

## CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

<b>Project Name:</b>	McDowell Ranch/O'Connor Cattle Company Breaking Request 2012
<b>Proposed Implementation Date:</b>	Spring 2012
<b>Proponent:</b>	McDowell Ranch/O'Connor Cattle Company
<b>Location:</b>	T3S-R54E-Sec 5,6,& 7
<b>County:</b>	Powder River County

### I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

McDowell Ranch and O'Connor Cattle Company (henceforth referred to as proponent) has requested permission from the DNRC Eastern Land Office to begin breaking of approximately 255 acres of State Trust Land which the proponent currently leases (Lease # 8984). The land requested shows evidence of being previously broken, due to lack of sagebrush and near monoculture of Western Wheatgrass (AGSM). The productivity of this grazing land is moderate. The lessee plans to roll the soil and begin farming the land with a 5 year rotation of small grains (flax, wheat, or barley) followed by pulse crops (lentils and peas). This agricultural practice will aid in the mellowing of the soil. Five years is the initial planned agricultural rotation period although it could be extended. Once the agricultural rotation is complete the ground will be seeded back to an alfalfa hay base.

### II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

#### 1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:

*Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.*

The proponent has prepared a conservation plan with the local NRCS office. The ELO staff performed a field review, and inventory. Comments were solicited from the Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks Region 7 Office, Montana Audubon Society and The National Wildlife Federation. Comments were received from the MT-FWP Region 7 Office Area Wildlife Biologist. Comments were in regard to the project location within the Greater Sage Grouse Core Area. Comments acknowledged that there are no active Sage Grouse leks within 1.5 miles of the project and that a lack of Big Sage (*Artemisia tridentata*) in the project area would not be suitable nesting cover for Sage Grouse.

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

USDA-Natural Resource Conservation Service

#### 3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Alternative A- Grant permission for the breaking requested and transfer from rangeland to agriculture for a 5 year rotation. After the rotation is complete seeding back to alfalfa for a hay base.

Alternative B- No Action

### 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.*

Alternative A- Soil surveys of the area shows several different soil types within the scope of the project. Most of the soils involved are Class 3C and 3E. Less than 5% of the project is within NRCS Designated HEL areas. Soil stability in the area is fair to good; with proper cultural practices and maintaining proper residue conditions erosion risks should be mitigated.

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

#### 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.*

Alternative A- No Significant Impact

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

#### 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.*

Alternative A- Breaking of the ground and subsequent agricultural use may increase the pollutant and particulate levels. Increases should be a negligible impact.

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

#### 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.*

Alternative A- Current Vegetative cover of the site includes Western Wheatgrass (*Agropyron smithii*), Crested Wheatgrass (*Agropyron Cristatum*), Blue Grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*), Buffalo Grass (*Bouteloua dactyloides*), Sandberg Bluegrass (*Poa secunda*) Prairie Junegrass (*Koleria Pyramdata*) and Prickly Pear Cactus. Comments were in regard to the project location within the Greater Sage Grouse Core Area. Comments acknowledged that there are no active Sage Grouse leks within 1.5 miles of the project and that a lack of Big Sage (*Artemisia tridentata*) would create an area without proper nesting cover for Sage Grouse. The proposed area is currently in fair range condition. Species composition is mostly Western Wheatgrass (*Agropyron smithii*), and sod bound Blue Grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*) and Buffalo Grass (*Bouteloua dactyloides*). Big Sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) is limited to only a few plants within 255 acre area.

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**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.*

Alternative A-Wildlife in the area may experience some disturbance during the breaking and subsequent agricultural practices to take place on the site. This project should create a larger and more reliable seasonal food source in the area for most forms of wildlife. Wildlife in the area consists mainly of Mule Deer, Antelope, Coyotes, Fox, Badgers, Rodents, Reptiles, Migratory and Prairie Birds and Raptors.

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**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.*

Alternative A- A search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program Database shows potential habitat in the area for Greater Sage Grouse. This is a broad spectrum analysis of the habitat area around the project and does not necessarily mean that these exist within the scope of the project. No sage grouse or leks have been noted in the area of the project. The Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Region 7 Office Area Wildlife Biologist provided comments regarding the project.

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:**

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

Alternative A- The area of potential effect, as it relates to the proposed McDowell/O'Connor Break Request was inventoried to Class III standards for cultural and paleontological resources in February of 2012. No cultural or paleontological resources were identified. No additional archaeological investigative work is recommended.

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**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.*

Alternative A- Any impact to the aesthetics of this project should be minimal in nature.

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**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.*

Alternative A- No Significant Impact

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**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.*

None

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IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.</i></li><li>• <i>Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.</i></li><li>• <i>Enter "NONE" if no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.</i></li></ul>

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**14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:**

*Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.*

Alternative A- Farming and Ranching are inherently dangerous professions any risk to health and human safety can be mitigated with proper safety efforts.

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:**

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

Alternative A- This project should have a positive impact on agricultural activities and production in the area. This project should convert low productivity grazing land to agricultural land and eventually hay land with fair to good production.

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**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.*

Alternative A- No impact expected

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**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.*

Alternative A- No Significant Impact

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**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*

Alternative A- No Significant Impact

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**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.*

Alternative A- No Significant Impact

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**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.*

Alternative A- No Significant Impact

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**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.*

Alternative A- No Significant Impact

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:**

*Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.*

Alternative A- No Significant Impact

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:**

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

Alternative A- No Significant Impact

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

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**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.*

Alternative A- This project has the ability to increase revenue to the school trust. This increased revenue should come from the conversion of low productivity grazing land to more productive agricultural land. The lease payment for this project will switch from a per AUM price to at least 25% crop share. Previous projects in this area have created an average crop share return of \$30.00- \$50.00 per acre. In addition to the added crop share revenue the trust would also be benefitted through aftermath AUM's being applied to the range land. Revenue to the trust should be increased due to the change from grazing to agricultural land. Once the agricultural rotation

has been completed the site will be seeded to a permanent alfalfa/grass hay base, of which the same crop share would apply.

Alternative B- No Significant Impact

<b>EA Checklist Prepared By:</b>	<b>Name:</b> Scott Aye	<b>Date:</b> 2-23-2012
	<b>Title:</b> Land Use Specialist	

**V. FINDING**

**25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:**

Alternative A

**26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:**

The proposed breaking of approximately 255 acres of moderate productivity grazing land and subsequent conversion to agricultural production should not result in nor cause significant environmental impacts. The predicted environmental impact would be mitigated through the proposed breaking plan. An environmental assessment checklist is the appropriate level of analysis for the proposed action. USDA NRCS, Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks, and the Montana Natural Heritage Program, were all contacted and appropriate comments and concerns were incorporated into the proposed breaking plan. The proposal meets the intent, standard and the guidance of the DNRC's breaking policy, capability inventory and conservation farming requirements. The breaking and conversion of this grazing land to agricultural production would satisfy the trusts fiduciary mandate and enhance the long term productivity of the resource.

**27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:**

EIS       More Detailed EA       No Further Analysis

<b>EA Checklist Approved By:</b>	<b>Name:</b> Chris Pileski
	<b>Title:</b> ELO Area Manager
<b>Signature:</b>	<b>Date:</b>