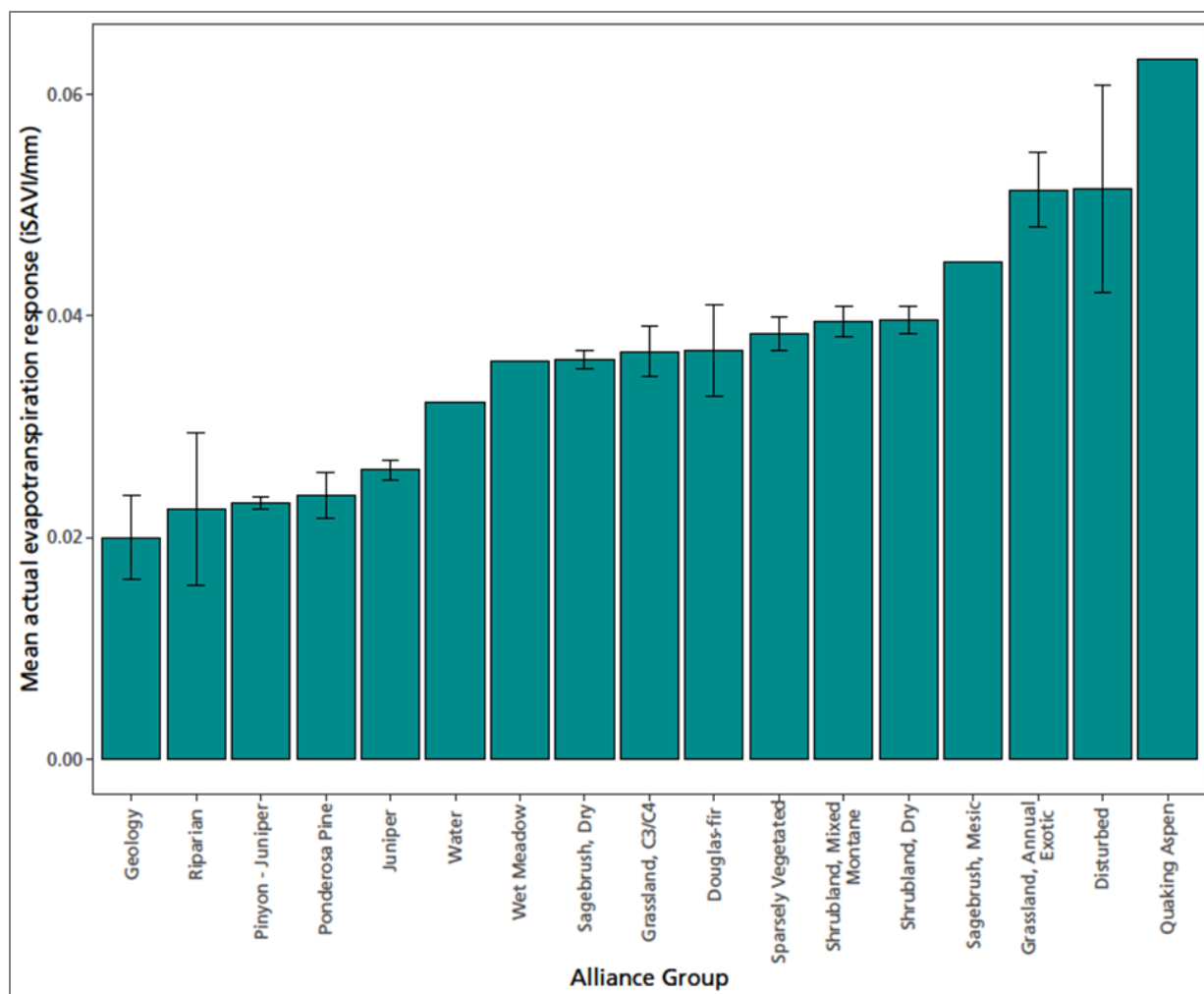


Figure 67. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to actual evapotranspiration, where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

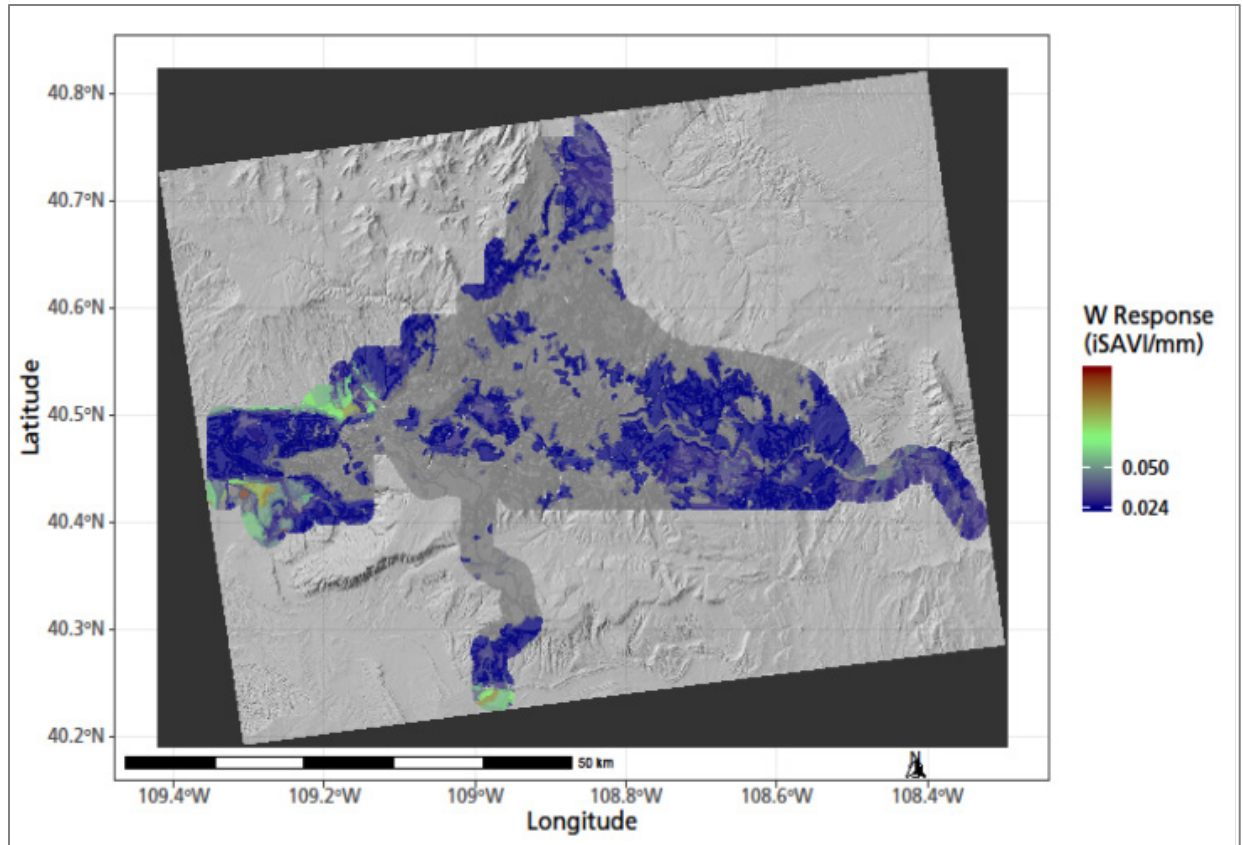


Figure 68. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to water (rain plus snowmelt) among polygons where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

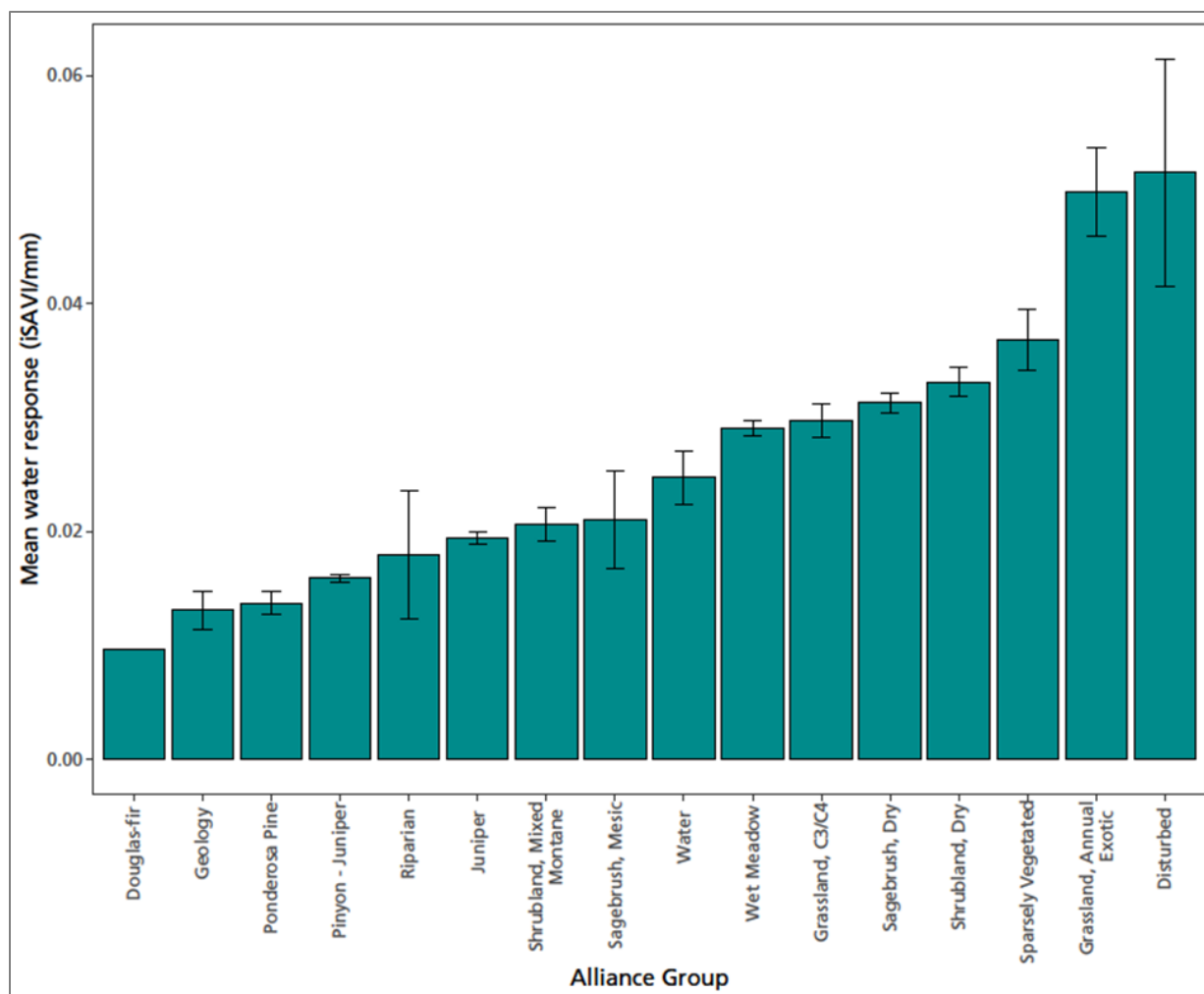


Figure 69. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to water (rain plus snowmelt) among alliance groups where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.

