The Dynamic Nature of the FGDC Vegetation Classification Standard

Drafted by David Tart
FGDC Vegetation Subcommittee
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The FGDC Vegetation Subcommittee is developing a classification process standard for floristic classification of existing vegetation. We envision that implementation of this process standard will produce a content standard, or classification system, consisting of a list of vegetation types. This vegetation classification system is expected to be change rapidly for several years, then to continue to change at a slower pace. The process standard requires that floristic types be based on vegetation plot data and assigns each vegetation type a confidence level based on the amount of data available to define and characterize it. As plot data continues to be collected, analyzed, and correlated over time new vegetation types will be defined, previously defined types will be refined, and confidence levels will be upgraded. This process is referred to as successive refinement, and constitutes the fundamental methodology of vegetation classification.

Most of the FGDC Vegetation Subcommittee members have been under the impression that an FGDC process standard encompassed ongoing revision of a content standard as described above. However, the FGDC Standards Reference Model and FGDC Directive #9 indicate this is not the case. Directive #9 states that technical changes (i.e. substantive content changes) must be made using the 12-step FGDC Standards Approval Process described in FGDC Directive #1. The time required for the approval process is not compatible with the rapid and ongoing refinement of a national vegetation classification system as envisioned by the Vegetation Subcommittee.

Managing the vegetation classification content standard dynamically through registers as the classification process is implemented may allow development and revision of the national vegetation classification system to proceed efficiently. As this option is explored, it must be noted that the classification system is not synonymous with a map legend. We will be developing and tracking more that a list of acceptable labels for map polygons. Each vegetation type name represents a taxonomic concept with defined limits. As the classification system changes over time, the concept represented by a given type name may change. As the vegetation classification system stabilizes, the hierarchical set of vegetation types can be used to describe the content of vegetation map units at multiple scales. We hope that the ecological characteristics of the vegetation types will guide the design of map legends (sets of map units) to address varying land management issues at multiple spatial scales. We expect the classification system to provide the common link to compare and relate these various map legends to each other and facilitate information sharing between federal agencies and other organizations.