

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Nate Finch Small Acreage Grazing to Ag Conversion Request
Proposed Implementation Date:	Spring, 2006
Proponent:	Lessee, Nate Finch
Location:	T7S R12W Section 36
County:	Beaverhead

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

The Lessee of the Trust Land located in T7S R12W Sec. 36 has made application to convert approximately 3 to 5 acres, subject to final measurement, from native range sagebrush/grassland to irrigated grass hay production. A portion of the state lease is currently classified as agriculture and is producing hay under the pivot. The site the lessee is interested in converting to hay production is currently in native range but is being irrigated by the full swing of the pivot through the state parcel. The lessee wishes to take full advantage of the water availability on site by converting the acreage to agricultural production.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:
Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.

Beaverhead County Natural Resources and Conservation office, Craig Fager – DFWP Wildlife Biologist.

2. OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED:

None.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

- 1) Allow small 3 to 5 acre conversion from native range to irrigated grass hay production.
- 2) No action, acreage would remain in "irrigated" native range

III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" if no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:
Consider the presence of fragile, compactable or unstable soils. Identify unusual geologic features. Specify any special reclamation considerations. Identify any cumulative impacts to soils.

The soils on site are in capability class VI and are suitable for irrigated perennial crops.

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 POLICY OFFICE

5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION:

Identify important surface or groundwater resources. Consider the potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality. Identify cumulative effects to water resources.

The project area is located approximately ¾ mile from Grasshopper Creek. The project will not impact water quality, quantity, or distribution.

6. AIR QUALITY:

What pollutants or particulate would be produced? Identify air quality regulations or zones (e.g. Class I air shed) the project would influence. Identify cumulative effects to air quality.

N/A

7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY:

What changes would the action cause to vegetative communities? Consider rare plants or cover types that would be affected. Identify cumulative effects to vegetation.

If approved, the project will alter the existing native plant community of sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) / native grass – primarily composed of needle-and-thread (*Stipa comata*), Bluebunch wheatgrass (*Agropyron spicatum*), Sandberg bluegrass (*Poa secunda*), and prairie junegrass (*Koeleria pyramidata*), to tame grass species for the production of hay.

8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:

Consider substantial habitat values and use of the area by wildlife, birds or fish. Identify cumulative effects to fish and wildlife.

No cumulative effects to avian and terrestrial wildlife are anticipated due to the small scale of the proposed project.

9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:

Consider any federally listed threatened or endangered species or habitat identified in the project area. Determine effects to wetlands. Consider Sensitive Species or Species of special concern. Identify cumulative effects to these species and their habitat.

The Montana Natural Heritage Program identified five vertebrate animals species of concern near the proposed project area: greater sage-grouse, great basin pocket mouse, black-tailed jack rabbit, westslope cutthroat trout, and ferruginous hawk. Also identified are six vascular plant species of concern: taper-tip desert-parsley, chicken sage, beautiful bladderpod, hoary phacelia, bitterroot milkvetch, and slender thelypody.

Greater sage-grouse are known to inhabit the proposed project area. A greater sage-grouse lek has been identified approximately ¾ mile to the Northeast of the proposed project area in Section 25-T7S-R12W. No impacts are anticipated.

The **great basin pocket mouse** and **black-tailed jack rabbit** are known to inhabit the proposed project area. Do to the relatively small conversion area, no impacts are anticipated.

Westslope cutthroat trout are found in Taylor Creek, located approximately ¾ of a mile to the northwest of the proposed project area. Due to the distance from the proposed project, relatively level topography, and minimal soil disturbance, no impacts are anticipated.

Ferruginous hawks are known to inhabit the proposed project area. Badland habitats and areas with small buttes and bluffs that are preferred nesting sites for ferruginous hawks do not occur in the project area. Due to the relatively small conversion area, no impacts are anticipated.

Taper-tip desert parsley, chicken sage, beautiful bladderpod, hoary phacelia, and bitterroot milkvetch are found approximately one and one-half miles to the southeast of the proposed project area. Due to the small conversion area and distance from the proposed project, no impacts are anticipated.