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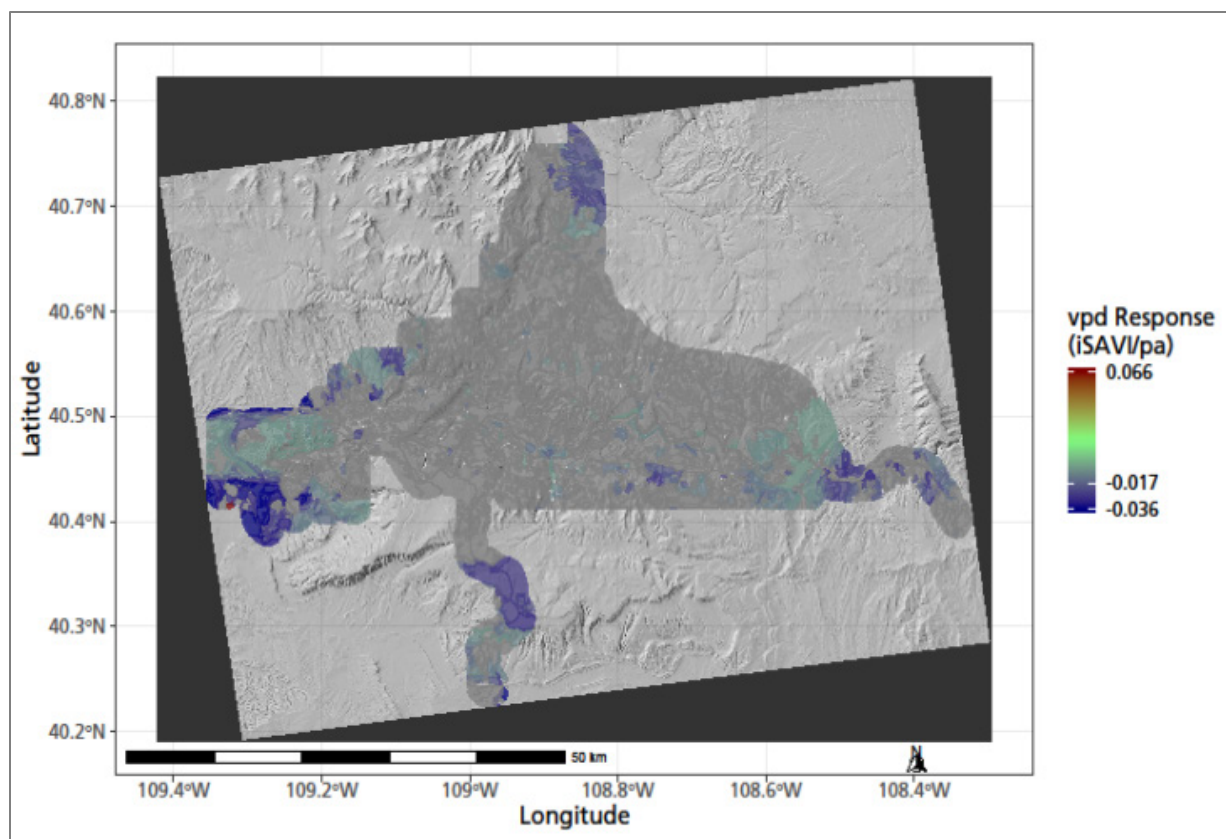


Figure 70. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to vapor pressure deficit among polygons where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

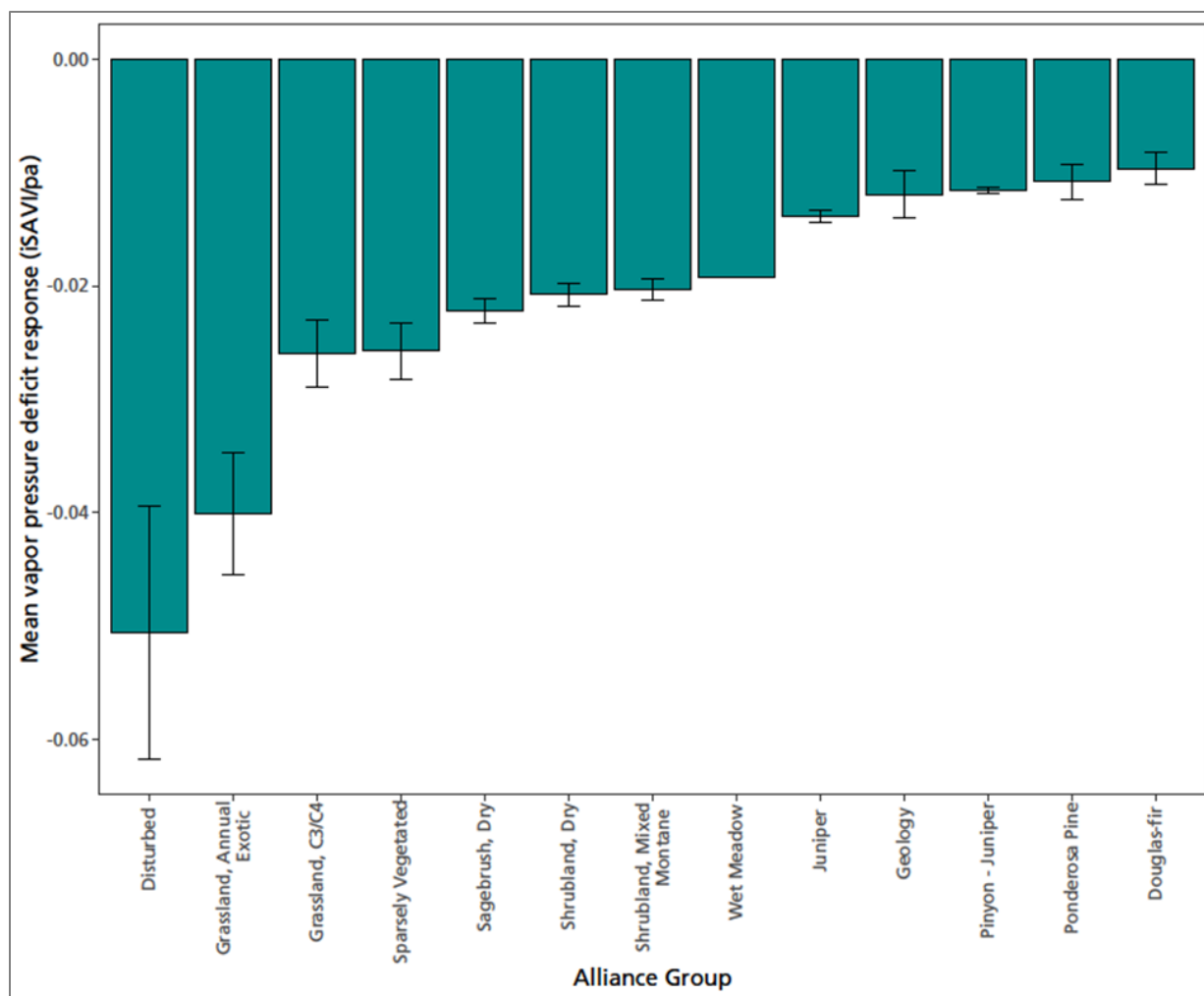


Figure 71. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to vapor pressure deficit where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

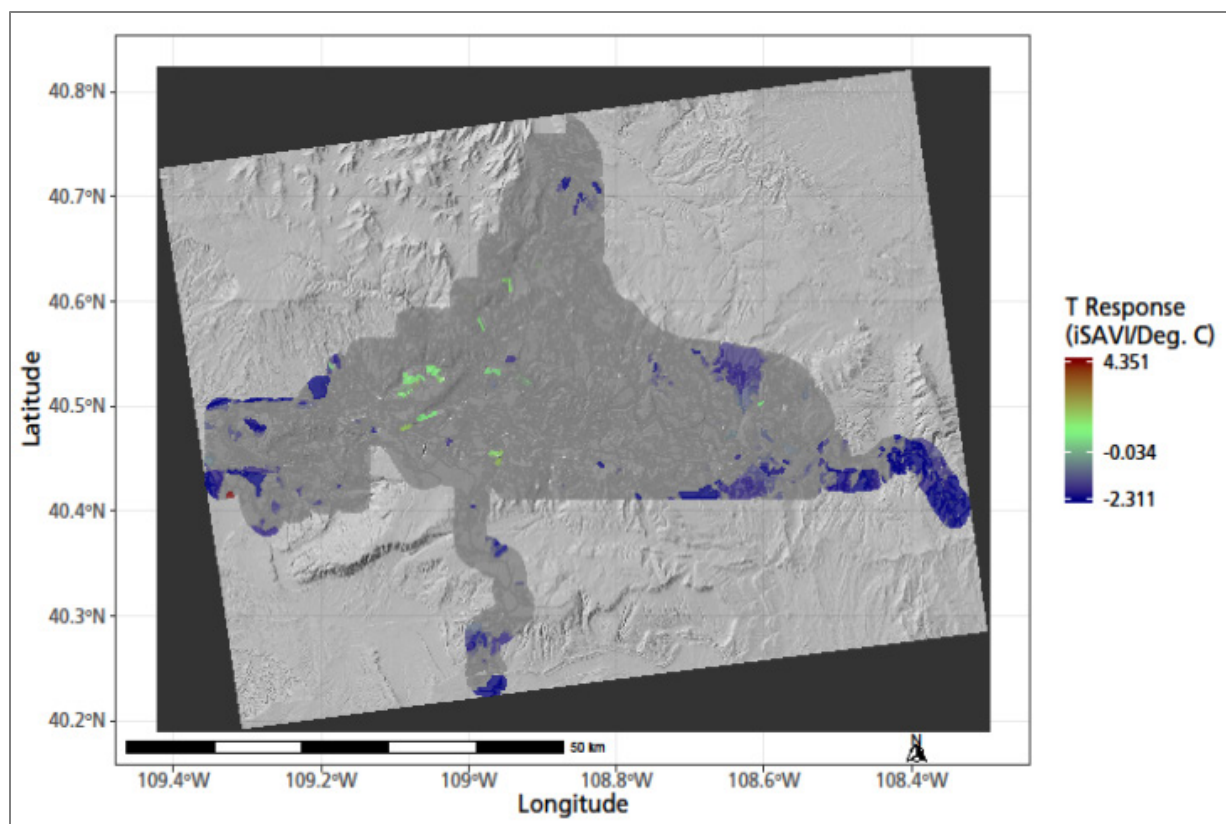


Figure 72. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to temperature among polygons at Dinosaur National Monument where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.
NPS / DAVID THOMA

