

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name: Land Breaking of tame grass rangeland for conversion to dryland agriculture. State of Montana Lease Number 962

Proposed Implementation Date: June/July 2011

Proponent: Darlene J. Fulton, P O Box 115, Richland Montana 59260

Type and Purpose of Action: Surface lessees, Darlene J. Fulton has made a written request for breaking of tame grass rangeland to the Glasgow Unit Office of the Department of Natural Resources & Conservation. The surface lessee has requested permission to break an estimated 420.0 acres of crested wheatgrass currently listed as tame grass rangeland. The land breaking would be a conversion from present use of tame grass rangeland for livestock grazing to dryland agriculture for the purpose of growing small grain or pulse crops. The acreage would be reclassified from grazing land acreage for livestock to dryland agriculture.

Location: E2, NW4, Section 15 Township 34 North Range 43 East

County: Valley

I. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

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

Darlene J. Fulton the surface lessee has made a request to break 420.0 acres (more or less) of crested wheatgrass rangeland on State land Lease Number 962. The request was sent to the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Glasgow Unit Office for review and evaluation. The request will be reviewed per Department of Natural Resources and Conservation land breaking criteria for all lands other than native sod. The Glasgow Unit Office contacted the following government agency for comments: Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, Region 6.

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

The other government agencies that may have jurisdiction for this project are the United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Service Agency and United States Department of Agriculture, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Service.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

No Action Alternative: Deny permission to the surface lessee to break 420.0 acres of former crested wheatgrass rangeland. The new land use will be dryland agriculture to produce small grain & pulse crops.

Action Alternative: Grant permission to the surface lessee to break 420.0 acres of crested wheatgrass rangeland. The new land use will be dryland agriculture to produce small grain & pulse crops.

II. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

RESOURCE

POTENTIAL IMPACTS

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4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE: Are fragile, compactible or unstable soils present? Are there unusual geologic features? Are there special reclamation considerations?

No Action Alternative: The soils on the State land will remain the same and continue to produce crested wheatgrass vegetation. The area will continue to produce vegetation for livestock grazing.

Action Alternative: This type of project will impact the soils that are currently producing crested wheatgrass vegetation. The soils will be broken up for the purpose of producing dryland small grain and pulse crops. The soil type that will be broken for dryland agriculture is: Farnuf-Reader loams, 2 to 5% slopes. The Farnuf-Reader loam is suitable for dryland agriculture. This soil type has minimal hazard of soil blowing. Reeder-Cambert-Doney loam 2 to 9% slopes. The Reeder-Cambert-Doney loam is suitable for dryland agriculture. This soil type has minimal hazard of soil blowing. Tally-Dooley sandy loam, 0 to 6% slopes. The Tally-Dooley soil is suitable for small grain production. This soil type has some hazard of soil blowing. The lessee will mitigate impacts to soil blowing with continuous cropping practices. The onsite inspection of this tract showed no salinity present in the topsoil profile. The 420.0 acres requested for breaking will maintain current soil qualities and soil stability under dryland agriculture management.

Mitigation: There will be no need for a supplemental lease agreement with the lessee. The surface lessee plans to continuous crop this acreage. The annual standing stubble will mitigate any type of soil loss from wind erosion on the Tally-Dooley sandy loam.

5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION: Are important surface or groundwater resources present? Is there potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality?

No Action Alternative: Under this alternative annual precipitation will be utilized by the crested wheatgrass plant community. There will be no impacts to water quality, quantity and distribution.

Action Alternative: The project will allow the surface lessee to expand his dryland agriculture small grain and pulse crop production. The land breaking for small grain and pulse crops will not use water resources, other than the water associated with the topsoil from annual precipitation.

6. AIR QUALITY: Will pollutants or particulate be produced? Is the project influenced by air quality regulations or zones (Class I airshed)?

No Action Alternative: No impacts will occur to air quality under this alternative.

Action Alternative: The breaking of the crested wheatgrass acreage for dryland agriculture purposes will have no impacts to the air quality of the State land.

7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY: Will vegetative communities be permanently altered? Are any rare plants or cover types present?

No Action Alternative: Under this alternative the current crested wheatgrass plant community will remain intact.

