

Potential Fossil Yield Classification System

Introduction.

The Potential Fossil Yield Classification (PFYC) system allows Bureau of Land Management (BLM) employees to make initial assessments of paleontological resources in order to plan for multiple uses of public lands, consider disposal or acquisition of lands, analyze potential effects of a proposed action under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) or conduct other BLM resource-related activities. The PFYC system can also highlight areas where paleontological research efforts may be warranted or predict illegal collecting. The system provides a consistent approach to land use planning or to determine if a proposed action may affect paleontological resources on public lands.

The PFYC system provides baseline guidance for assessing paleontological resources. The classification should be considered early in an analysis and should be used to assist in determining the need for further assessment or actions. When considering proposed actions, the PFYC system should be used in conjunction with an analysis of known fossil localities.

Occurrences of paleontological resources are known to be correlated with mapped geologic units (i.e., formations). The PFYC is created from available geologic maps and assigns a class value to each geological unit, representing the potential abundance and scientific importance of paleontological resources that occur in that geological unit. PFYC assignments should be considered as only a first approximation of the potential presence of paleontological resources, subject to change based on ground verification.

In the PFYC system, geologic units are assigned a class based on the known relative abundance of scientifically important paleontological resources and their sensitivity to adverse impacts. This classification is applied to the geologic formation, member, or other mapped unit. The classification is not intended to be applied to specific paleontological localities or small areas within units. Although important localities may occasionally occur in a geologic unit that has been assigned a lower PFYC classification, widely scattered fossils or localities do not necessarily indicate a higher class assignment. Instead, the overall abundance of scientifically important localities is intended to be the major determinant for the assigned classification.

The descriptions for the class assignments below serve as guidelines rather than as strict definitions. Knowledge of the geology and the paleontological potential for individual geological units are considered when developing PFYC assignments. These assignments must be developed using scientific expertise with input from a BLM paleontologist, but may include collaboration or peer review from outside researchers who are knowledgeable about both the geology and the nature of paleontological resources that may be found in each geologic unit. Each state has unique geologic maps and so also has unique PFYC assignments. It is possible, and occasionally desirable, to have different assignments for a similar geologic unit across separate states.

Class 1 – Very Low.

Geologic units that are not likely to contain recognizable paleontological resources. Units assigned to Class 1 typically have one or more of the following characteristics:

Geologic units are igneous or metamorphic, excluding air-fall and reworked volcanic ash units.

- Geologic Units are Precambrian in age.

(1) Management concerns for paleontological resources in Class 1 units are usually negligible or not applicable.

(2) Paleontological mitigation is unlikely to be necessary except in very rare or isolated circumstances that result in the unanticipated presence of paleontological resources, such as unmapped geology contained within a mapped geologic unit. For example, young fissure-fill deposits often contain fossils but are too limited in extent to be represented on a geologic map; a lava flow that preserves evidence of past life, or caves that contain important paleontological resources. Such exceptions are the reason that no geologic unit is assigned a Class 0.

Overall, the probability of impacting paleontological resources is very low and further assessment of paleontological resources in these areas is usually unnecessary. An assignment of Class 1 normally does not trigger further analysis unless paleontological resources are known or found to exist. However, standard stipulations should be put in place prior to authorizing any land use action in order to accommodate an unanticipated discovery.

Class 2 – Low.

Geologic units that are not likely to contain paleontological resources. Units assigned to Class 2 typically have one or more of the following characteristics:

- Field surveys have verified that scientifically important paleontological resources are not present or are rare.
- Units are generally younger than 10,000 years before present.
- Recent aeolian deposits.
- Sediments exhibit significant physical and chemical changes (i.e., diagenetic alteration) that make fossil preservation unlikely.

(1) Except where paleontological resources are known or found to exist, management concerns for paleontological resources are generally low and further assessment is usually unnecessary except in occasional or isolated circumstances.

(2) Paleontological mitigation is only necessary in locations where paleontological resources are known or found to exist.

The probability of impacting scientifically important paleontological resources is low. Localities containing important paleontological resources may exist, but are occasional and should be managed on a case-by-case basis. An assignment of Class 2 may not trigger further analysis unless paleontological resources are known or found to exist. However, standard stipulations should be put in place prior to authorizing any land use action in order to accommodate unanticipated discoveries.

Class 3 – Moderate.

Sedimentary geologic units where fossil content varies in scientific importance, abundance, and predictable occurrence. Units assigned to Class 3 have some of the following characteristics:

- Marine in origin with sporadic known occurrences of paleontological resources.
- Paleontological resources may occur intermittently, but abundance is known to be low.
- Units may contain scientifically important paleontological resources, but these occurrences are widely scattered.
- The potential for an authorized land use to impact important paleontological resources is low-to-moderate.

(1) Management concerns for paleontological resources are moderate because the existence of scientifically important paleontological resources is known to be low. Common invertebrate or plant fossils may be found in the area, and opportunities may exist for casual collecting.

(2) Paleontological mitigation strategies should be developed based on the nature of the proposed activity.

This classification includes units of moderate or infrequent occurrence of paleontological resources. Management considerations cover a broad range of options that may include record searches, pre-disturbance surveys, monitoring, mitigation, or avoidance. Surface-disturbing activities may require assessment by a qualified paleontologist to determine whether scientifically important paleontological resources occur in the area of a proposed action, and whether the action could affect those paleontological resources.