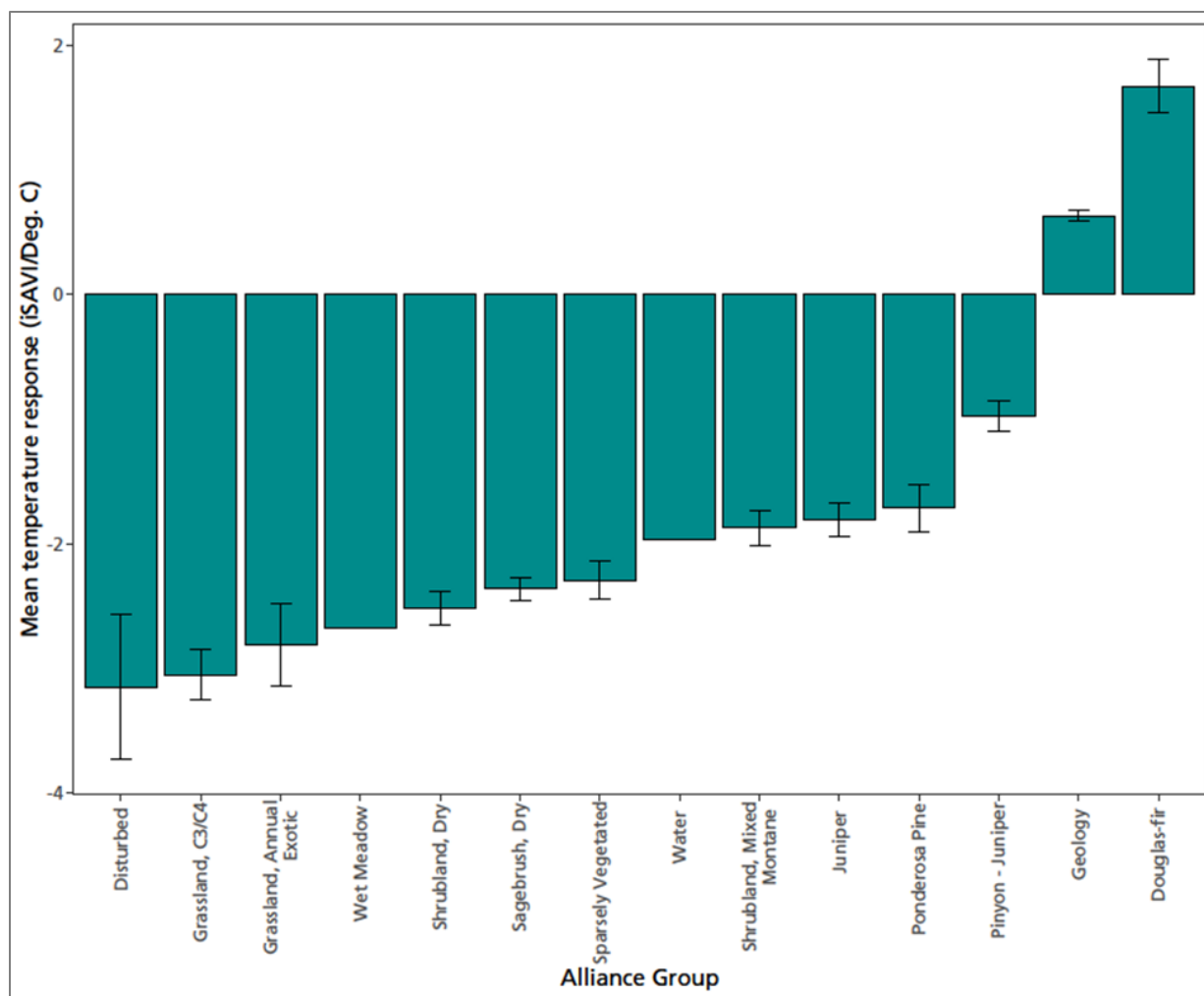


Figure 73. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to temperature among polygons of different alliance groups where the relationship was significant (p-value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

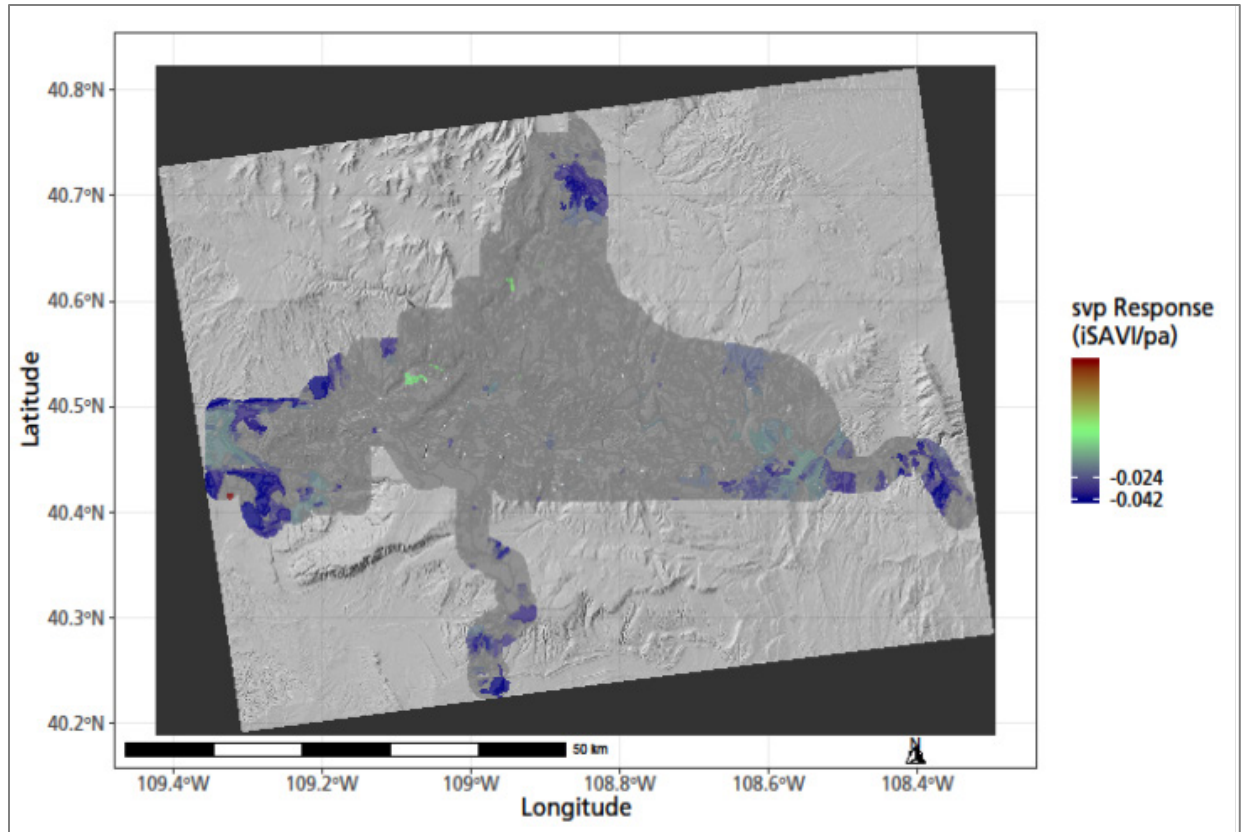


Figure 74. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to saturation vapor pressure among polygons at Dinosaur National Monument where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year. Gray areas indicate locations not analyzed or outside the study area.

