ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

On an Application for an

OPENCUT MINING PERMIT

The Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) prepared this Environmental Assessment (EA) in accordance with requirements of the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). An EA functions to identify, disclose, and analyze the impacts of a proposed action. This document may disclose impacts that have no legislatively required mitigation measures, or over which there is no regulatory authority.

The state law that regulates gravel mining operations in Montana is the Opencut Mining Act. This law and the rules adopted thereunder place operational guidance and limitations on a project during its lifetime, and provide for the reclamation of land affected by opencut mining operations.

Local governments and other state agencies may have authority over different resources and activities under their regulations. Approval or denial of this Opencut Application will be based on a determination of whether or not the proposed operation complies with the Opencut Mining Act and the rules adopted thereunder. The DEQ approval of this application would not relieve the operator from the obligation to comply with any other applicable federal, state, or county statutes, regulations, or ordinances. The operator is responsible for obtaining any other permits, licenses, approvals, etc. that are required for any part of the proposed operation.

APPLICANT: Valley County Road Department **COUNTY:** Valley

SITE NAME: Copenhaver Pit **DATE:** October 2012

LOCATION: Section 33, Township 31 North, Range 37 East

PROPOSAL: The applicant proposes to permit a new, long-term gravel pit to mine, screen, crush, stockpile and transport 200,000 cubic yards of gravel from a 22.5-acre site located 7.4 miles east of Hinsdale, adjacent and north of Highway 2. A portion of the site had been previously mined in the past. The Operator would encompass this disturbance within their permitted boundary. The site is adjacent and west of a large ephemeral drainage containing an earthen dam installed by the landowner. The Operator would use some of the excess clay material to repair the landowner's dam.

Valley County Rd. would be liable to reclaim the site to rangeland/pasture with remaining access and internal roads by September 2027. This application contains all items required by the Opencut Mining Act and its implementing rules. Proponent commits to properly conducting opencut operations and would be legally bound by the permit.

IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
RESOURCE	**POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES**
1. TOPOGRAPHY, GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:	The site consists of relatively flat rangeland area, with a large ephemeral drainage on the east, a reclaimed Opencut disturbance on the west, and a residence to south, and rangeland adjacent to the north. The site is comprised of the Judith River formation which was deposited during the Late Cretaceous period and consists of sandstone, siltstone, and sandy shale. It may also contain deposits of alluvial gravel, sand, silt or clay deposited during the Holocene Epoch of the Quaternary period. The onsite soils consist of sandy loams. The operator would replace 18 inches of soil in the mine level area and 12 inches of soil in the facility level area. The site receives approximately 12.8 inches of precipitation per year.

IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
RESOURCE	**POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES**
	Impacts: An irreversible and irretrievable removal of gravel from the site would occur. A small impact to the quantity and quality of soils from salvaging, stockpiling, and resoiling activities also would occur, but this would not impair the capacity of the soils to support full reclamation. There are no unusual topographic, geologic, soil, or special reclamation considerations that would prevent reclamation success.
2. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION	The site is located adjacent and west of a large ephemeral drainage. The ephemeral drainage contains a landowner earthen dam. Water for dust control would be obtained from a source in Hinsdale, Montana. *Impacts:* The proposed activities would have a minimal effect on the quantity and quality of the surface and groundwater resources. *Cumulative:* Cumulative impacts should be negligible.
3. AIR QUALITY	Air quality standards are based upon the Clean Air Act of Montana and pursuant rules and are administered by the DEQ Air Resources Management Bureau (ARMB). Its program is approved by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). These rules and standards are designed to be protective of human health and the environment. Air quality permits would be required on the processing equipment before installment. Machinery, such as generators, crushers and asphalt plants, are individually permitted for allowable emissions. Best Available Control Technology (BACT) is the usual standard applied. Fugitive dust is that which blows off the pit floor, stockpiles, gravel roads, farm fields, etc. It is considered to be a nuisance but not harmful to health. *Impacts:* Air quality standards as set by the federal government and enforced by the ARMB would allow minimal detrimental air impacts.
4. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY	There are no known rare or sensitive plants or cover types present in the site area. Onsite vegetation consists of western wheatgrass, green needlegrass, blue grama, crested wheatgrass, cheatgrass, sagebrush, winterfat and curly cup gumweed; and provides approximately 70 to 80% cover. The vegetation would be removed as soil is stripped and the site would be replanted with plant species compatible with the proposed reclaimed use. *Impacts:* No long term detrimental impacts to the vegetation would occur.
5. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:	Although the area is used primarily for pasture, it also supports populations of deer, antelope, rodents, song birds, coyotes, foxes, raptors, insects and various other animal species. Population numbers for these species are not known. *Impacts:* The proposed mine is expected to temporarily displace some species but it is likely that the site will be re-inhabited following reclamation.
6. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:	The Montana Natural Heritage Program (MNHP) lists the following two species of concern in the vicinity of the site: **Scarlet Ammannia** *(Ammannia robusta)* is an annual with simple or branched stems, which are 5-40 cm high. The glabrous leaves are strap-shaped, 2-4 cm long, and seem to join together opposite each other on the stem. 1-5 inconspicuous flowers occur at the base of the leaves. It flowers and fruits after water recedes; usually in August.

IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
RESOURCE	**POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES**
	Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) is the largest heron in North America, 60 cm tall and 97 to 135 cm long. Its upper parts are gray, and the fore-neck is streaked with white, black, and rust-brown. Great Blue Herons breed from southern Alaska southeast across central Canada to Nova Scotia and south to Guatemala, Belize, and the Galapagos Islands. Most Montana nesting colonies are in cottonwoods along major rivers and lakes; a smaller number occur in riparian ponderosa pines and on islands in prairie wetlands. Great Blue Herons eat mostly fish but also amphibians, invertebrates, reptiles, mammals, and birds. Disturbance by humans and loss of protected colony sites are major threats. *Impacts:* None of the listed species have been found on this site. Even if suitable habitat did exist on this site, the disturbance area would be small and large areas of similar or identical habitat surrounds the site. The possible impact to these species would be minimal.
7. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES	The Montana State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) was notified of the application. It reported that no previously recorded sites have been discovered previously within the designated search locale. A pedestrian survey of the area by DEQ personnel did not reveal any artifacts or signs of occupation. No signs were evident at depth in the previously disturbed area. SHPO recommends that a cultural resource inventory be conducted at this site in order to determine whether or not sites exist and if they would be impacted. *Impacts:* If during operations resources were to be discovered, activities would be temporarily moved to another area or halted until SHPO was contacted and the importance of the resources was determined.
8. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY	There are no unusual demands on land, water, air or energy anticipated as a result of this project. *Impacts:* Negligible impacts to land, water, air, or energy would occur.

IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION	
RESOURCE	**POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES**
9. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS	County zoning clearance has been obtained.
10. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING	As seen on the aerial photo of the surrounding area, the only nearby residence is the landowner's. *Impact:* This county pit is being sited in this area because of the location of the resource, and to service the nearby county roads.
11. AESTHETICS	The site is located in a common pastureland area. There would be a temporary alteration of aesthetics while mining is under way. However, reclamation would return the area to a visually acceptable landscape. This project is considered to be long-term, i.e., planned to take 14 years to complete.
12. QUANTITY/ DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT	Existing employees would mainly be utilized for this operation. There is low potential that this project would create a significant number of new jobs. *Impacts:* New employment opportunities would be limited.

IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION	
RESOURCE	**POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES**
13. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL, AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION	The acreage listed in the proposal would be taken out of rangeland/pastureland use. Upon completion of mining, the land would be reclaimed to rangeland/pastureland with access and internal roads remaining. *Impacts:* Rangeland/pastureland production would be reduced as soil stripping and operations progress across the site. When the entire site is opened up for mining and mine-related actives, all rangeland/pastureland activities would cease, but would be restored as the site is reclaimed.
14. LOCAL, STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES, PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY INCOME	Local, state and federal governments would be responsible for appraising the property, setting tax rates, collecting taxes, etc., from the companies, employees, or landowners benefitting from this operation. Following reclamation, it is assumed the tax base would revert to pre-mine levels.
15. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES	Limited oversight by DEQ Opencut Program personnel would be conducted in concert with other area activity when in the vicinity.
16. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY	Any industrial activity will increase the opportunities for accidental injury. There are agencies that require specific safety measures are in place. If followed there is no reason to believe that significant safety issues would be present.
17. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES	This activity would not inhibit the use of the identified resources.
18. NATIVE CULTURAL CONCERNS	*Impacts:* None identified.

19. Alternatives Considered:

A. Denial Alternative: The Department would deny an application that does not comply with the Act and Rules. No impacts to the natural or human environment would occur.

B. Approval Alternative: The Department would approve an application that complies with the Act and Rules. Impacts of this application are addressed in the body of the EA.

20. Public Involvement, Agencies, Groups or Individuals contacted: Montana State Historic Preservation Office, Montana Natural Heritage Program.

21. Other Governmental Agencies which May Have Overlapping or Sole Jurisdiction include, but may not be limited to: Valley County Commission or County Planning Department (zoning), Valley County Weed Control Board, MSHA and OSHA (worker safety), DEQ ARMB (air quality) and Water Protection Bureau (groundwater and surface water discharge; stormwater), DNRC (water rights), and MDT (road access).

22. Regulatory Impact on Private Property: The analysis done in response to the Private Property Assessment Act indicates no impact. The Department does not plan to deny the application or impose conditions that would restrict the use of private property so as to constitute a taking.

23. Magnitude and Significance of Potential Impacts: This proposal is not likely to create impacts of significance due to mitigation, restrictions, and oversight mandated by the Opencut Mining Act and pursuant rules and the Montana Clean Air Act.

24. Recommendation for Further Environmental Analysis: [ ] EIS [X] No Further Analysis

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PRIVATE PROPERTY ASSESSMENT ACT (PPAA) CHECKLIST

DOES THE PROPOSED AGENCY ACTION HAVE TAKINGS IMPLICATIONS UNDER THE PPAA?

YES	NO	
X		1. Does the action pertain to land or water management or environmental regulation affecting private real property or water rights?
	X	2. Does the action result in either a permanent or indefinite physical occupation of private property?
	X	3. Does the action deprive the owner of all economically viable uses of the property?
	X	4. Does the action deny a fundamental attribute of ownership?
	X	5. Does the action require a property owner to dedicate a portion of property or to grant an easement? (If answer is NO, skip questions 5a and 5b and continue with question 6.)
		5a. Is there a reasonable, specific connection between the government requirement and legitimate state interests?
		5b. Is the government requirement roughly proportional to the impact of the proposed use of the property?
	X	6. Does the action have a severe impact on the value of the property?
	X	7. Does the action damage the property by causing some physical disturbance with respect to the property in excess of that sustained by the public generally? (If the answer is NO, skip questions 7a-7c)
		7a. Is the impact of government action direct, peculiar, and significant?
		7b. Has the government action resulted in the property becoming practically inaccessible, waterlogged, or flooded?
		7c. Has the government action diminished property values by more than 30% and necessitated the physical taking of adjacent property or property across a public way from the property in question?

Taking or damaging implications exist if YES is checked in response to question 1 and also to any one or more of the following questions: 2, 3, 4, 6, 7a, 7b, 7c; or if NO is checked in response to questions 5a or 5b.

If taking or damaging implications exist, the agency must comply with § 5 of the Private Property Assessment Act, to include the preparation of a taking or damaging impact assessment. Normally, the preparation of an impact assessment will require consultation with agency legal staff.

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