Action Alternative: The breaking of the crested wheatgrass plant community will permanently destroy the current plant community on the project area. The crested wheatgrass community

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consisting of tame grass rangeland contains no known rare plant species. This plant community is currently crested wheatgrass. There are some small areas that contain some native grass and forb species. These same areas contain a very large amount (60% or greater) crested wheatgrass plants. The project area will produce small grain or pulse crop plant communities after land breaking.

8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS: Is there substantial use of the area by important wildlife, birds or fish?

No Action Alternative: The habitat types associated with a crested wheatgrass plant community will remain intact.

Action Alternative: This type of activity will disturb the habitat types on the State land. The area of impact is a crested wheatgrass plant community. This type of tame grass plant community has limited habitat resources. There will be minimal impacts to the wildlife and upland bird resources associated with the State land. There will be some areas of tract that will continue to produce a tame grass/native plant community. The remaining native plant community will provide some habitat resources for song birds, upland game birds, waterfowl, and whitetail deer. Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks were asked for their comments concerning this proposal. Kelvin Johnson Wildlife Biologist from Fish Wildlife & Parks made the on-site inspection of the State land. The following written statement from Mark Sullivan Region 6 Wildlife Program Manager concerning this project was submitted for the environmental assessment process: 1. The very high grazing rate this parcel has received has likely minimized use by wildlife so the cumulative impacts of breaking this tame pasture will not be as significant as had this not received maximum stocking rates over several years. However, due to this pasture not being used this year, it is evident and likely that wildlife are utilizing this parcel much more than in the past. Both whitetail and mule deer were observed on this property during inspection, and several ducks as well as numerous migratory birds which utilize prairie landscapes were seen. A pair of great horned owls are using the parcel in the shelterbelt area. 2. We recommend leaving a wide width for each waterway to decrease probability of erosion during a rain event. This will also allow for additional wildlife cover during such an event. These waterways were likely not cultivated in the past before it had been planted to grass. The grass covered waterway directly to the north of the Phillips Road and of the waterway located in the extreme NE corner of the parcel could be used as reference. 3. We recommend leaving the area around the well/pond stock tank area intact as well, with a buffer that would be similar to the waterways around the associated pond with this structure. 4. Although there is crested wheatgrass in the approximate 65 acre native range site located in the S2SE4, we recommend leaving this site intact, especially due to the possibility of highly erodible soils. 5. We concur with breaking request to leave the

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	shelter belt area and building site intact. The northern portion of the shelter belt has naturally reseeded itself and contains numerous young shrubs that are likely located along the edge of the original fields. We recommend these young shrubs be left intact as well. Care should be given with herbicides as to minimize these impacts as well.
9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES: Are any federally listed threatened or endangered species or identified habitat present? Any wetlands? Sensitive Species or Species of special concern?	<p>No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there will be no change to the current environmental resources of crested wheatgrass pasture lands.</p> <p>Action Alternative: The project area contains no known unique, endangered, fragile or limited environmental resources. The project area consists of flat to gently rolling terrain, with crested wheatgrass vegetation. There are small areas of native rangeland located on the W2SE4 of tract. These areas are a limited portion of the project site. These limited areas will see minimal impacts from the land breaking process. This native grass/crested wheatgrass area has a drainage that will be left intact for water runoff.</p>
10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES: Are any historical, archaeological or paleontological resources present?	<p>No Action Alternative: The project area has no known historical or archaeological sites and existing status would remain.</p> <p>Action Alternative: There are no known historical or archaeological sites on the project area that will be impacted. The project area was inspected by Glasgow Unit Office personnel for archaeological, historical and paleontological resources. There were no historical or archaeological sites identified during the on-site inspection. The shelter belt on tract at one time contained a home. The home is gone and the site contains an old wooden shop, small wooden pump house and two steel grain bins. None of these structures are considered historical.</p>
11. AESTHETICS: Is the project on a prominent topographic feature? Will it be visible from populated or scenic areas? Will there be excessive noise or light?	<p>No Action Alternative: There would be no impacts that would occur to the aesthetic values associated with the State land under this alternative.</p> <p>Action Alternative: The project site is located in a rural area and is visible to the general public from a county road. The project will have no impacts to the aesthetic values associated with the State land involved with this project or other surrounding lands. The aesthetic values of this area for the most part are dryland agriculture producing small grain and pulse crops. There are some scattered tame grass/native rangelands in the vicinity of the project site.</p>
12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY: Will the project use resources that are limited in the area? Are there other activities nearby that will affect the project?	<p>No Action Alternative: There will be no demands on environmental resources of land, water, air or energy occurring under this alternative.</p> <p>Action Alternative: The project will place no demands on environmental resources of land, water, air or energy. The nearby activities occurring on surrounding lands are the tillage of dryland agriculture acreage for the</p>