NPS / DAVID THOMA

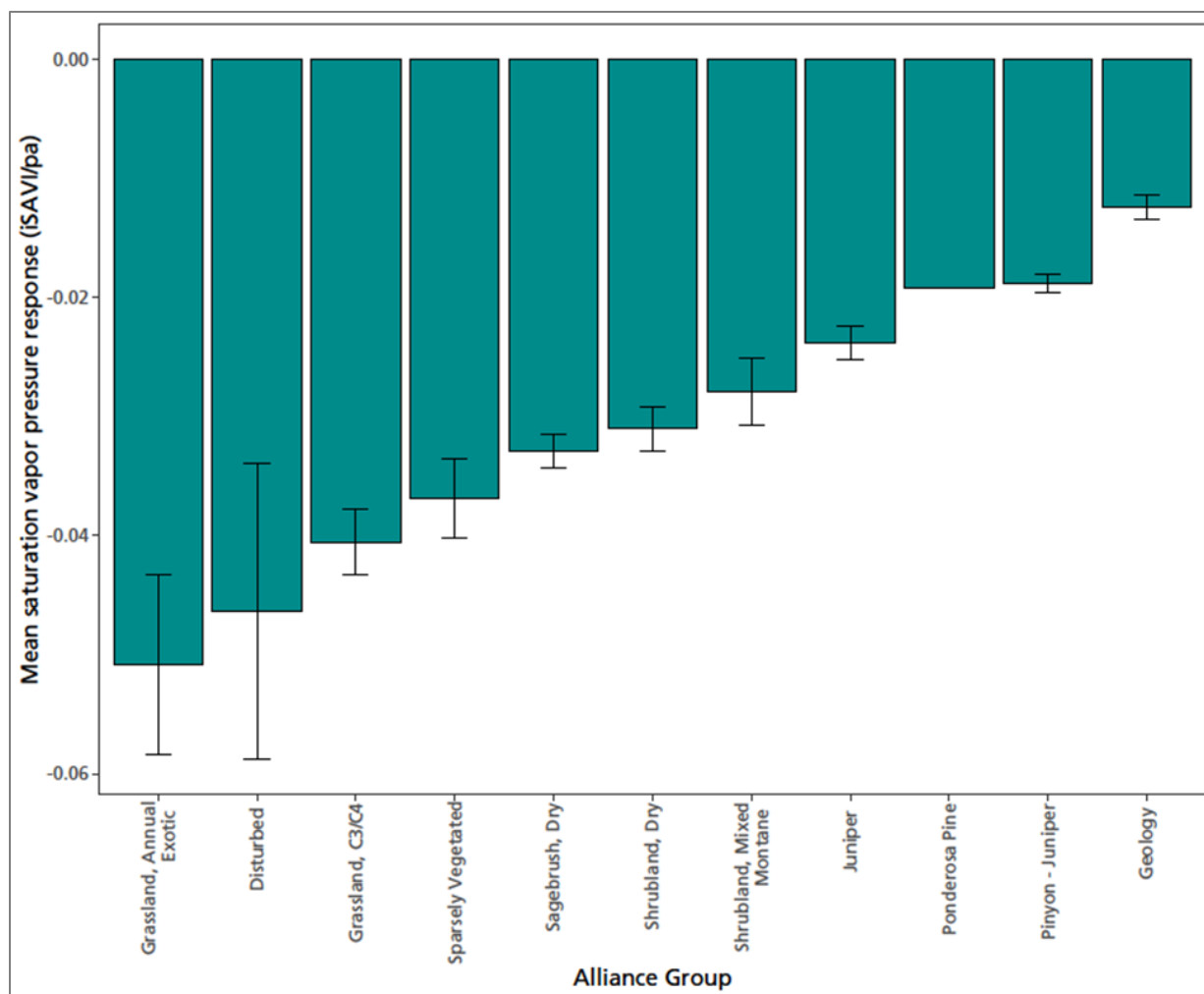


Figure 75. Sensitivity of growing season vegetation production to saturation vapor pressure among polygons where the relationship was significant (p -value < 0.05). Climate data summarized by water year.
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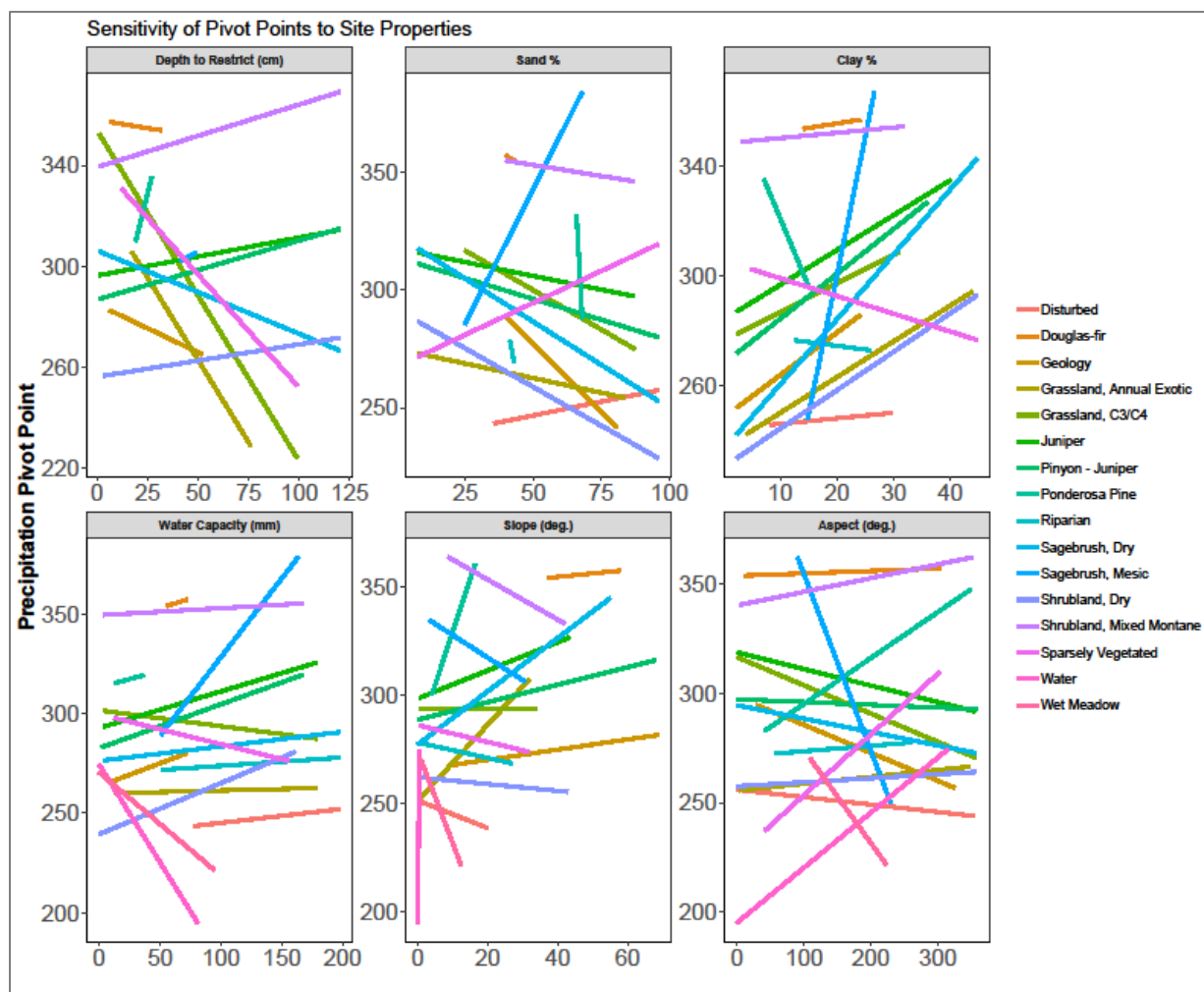


Figure 76. Variation in precipitation pivot points as related to soil and site characteristics at Dinosaur National Monument. Steeper slopes in the graphs indicate greater sensitivity of pivot points to site properties. These site properties are important modifiers of climate because they influence water retention and distribution in the soil profile and, in the case of slope and aspect, because they affect the heat load on vegetation.

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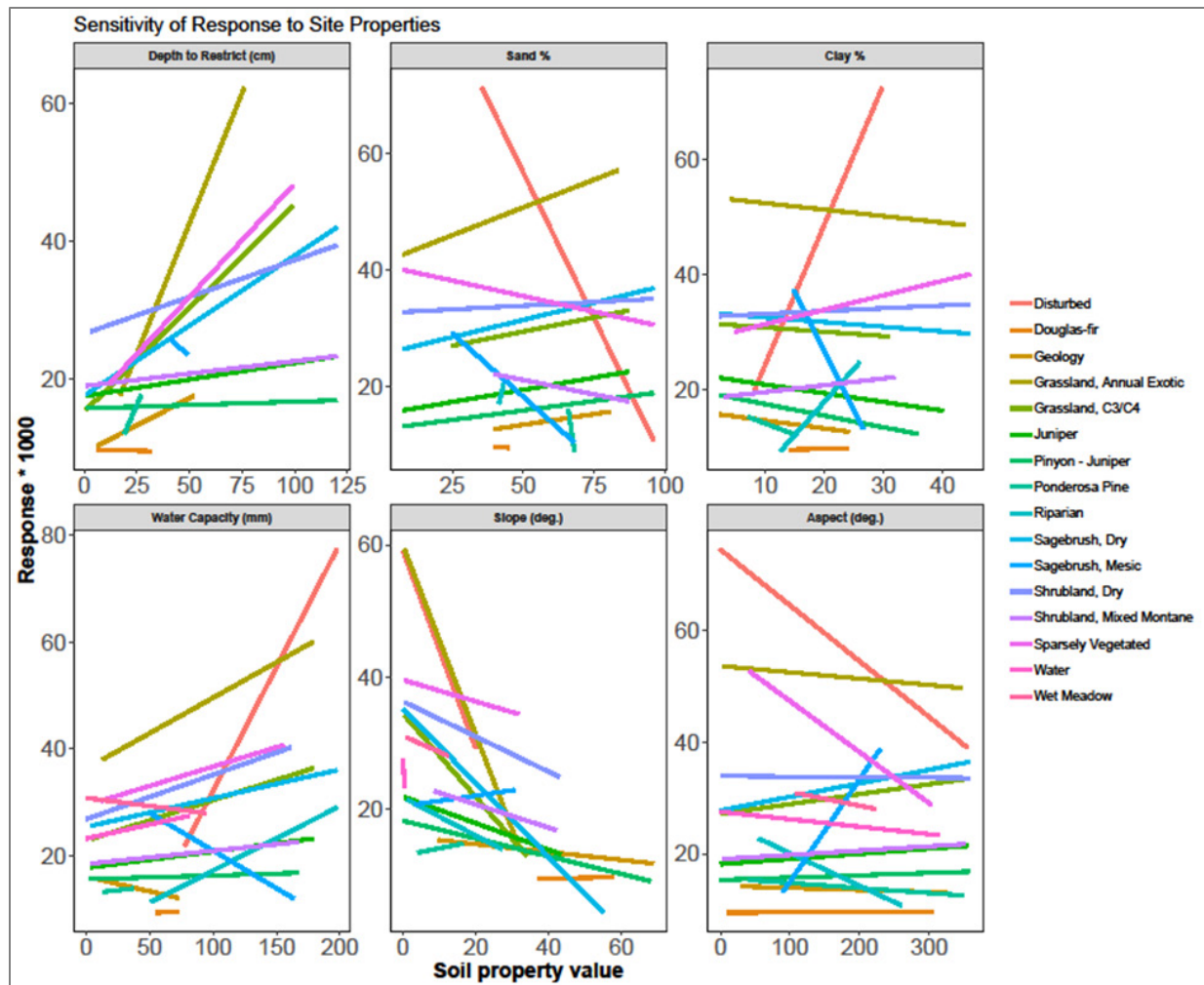


Figure 77. Variation in responses to precipitation as related to soil and site characteristics at Dinosaur National Monument. Steeper slopes indicate greater sensitivity of responses to site properties. These site properties are important modifiers of climate because they influence water retention and distribution in the soil profile and, in the case of site slope and aspect, because they affect the heat load on vegetation.