Slender thelypody has been located in the project area. Due to the relatively small conversion area, minimal impacts are expected.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

Identify and determine effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.

No sites were found during an inspection of the proposed project site. Patrick Rennie, DNRC Archaeologist, was consulted for a data base check of the site; no historical resources were documented on the affected acreage.

11. AESTHETICS:

Determine if the project is located on a prominent topographic feature, or may be visible from populated or scenic areas. What level of noise, light or visual change would be produced? Identify cumulative effects to aesthetics.

The proposed project is located approximately 1.75 miles Northwest of the historical town site of Bannack and the present day Bannack State Park. The proposed project is out of sight of the park.

12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY:

Determine the amount of limited resources the project would require. Identify other activities nearby that the project would affect. Identify cumulative effects to environmental resources.

None

13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA:

List other studies, plans or projects on this tract. Determine cumulative impacts likely to occur as a result of current private, state or federal actions in the analysis area, and from future proposed state actions in the analysis area that are under MEPA review (scoped) or permitting review by any state agency.

A Northwest Energy transmission line easement has been approved in the East half of the section. EA completed by Richard Moore, Dillon Unit Manager. Application for roads and trails for motorized public use have also recently been applied for and granted in the East half of the section as part of the Montana FWP Road Agent Rock trail system.

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" if no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:

Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.

None

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.

Due to the small acreage involved, the proposed project will result in a slight increase in income to the Trust Beneficiaries by the conversion to agricultural production on a per acre basis. Current income from grazing on the 3 to 5 acres would amount to \$6 - \$10 per year while the proposed project should result in an annual income of \$25.00 - \$35.00 per acre, a total of \$75 - \$125 per year minimum, depending on final measurement of the project acreage.

16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:

Estimate the number of jobs the project would create, move or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to the employment market.

None

17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:

Estimate tax revenue the project would create or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to taxes and revenue.

None

18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES:

Estimate increases in traffic and changes to traffic patterns. What changes would be needed to fire protection, police, schools, etc.? Identify cumulative effects of this and other projects on government services.

None

19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS:

List State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, and other zoning or management plans, and identify how they would affect this project.

N/A

20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES:

Identify any wilderness or recreational areas nearby or access routes through this tract. Determine the effects of the project on recreational potential within the tract. Identify cumulative effects to recreational and wilderness activities.

N/A

21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:

Estimate population changes and additional housing the project would require. Identify cumulative effects to population and housing.

N/A

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:

Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

N/A

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?

N/A

24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:

Estimate the return to the trust. Include appropriate economic analysis. Identify potential future uses for the analysis area other than existing management. Identify cumulative economic and social effects likely to occur as a result of the proposed action.

Current income from grazing on the 3 to 5 acres would amount to \$6 - \$10 per year while the proposed project should result in an annual income of \$25.00 - \$35.00 per acre, a total of \$75 - \$125 per year minimum, depending on final measurement of the project acreage. Income would improve to the trust beneficiary by \$69-\$115 at minimum.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Charles Maddox	Date: March 7, 2006
	Title: Land Use Specialist	

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

After review, I have selected the proposed Action Alternative, to allow a small 3 to 5 acre conversion from native range to irrigated grass hay production. I believe this alternative can be implemented in a manner that is consistent with the long-term sustainable natural resource management of the area and generating additional revenue for the school trust.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

I conclude all identified potential impacts will be avoided or mitigated by the small size of the project and the project will not adversely affect range cover; no significant impacts will occur as a result of implementing the selected alternative.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

EIS
 More Detailed EA
 No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	Name: Richard A. Moore	
	Title: Dillon Unit Manager	
Signature:	<i>Richard A. Moore</i>	Date: 3/9/06

LAND CAPABILITY INVENTORY

This form must be used by DNRC whenever there is an application for a reclassification of State Land. Please provide a narrative for each item listed.