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	production of small grain and pulse crops. There are some scattered areas where livestock grazing occurs.
13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA: Are there other studies, plans or projects on this tract?	<p>No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there would be no changes to existing plans, studies or projects that the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation may have occurring on the State land.</p> <p>Action Alternative: The breaking of the crested wheatgrass vegetation will not impact other projects or plans that the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation may have occurring on this tract of State land.</p>

III. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION	
RESOURCE	POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES
14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY: Will this project add to health and safety risks in the area?	<p>No Action Alternative: No human health or safety risks would occur under this alternative.</p> <p>Action Alternative: The breaking of crested wheatgrass vegetation for dryland small grain or pulse crop production has minimal human health or safety risks.</p>
15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION: Will the project add to or alter these activities?	<p>No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there will be no changes to current agriculture activities.</p> <p>Action Alternative: The project will enhance the surface lessee's ability to produce small grain and pulse crops on his State land lease. The production of dryland small grain and pulse crops will also enhance the revenue generated for the School Trust.</p>
16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT: Will the project create, move or eliminate jobs? If so, estimated number.	<p>No Action Alternative: There will be no impacts to quantity and distribution of employment.</p> <p>Action Alternative: The project will not impact the quantity and distribution of employment. The land breaking will be accomplished by the surface lessee and no other labor force will be hired.</p>
17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES: Will the project create or eliminate tax revenue?	<p>No Action Alternative: No local and state tax base and tax revenues would be impacted under this alternative.</p> <p>Action Alternative: The project will have no impacts on the local or state tax base.</p>
18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES: Will substantial traffic be added to existing roads? Will other services (fire protection, police, schools, etc) be needed?	<p>No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there will be no demands for government services.</p> <p>Action Alternative: The project will place no demands for government services.</p>
19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS: Are there State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, etc. zoning or management plans in effect?	No Action Alternative: No impacts would occur to the locally adopted environmental plans or goals under this alternative.

	<p>Action Alternative; The project will not impact locally adopted environmental plans and goals. The United States Department of Agriculture agencies (Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources and Conservation Service) will review this land breaking request by our lessee. The writer of this document envisions that they will approve of the land breaking request with there specific management plan of operation.</p>
<p>20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES: Are wilderness or recreational areas nearby or accessed through this tract? Is there recreational potential within the tract?</p>	<p>No Action Alternative: No impacts would occur to access and quality or recreation associated with the State land under this alternative.</p> <p>Action Alternative: The project area has minimal recreational values (upland bird hunting) in its current status. The land breaking project will have minimal impacts to the recreational values associated with this tract of state land. There will be no impacts to recreational values on other bordering lands.</p>
<p>21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING: Will the project add to the population and require additional housing?</p>	<p>No Action Alternative: No impacts will occur to density and distribution of population and housing under this alternative.</p> <p>Action Alternative: The project will not impact the density and distribution of the population and housing on this rural area.</p>
<p>22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES: Is some disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities possible?</p>	<p>No Action Alternative; No impacts will occur to native or traditional lifestyles or communities under this alternative.</p> <p>Action Alternative: The project will not impact the social structures of the local communities.</p>
<p>23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY: Will the action cause a shift in some unique quality of the area?</p>	<p>No Action Alternative: No impacts will occur to the cultural uniqueness and diversity under this alternative.</p> <p>Action Alternative: The project will not impact the cultural uniqueness and diversity of the State land.</p>
<p>24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:</p>	<p>No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there will be no social or economic impacts that would occur</p> <p>Action Alternative: The cumulative affects of this project provides economic benefit to the surface lessee and the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation School Trust Fund. The dryland agriculture acreage on the State land will increase lessee's annual revenue from his State land lease holdings. The Department of Natural Resources will see additional revenue generated from this tract of State land for the School Trust.</p>

EA Checklist Prepared By: _____ \S\ _____ Date: _____
Randy Dirkson Land Use Specialist

IV. FINDING