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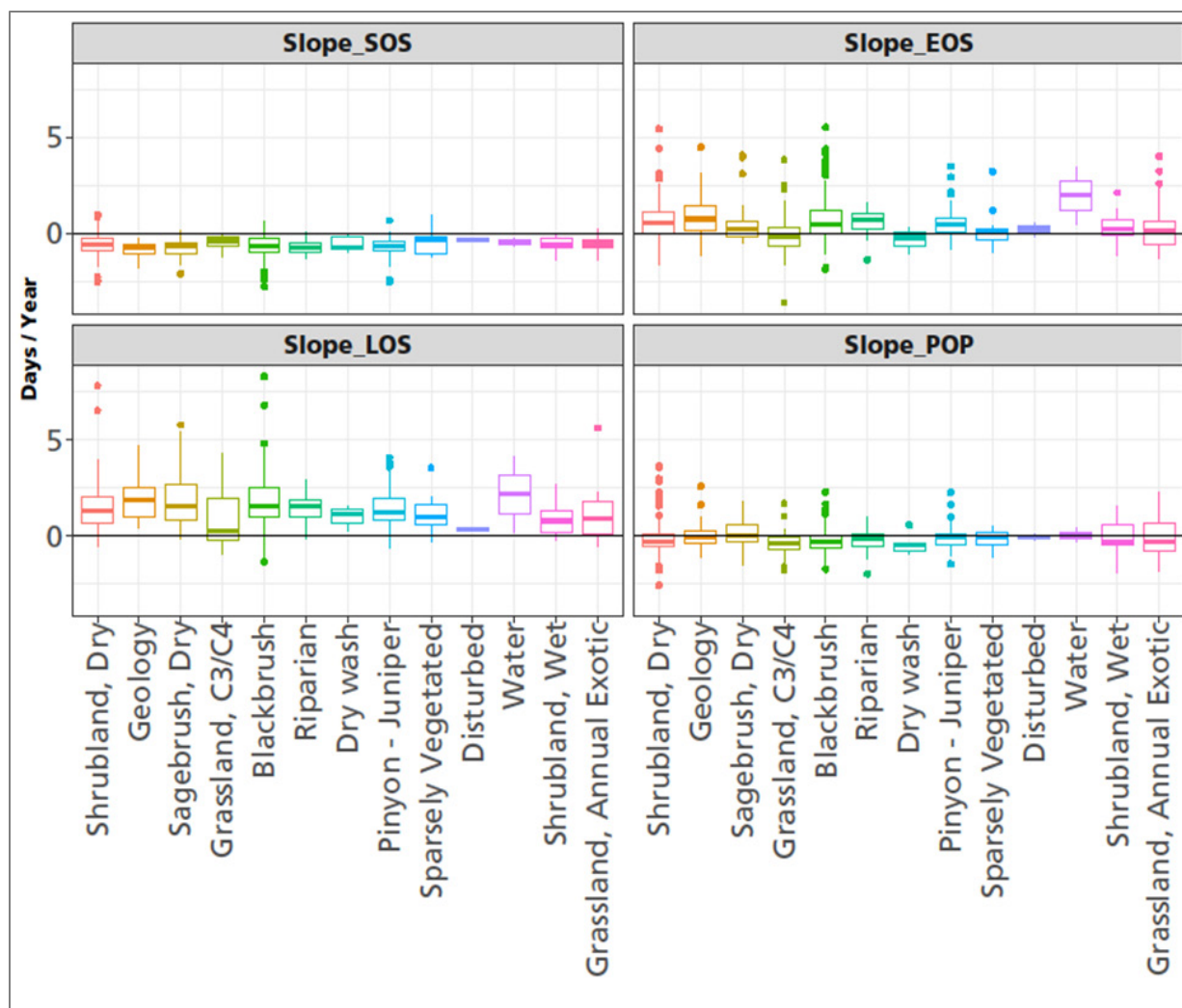


Figure 78. Direction and magnitude of annual change rates in land surface phenology metrics for alliance groups in Dinosaur National Monument, expressed as $\pm$ days per year. Each panel shows a phenology metric (start of season, end of season, length of season, or timing of peak SAVI), with box plots representing trends for different alliance groups. Trends were calculated using linear regression from 2000 to 2019.

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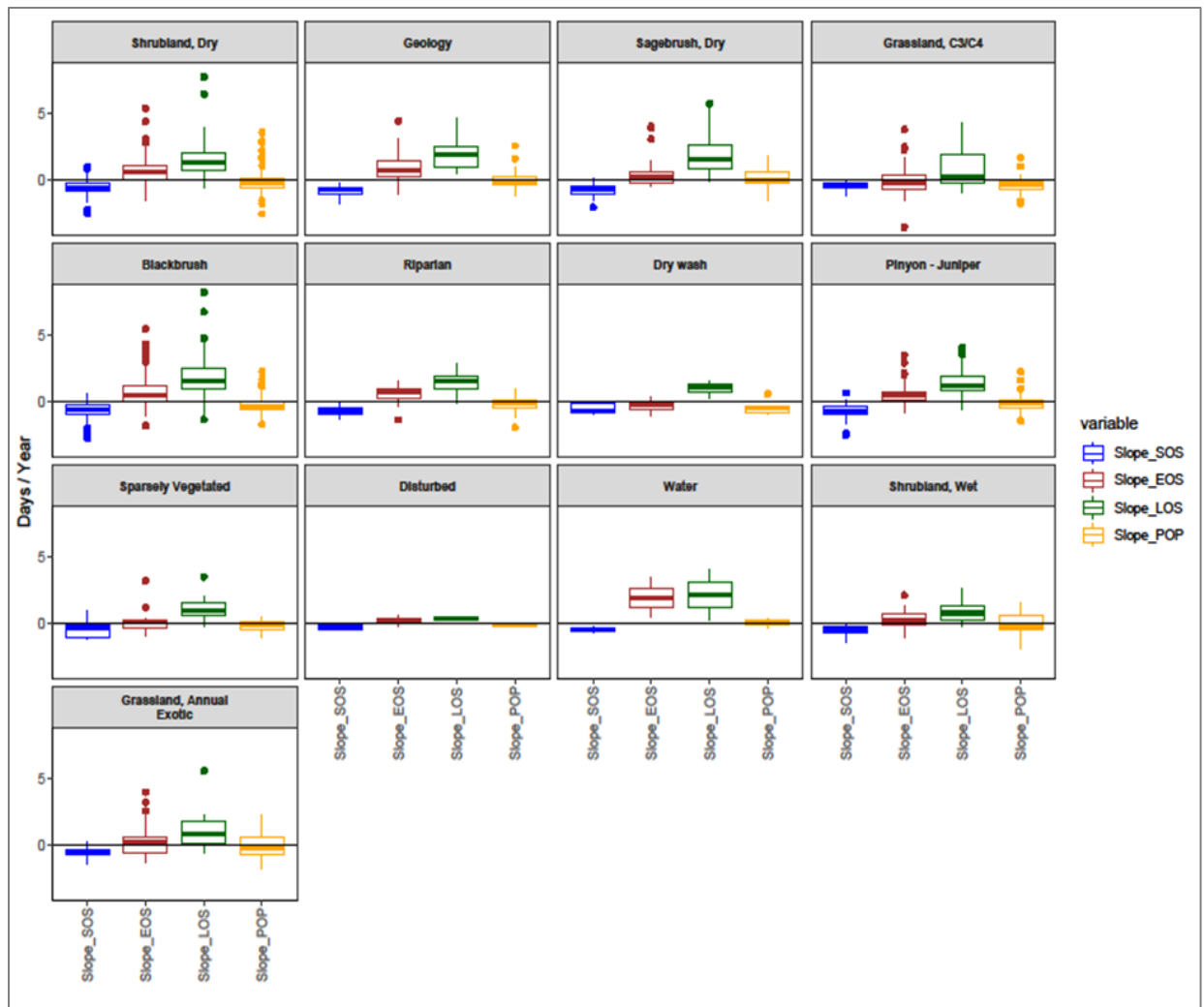


Figure 79. Direction and magnitude of annual change rates in land surface phenology metrics for alliance groups in Dinosaur National Monument, expressed as $\pm$ days per year. Each panel shows results for a different alliance group, with box plots representing trends for start of season, end of season, length of season, and timing of peak SAVI. Trends were calculated using linear regression from 2000 to 2019.