LEASE NO(S).	2883	COUNTY:	Beaverhead
LEGAL(S)	T7S R12W Section 36		
AREA OFFICE	Central Land Office - Dillon Unit		
Current Land Use:	Grazing		
Proposed Land Use:	Irrigated Tame Grass Hay Production. The lessee's pivot currently crosses over the site; he would like to include this small acreage of native range being irrigated to hay production.		
Affected Acreage to include a Topographic Description:	Total acreage affected would be 3 to 5 acres, depending on final measurement. Topographic description: Topography of the site is characterized by a flat bench-like fan with slopes of 0 - 5%.		
1) Highest and best use (Highest return to the trust):	The highest return to the trust would be to convert the acreage from grazing to hay production. Current income would be approximately \$6.00 to \$10.00 for the 3 to 5 acres. The proposed project should return \$15 - \$25 per affected acre for a total in revenues of \$45.00 - \$125.00.		
2) Soils Capability:	Beaverhead County has not had a complete soil survey done to date. Most of the bottom lands were mapped which includes this site. The soils appear to have been mapped to some extent in the late 1960's or early 1970's. The NRCS is currently working to map the soils in the County and there was some disagreement among the staff regarding the findings from the previous mapping survey. Capability on the site appears to be a class IV soil under irrigated perennial cropping practices.		
3) Existing Vegetation :	The existing vegetation on the site is native rangeland consisting mainly of big sagebrush and needle and thread grass, Sandberg bluegrass, prairie Junegrass with a small component of bluebunch wheatgrass.		
4) Mineral Characteristics:	No known minerals or reserves on site.		
5) Public Use / Recreation:	Recreational use on the East half of the tract is increasing with a trail having been proposed and allowed open on the section on the East side of the Bannack Road Northeast of the Bannack Cemetery site. The portion of the		

	<u>tract affected by this project receives minimal recreational use.</u>
6) Aesthetic Values:	<u>Aesthetic values of the site in relation to the proposed project are minimal due to the pivot already covering this area in its rotation.</u>
7) Cultural Values:	<u>Cultural values will not be affected by the proposed project.</u>
8) Wildlife Use:	<u>Big game species use of the site would include heavy use by whitetail deer and lesser use by mule deer, and occasional use by elk due to the close proximity of the lessee's hay fields. Sagegrouse use in the area is high with several leks in the general vicinity and nesting occurring in the sagebrush. The sagegrouse use the hay fields on and adjacent to the state section in the Spring and early Summer when the chicks are young.</u>
9) Surrounding Land Use:	<u>Grazing and irrigated hay. Bannack State Park is located approximately 1.5 air miles Southeast of the proposed project.</u>
10) Other Pertinent Resources or Factors:	
11) Zoning or Planning Information:	<u>Zoned Agriculture</u>

Recommendation of Individual Completing Form: My recommendation is to allow the lessee to proceed with the proposed project.

Reasons for Recommendation: The proposed project is a small scale conversion of 3 – 5 acres of native rangeland which is currently being irrigated under the swing of the lessee's pivot. The lessee is proposing to use minimal ground disturbance to complete the project including mowing the sagebrush using a brush hog mower then inter-seeding tame grass species for hay onto the site using a drill with no tillage other than the possible use of a harrow if necessary. Ground disturbance and impacts would be minimal. While the project is small in scale in both acres and income, revenue to the Trust would increase by approximately 2 to 3 times on the affected acreage.

Please attach all supporting documentation, such as letters and maps that are of value in making the decision to approve or deny the request to reclassify. All capability inventories must have the

appropriate MEPA document, which means at least an Environmental Action Checklist. If Special restrictions or conditions are required for approval of the proposed conversion, attach the Supplemental Lease Agreement that is to be used to implement these changes, any applicable management plan, and a completed Lease Record Change form.

This form must be signed and dated below by the individual completing the form, and must be reviewed and approved by staff as indicated in the subsequent blocks.

Charles Maddox

Signature of Individual Completing the Form

4/25/06

Date

LAND CAPABILITY INVENTORY - STAFF REVIEW

REVIEW BY BUREAU CHIEF

Recommendation:

_____ Reasons for Recommendation:

Bureau Chief

Date

REVIEW BY DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATOR

Final

Decision:

_____ Reason for Final Decision:

Administrator

Date