Class 4 – High.

Geologic units that are known to contain a high occurrence of paleontological resources. Units assigned to Class 4 typically have the following characteristics:

- Scientifically important paleontological resources have been documented but may vary in occurrence and predictability.
- Surface disturbing activities may adversely affect paleontological resources.
- Rare or uncommon fossils, including nonvertebrate (such as soft body preservation) or unusual plant fossils, may be present.
- Illegal collecting activities may impact some areas.

(1) Management concerns for paleontological resources in Class 4 are moderate to high, depending on the proposed action.

(2) Paleontological mitigation strategies will depend on the nature of the proposed activity, but field assessment by a qualified paleontologist is normally needed to assess local conditions.

The probability for impacting scientifically important paleontological resources is moderate to high and is dependent on the proposed action. Mitigation plans must consider the nature of the proposed disturbance, such as removal or penetration of protective surface alluvium or soils, potential for future accelerated erosion, or increased ease of access that could result in looting.

Detailed field assessment is normally required, and on-site monitoring or spot-checking may be necessary during land disturbing activities. In some cases, avoidance of known paleontological resources may be necessary.

Class 5 – Very High.

Highly fossiliferous geologic units that consistently and predictably produce scientifically important paleontological resources. Units assigned to Class 5 have some or all of the following characteristics:

- Important paleontological resources have been documented and occur consistently.
- Paleontological resources are highly susceptible to adverse impacts from surface disturbing activities.
- Unit is frequently the focus of illegal collecting activities.

(1) Management concerns for paleontological resources in Class 5 areas are high to very high.

(2) A field survey by a qualified paleontologist is almost always needed. Paleontological mitigation may be necessary before or during surface disturbing activities.

The probability for impacting scientifically important paleontological resources is high. The area should be assessed prior to land tenure adjustments. Pre-work surveys are usually needed and on-site monitoring may be necessary during land use activities. Avoidance or resource preservation through controlled access, designation of areas of avoidance or special management designations should be considered.

Class U – Unknown Potential.

Geologic units that cannot receive an informed PFYCAssignment. Characteristics of Class U may include:

- Geological units exhibit features or preservational conditions that indicate significant paleontological resources could be present, but little information about the actual paleontological resources of the unit or area is known.
- Geological units represented on a map are based on lithologic character or basis of origin but have not been studied in detail.
- Scientific literature does not exist or does not reveal the nature of paleontological resources.
- Reports of paleontological resources are anecdotal or have not been verified.
- Area or geologic unit is poorly or under-studied.
- BLM staff has not yet been able to assess the nature of the geologic unit.

(1) Until a provisional assignment is made, geologic units that have an unknown potential have medium to high management concerns.

(2) Lacking other information, field surveys are normally necessary, especially prior to

authorizing a ground-disturbing activity. An assignment of “Unknown” may indicate the unit or area is poorly studied, and field surveys are needed to verify the presence or absence of paleontological resources. Literature searches or consultation with professional colleagues may allow an unknown unit to be provisionally assigned to another Class, but the geological unit should be formally assigned to a Class after adequate survey and research is performed to make an informed determination.

Class W – Water.

Includes any surface area that is mapped as water. Bodies of water do not normally contain paleontological resources. However, shorelines should be carefully considered for uncovered or transported paleontological resources. Reservoirs are a special concern because important paleontological resources are often exposed during low water intervals. In areas of karst sinkholes and cenotes may trap animals and contain paleontological resources. Dredging river systems may result in the disturbance of sediments that contain paleontological resources.

Class I – Ice.

Includes any area that is mapped as ice or snow. Receding glaciers, including exposed lateral and terminal moraines should be considered for their potential to reveal recently exposed paleontological resources. Other considerations include melting snow fields that may contain paleontological resources with possible soft-tissue preservation.

Special Notes.

When developing PFYC assignments, the following should be considered:

- Standard stipulations should always be put in place prior to authorizing any land use action in order to accommodate an unanticipated discovery.
- Class 1 & 2 and Class 4 & 5 units may be combined for broad applications, such as large-scale planning, programmatic assessments, or when geologic mapping at an appropriate scale is not available. Resource assessment, mitigation, and other management considerations will need to be addressed when actual land disturbing activities are proposed.
- Where large projects impact multiple geologic units with different PFYC Classes, field survey and monitoring should be applied appropriately. For example, the authorized officer may determine that on-the-ground (pedestrian) surveys are necessary for the Class 4 and 5 formations, but not for Class 2 formations along a specific project.
- Based on information gained by surveys, the BLM may adjust PFYC assignments appropriately. Actual survey and monitoring intensities, as well as the extent of discoveries, should be included in any assessment, mitigation, or permit report so the BLM may reevaluate PFYC assignments.
- Some areas are difficult to evaluate, such as talus, colluvium, tailings, fill, borrow, and other mapped features. A PFYC assignment should be made for each area using available information, or the area should be assigned to Class U as appropriate.
- The BLM-wide PFYC assignments are maintained and periodically updated by the BLM paleontology team and may be obtained by contacting the BLM state or regional paleontologist assigned to an area.