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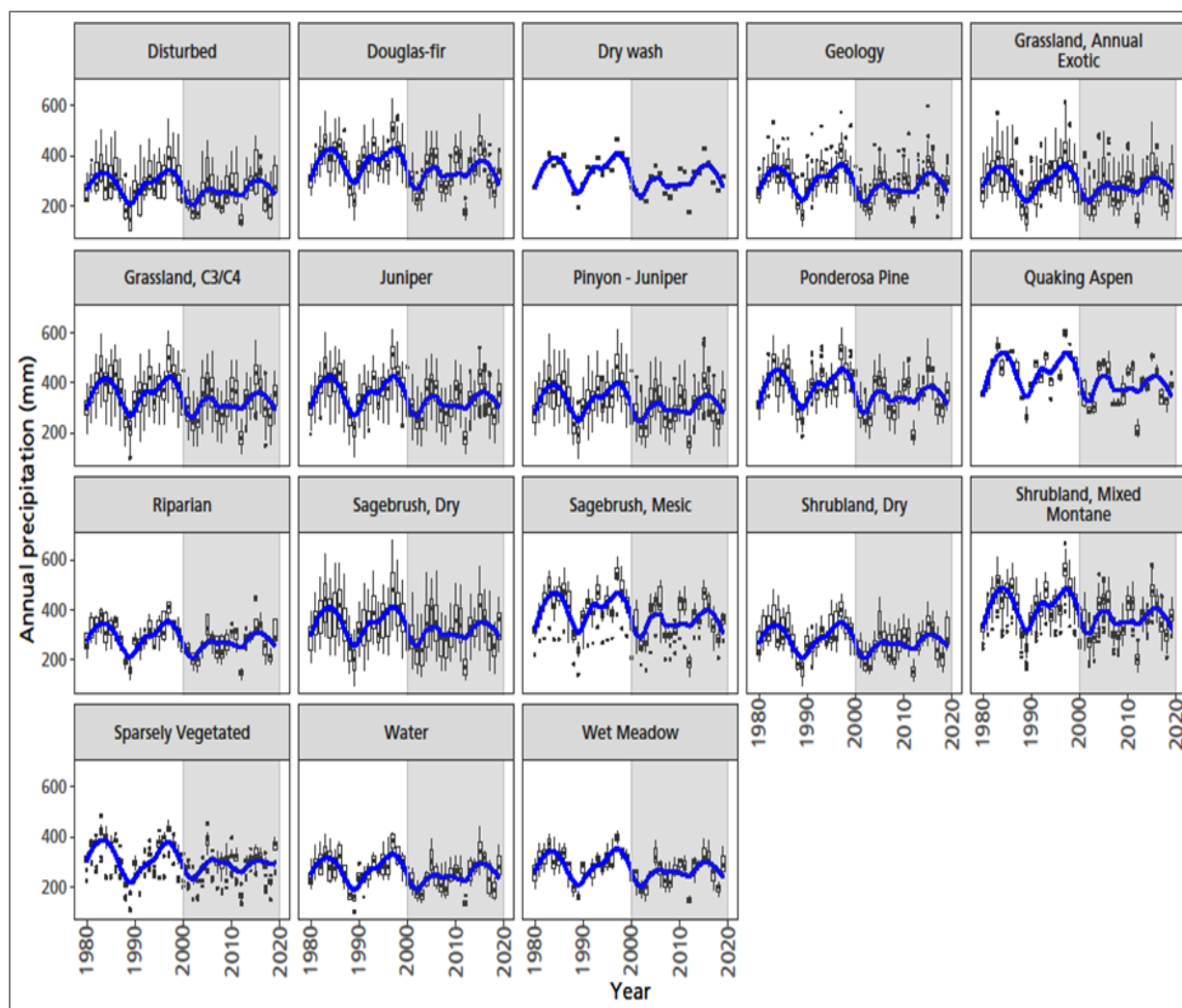


Figure 80. Cumulative annual precipitation over time (1980 to 2019) in vegetation alliance groups. Box plots demonstrate the range of variation within alliance groups by year. The blue line is a loess smooth with a 25 percent span to illustrate multi-year patterns. Gray shaded area includes the period investigated for relationships between production and climate when satellite imagery and climate data were both available.

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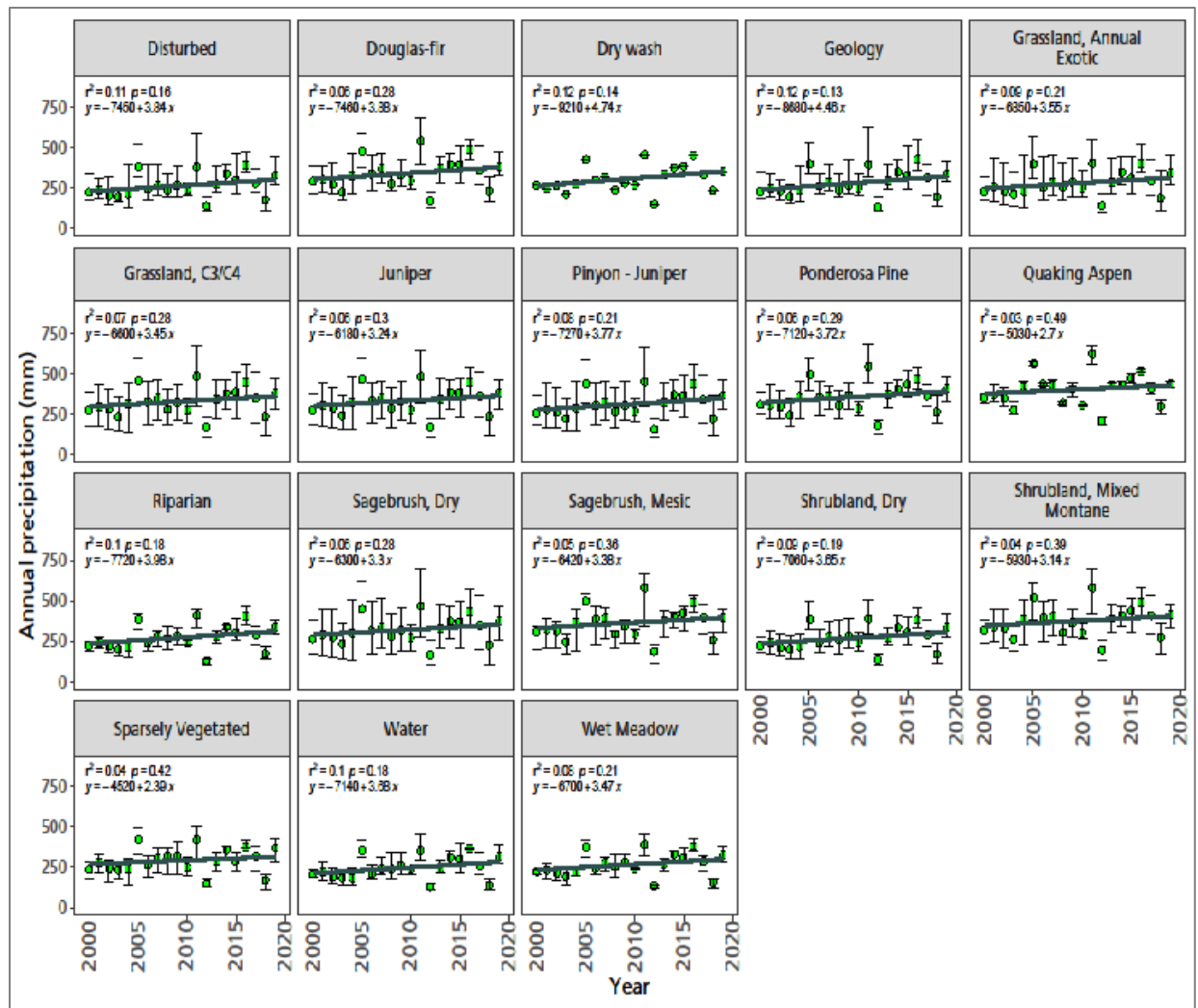


Figure 81. Cumulative annual precipitation from 2000 to 2019 across vegetation alliance groups. Each panel shows a linear trend line with standard error bars. These trends correspond to the gray shaded time period in the preceding figure.

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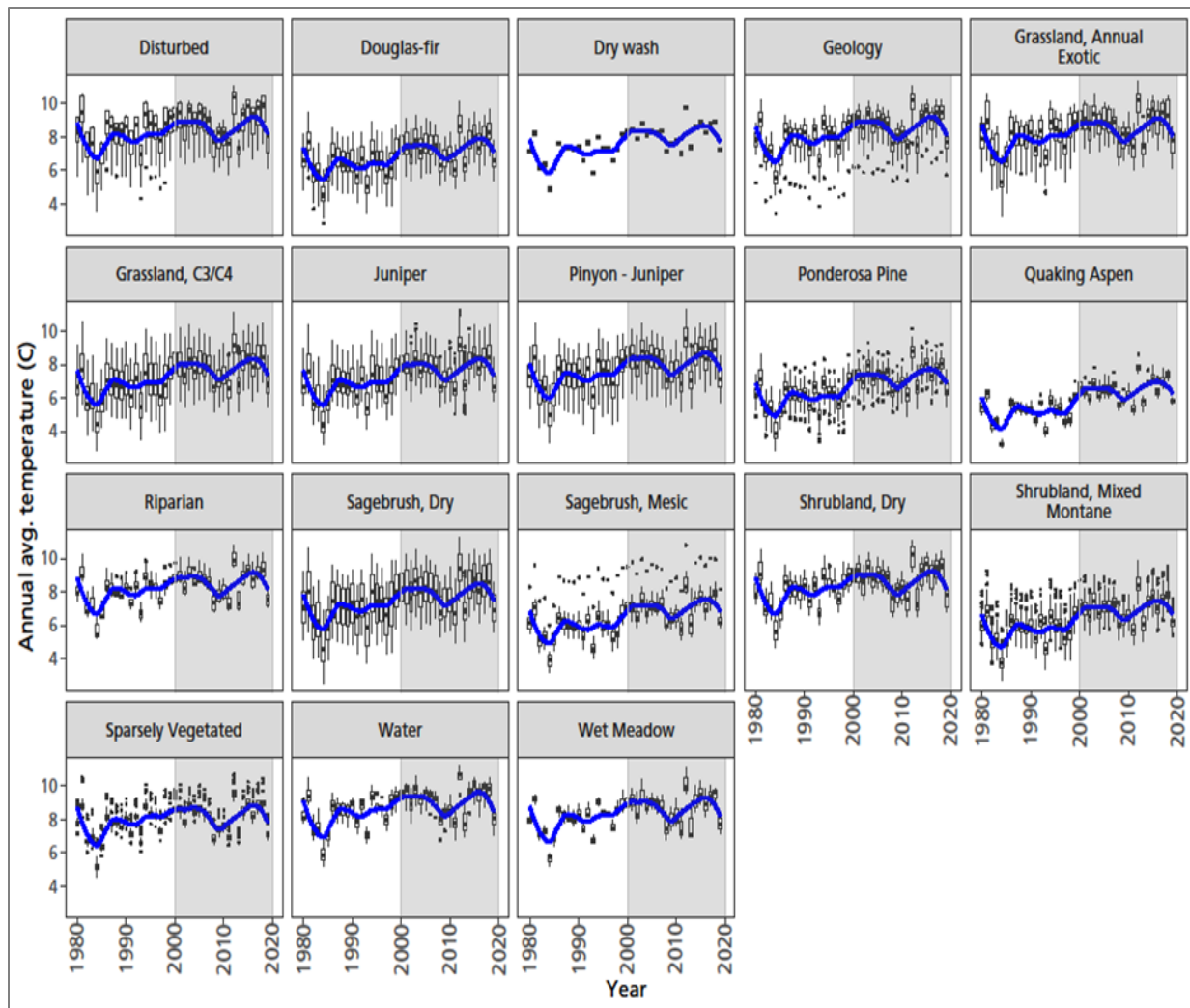


Figure 82. Annual average temperature over time (1980 to 2019) in vegetation alliance groups. Box plots demonstrate the range of variation within alliance groups by year. The blue line is a loess smooth with a 25 percent span to illustrate multi-year patterns. Gray shaded area includes the period investigated for relationships between production and climate when satellite imagery and climate data were both available.

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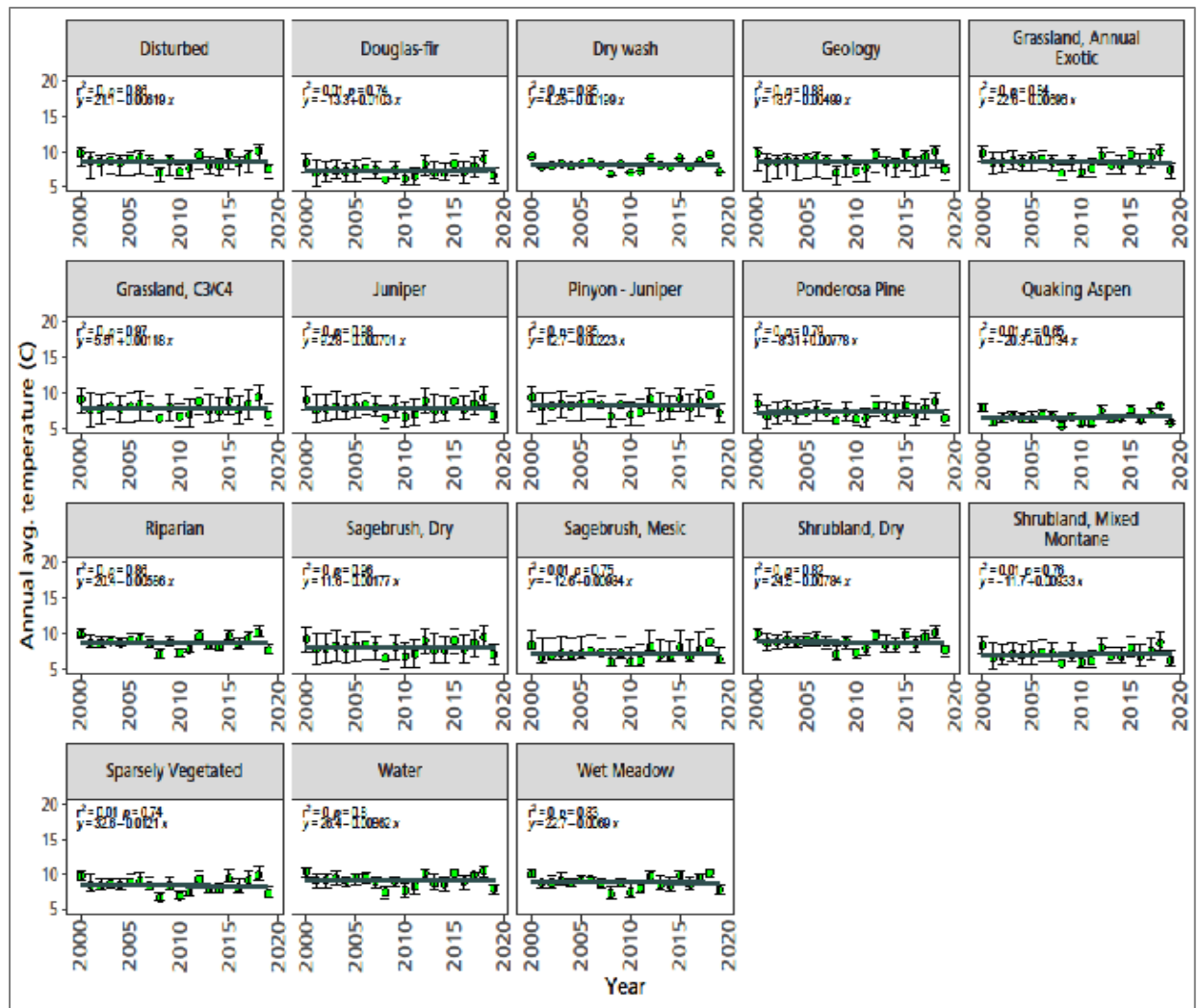


Figure 83. Annual average temperature over time (2000 to 2019) in vegetation alliance groups. The trend over time is shown for the period in gray in the previous figure. Error bars are standard error.

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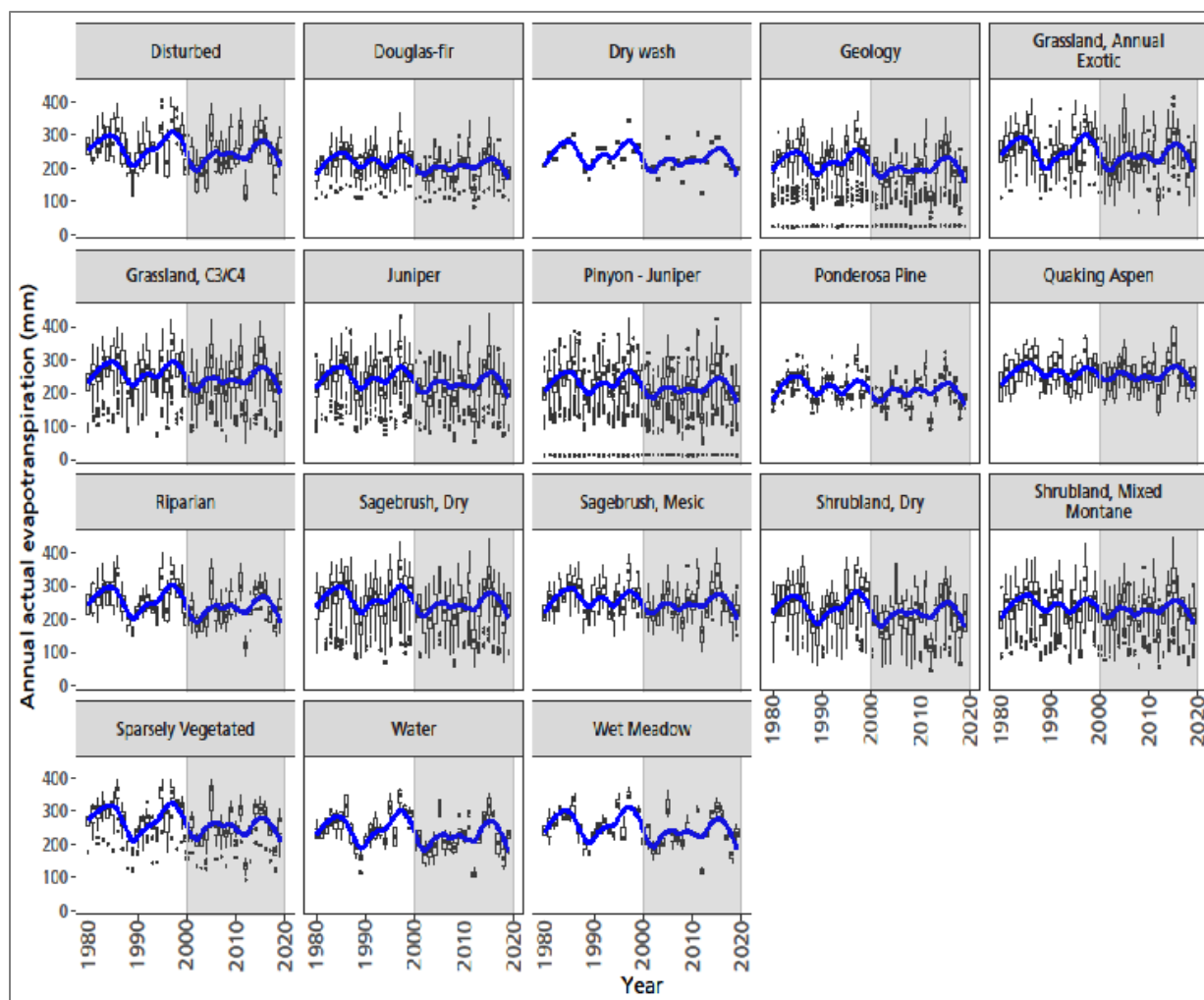


Figure 84. Cumulative annual actual evapotranspiration over time (1980 to 2019) in vegetation alliance groups. Box plots demonstrate the range of variation within alliance groups by year. The blue line is a loess smooth with a 25 percent span to illustrate multi-year patterns. Gray shaded area includes the period investigated for relationships between production and climate when satellite imagery and climate data were both available.

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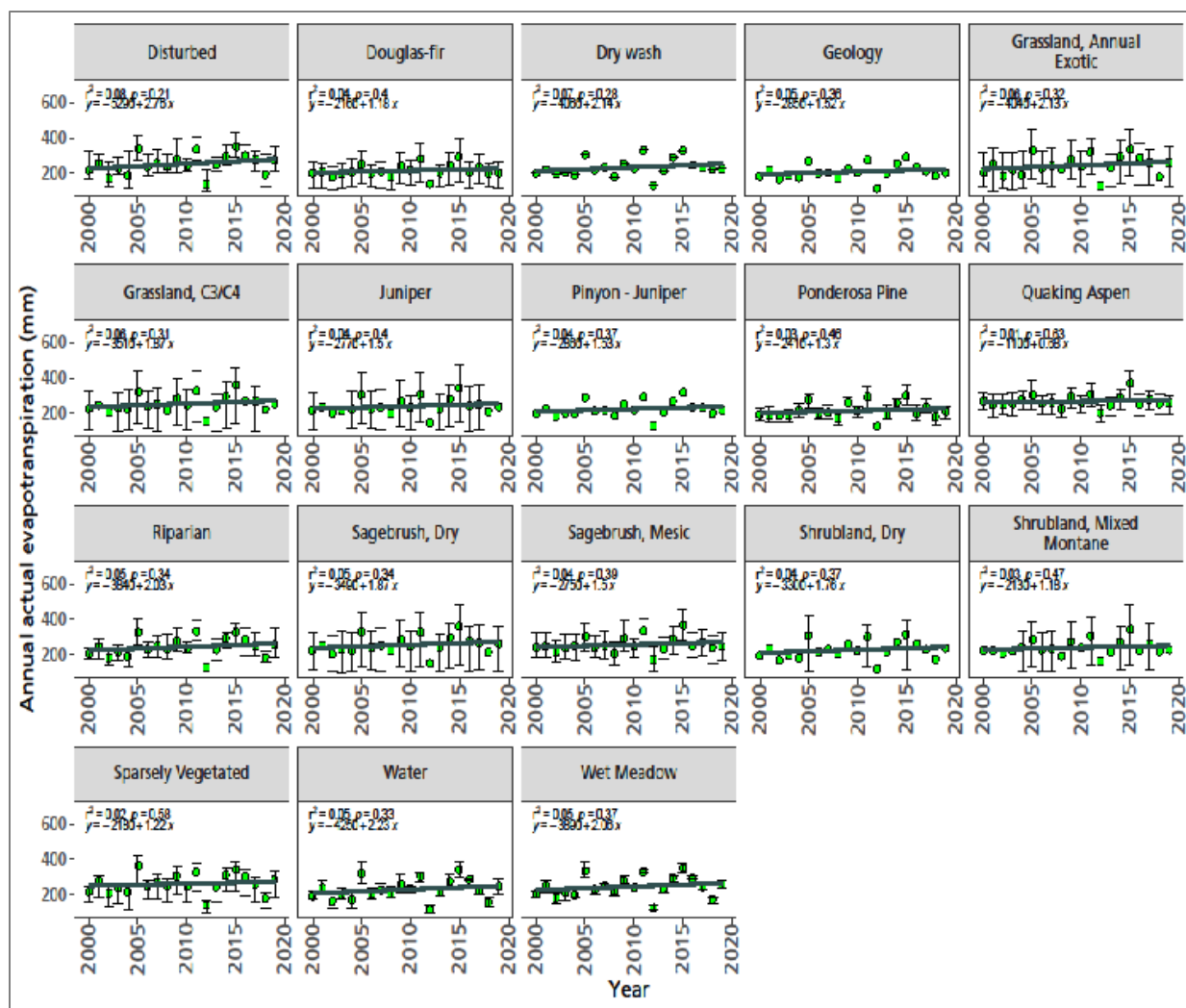


Figure 85. Cumulative annual actual evapotranspiration over time (2000 to 2019) in vegetation alliance groups. The trend over time is shown for the period in gray in the previous figure. Error bars are standard error.

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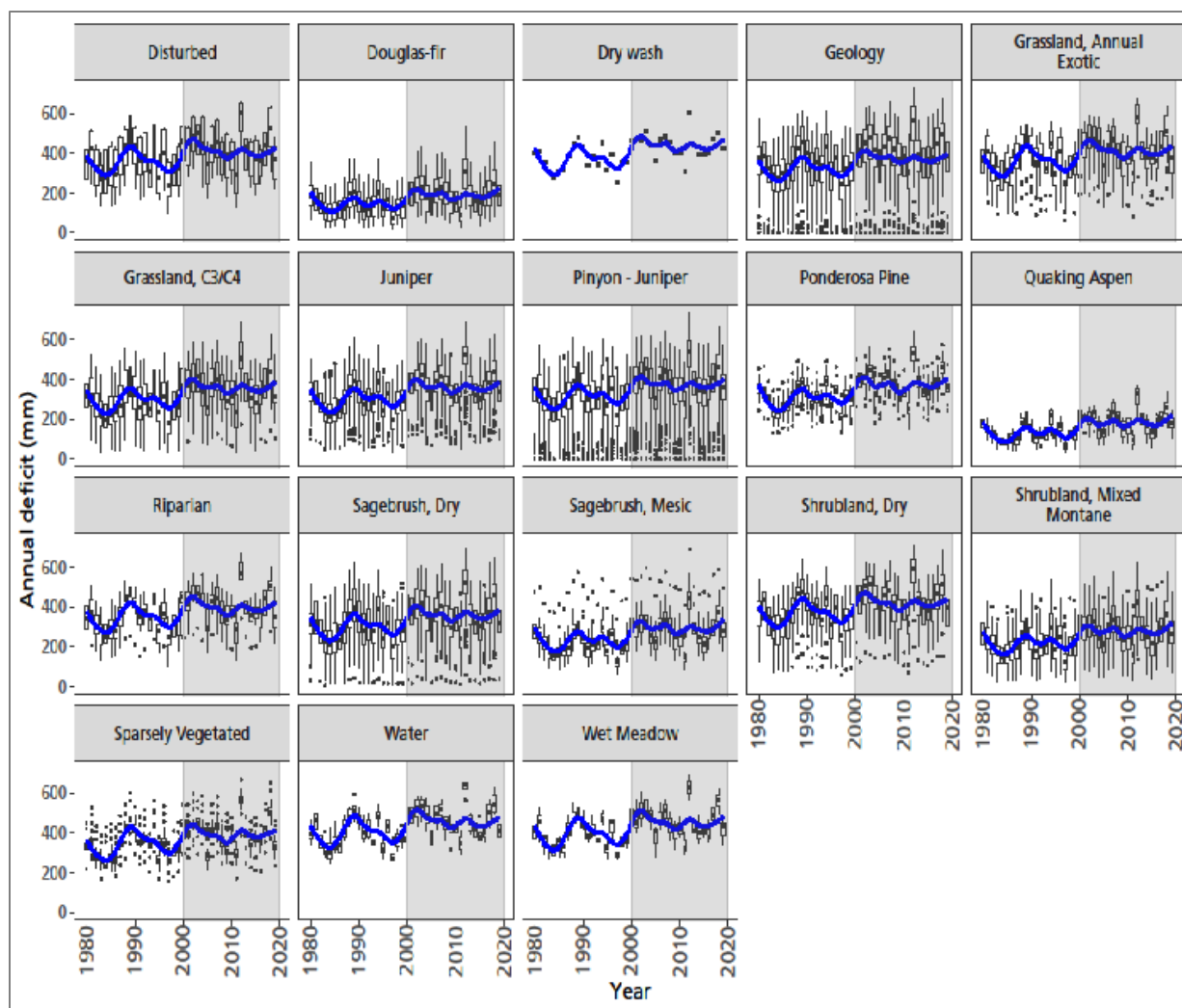


Figure 86. Cumulative annual water deficit over time (1980 to 2019) in vegetation alliance groups. Box plots demonstrate the range of variation within alliance groups by year. The blue line is a loess smooth with a 25 percent span to illustrate multi-year patterns. Gray shaded area includes the period investigated for relationships between production and climate when satellite imagery and climate data were both available.

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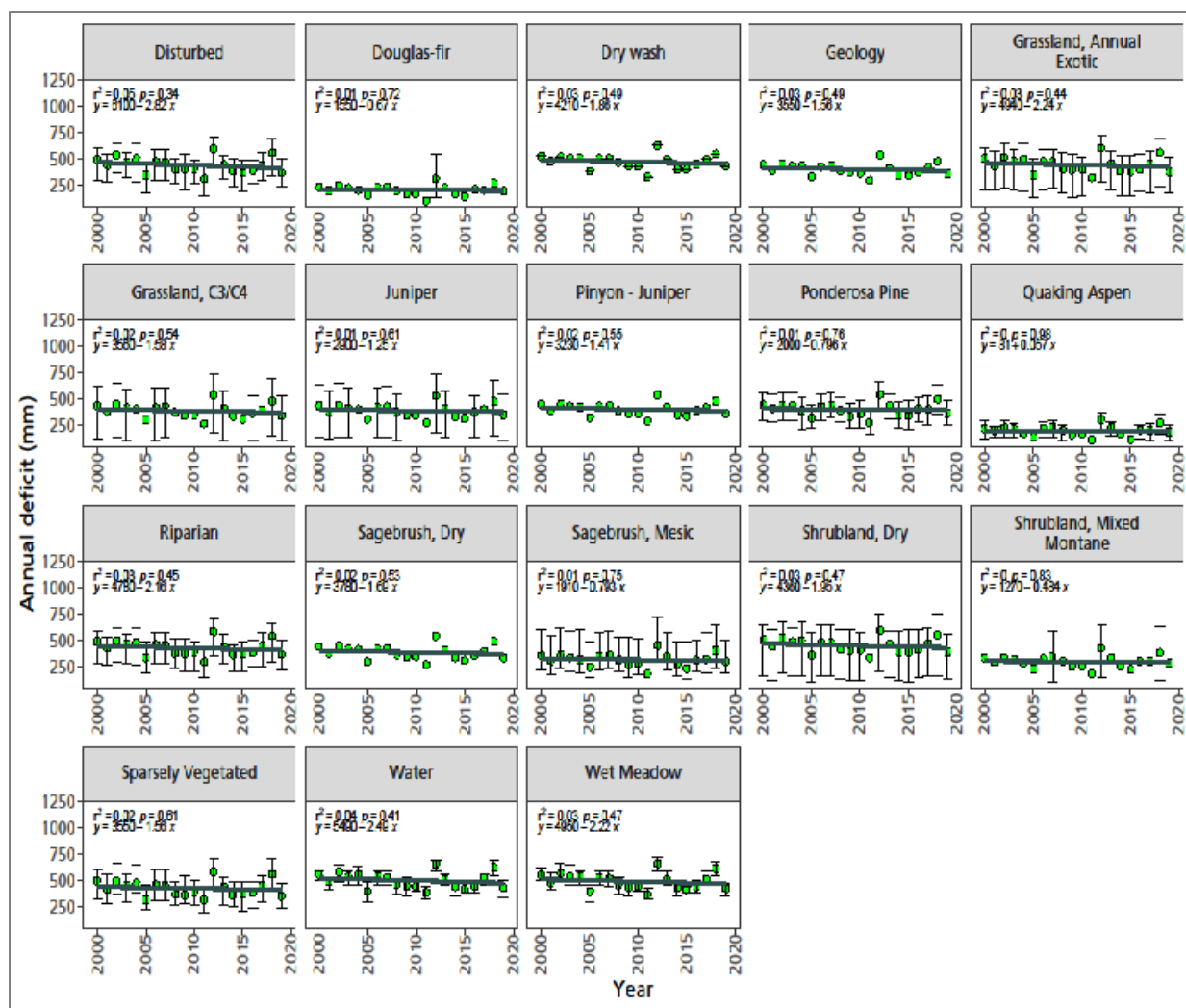


Figure 87. Cumulative annual water deficit over time (2000 to 2019) in vegetation alliance groups. The trend over time is shown for the period in gray in the previous figure. Error bars are standard error.

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