DS-252

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name: Land Breaking of wheatgrass species and alfalfa conservation reserve program acreage for conversion to dryland agriculture. State of Montana Lease Number 4899.	Proposed Implementation Date: Spring/summer 2012
Proponent: Larry Bain, 660 Mann Road, Plentywood, Montana 59254	
Type and Purpose of Action: Surface lessees, Larry Bain has made a written request for breaking of wheatgrass species and alfalfa on former conservation reserve program acreage to the Glasgow Unit Office of the Department of Natural Resources & Conservation. The surface lessee has requested permission to break an estimated 171.9 acres of wheatgrass species and alfalfa formerly enrolled in the conservation reserve program. The land breaking would be a conversion from the present use of wheatgrass species and alfalfa hayland to dryland agriculture for the purpose of growing small grain or pulse crops. The acreage would be reclassified from dryland hay to dryland agriculture for small grain or pulse crop production.	
Location: All, Section 36 Township 35 North Range 54 East	County: Sheridan

I. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT	
1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED: Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.	Larry Bain the surface lessee has made a request to break 171.9 acres (more or less) of wheatgrass species and alfalfa formerly conservation reserve program acreage on State land Lease Number 4899.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 171.9 acres of former wheatgrass and alfalfa acreage. Under the no action alternative this acreage would be classified as dryland hay production. Action Alternative: Grant permission to the surface lessee to break 171.9 acres of wheatgrass and alfalfa acreage. The new land use will be dryland agriculture to produce small grain & pulse crops.

II. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	

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RESOURCE	POTENTIAL IMPACTS
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 wheatgrass and alfalfa vegetation. The area will continue to produce vegetation for haying/livestock grazing. Action Alternative: This type of project will impact the soils that are currently producing tame grass 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: Williams loam undulating, 0 to 4% slopes. The Williams loam undulating is suitable for dryland agriculture. This soil type has moderate hazards to wind and water erosion. Williams-Zahill undulating, 0 to 4% slopes. The Williams-Zahill undulating is suitable for dryland agriculture. This soil type has moderate hazards of water and wind erosion. The lessee will mitigate impacts for the hazards of wind and water erosion. Through management practices such as continuous cropping and chemical fallow. The onsite inspection of this tract showed no salinity present in the topsoil profile. The 171.9 acres requested for breaking will maintain current soil qualities and soil stability under dryland agriculture management. Mitigation: There will be areas of tract that will be flagged by Departmental personnel and left in permanent vegetative cover. The surface lessee plans to continuous crop or chemical fallow this acreage. The annual standing stubble will mitigate any type of soil loss from wind or water erosion...
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 wheatgrass and alfalfa 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 wheatgrass and alfalfa 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 wheatgrass and alfalfa plant community will remain intact. Action Alternative: The breaking of the wheatgrass and alfalfa plant community will permanently destroy the current plant community

II. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
	on the project area. The plant community consists of wheatgrass species and alfalfa. The former conservation reserve program acreage contains no known rare plant species. This plant community is currently wheatgrass and alfalfa.
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 wheatgrass and alfalfa 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 wheatgrass species and alfalfa plant community. This type of wheatgrass and alfalfa 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 native grass plant community. The remaining native grass 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. Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks comments are as follows: I am writing to comment on the request to break Conservation Reserve Program acreage on State land in Sheridan County. First of all, thank you for the opportunity to comment on this break requests After a review of this lease location, MFWP is not opposed to breaking the described lands. However, if your onsite inspection finds adjacent waterways and wetlands. MFWP would recommend at least a 100 meter buffer around drainages for reptile and amphibian use, cover, as well as for filtering pollutant runoff and limiting top soil erosion. MFWP is aware of the difficulty that landowners are having when trying to re-enroll their CRP; particularly when CRP stands have aged and become dominated by crested wheatgrass and brome grass. This is unfortunate, given the habitat that these grasses can provide for nesting waterfowl, songbirds, and upland birds, as well as many other small mammal, amphibian and reptile species. Through our Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program, we can work with landowners/lessees to cost share on things such as seed (which can be very costly), site preparation, or even pollinator food plots; all of which may help these lands to qualify for re-enrollment into CRP and keep much needed grass on the landscape. If you know of lessees who would be interested in such an opportunity, please feel free to direct them to contact our regional office in Glasgow or our Upland Game Bird Habitat Biologist, Ryan Williamson at 406-895-2468. Thank you for the opportunity of comment on this matter. Mark Sullivan, Region 6 Wildlife Program Manager.
9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES: Are any federally listed threatened or endangered species or identified habitat present? Any wetlands?	No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there will be no change to the current environmental resources of wheatgrass and alfalfa hay lands. Action Alternative: The project area contains

II. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
Sensitive Species or Species of special concern?	no known unique, endangered, fragile or limited environmental resources. The project area consists of flat to gently rolling terrain, with wheatgrass and alfalfa vegetation. All drainages will be left intact for water runoff erosion control.
10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES: Are any historical, archaeological or paleontological resources present?	No Action Alternative: The project area has no known historical or archaeological sites and existing status would remain. Action Alternative: There are no known historical or archaeological sites on the project area that will be impacted. The project area was inspected by Craig Biggart, Land Use Specialist from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Glasgow Unit Office for archaeological, historical and paleontological resources. There were no historical or archaeological sites identified during the on-site inspection.
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?	No Action Alternative: There would be no impacts that would occur to the aesthetic values associated with the State land under this alternative. Action Alternative: The project site is located in a rural area and is not 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 scattered tame grass/native rangelands, conservation reserve program acreage and dryland agriculture in the vicinity of the project site.
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?	No Action Alternative: There will be no demands on environmental resources of land, water, air or energy occurring under this alternative. 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 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?	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. Action Alternative: The breaking of the wheatgrass and alfalfa 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.

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?	No Action Alternative: No human health or safety risks would occur under this alterative. Action Alternative: The breaking of wheatgrass and alfalfa vegetation for dryland small grain or pulse crop production has minimal human health or safety risks.
15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION: Will the project add to or alter these activities?	No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there will be no changes to current agriculture activities. 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.
16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT: Will the project create, move or eliminate jobs? If so, estimated number.	No Action Alternative: There will be no impacts to quantity and distribution of employment. Action Alternative: The project will not impact the quantity and distribution of employment. The land breaking will be accomplished by the surface lessee or his designated hired labor force.
17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES: Will the project create or eliminate tax revenue?	No Action Alternative: No local and state tax base and tax revenues would be impacted under this alternative. Action Alternative: The project will have no impacts on the local or state tax base.
18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES: Will substantial traffic be added to existing roads? Will other services (fire protection, police, schools, etc) be needed?	No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there will be no demands for government services. Action Alternative: The project will place no demands for government services.
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. 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.
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?	No Action Alternative: No impacts would occur to access and quality or recreation associated with the State land under this alternative. Action Alternative: The project area has some recreational values hunting upland birds, whitetail deer and bird watching. This tract also could be used for hiking in its current status. The land breaking project will have minimal impacts to the recreational values associated with this tract of state land. The areas remaining intact (not broken for agriculture) will continue to provide recreational values as stated above. There will

	be no impacts to recreational values on other bordering lands.
21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING: Will the project add to the population and require additional housing?	No Action Alternative; No impacts will occur to density and distribution of population and housing under this alternative. Action Alternative: The project will not impact the density and distribution of the population and housing on this rural area.
22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES: Is some disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities possible?	No Action Alternative; No impacts will occur to native or traditional lifestyles or communities under this alternative. Action Alternative: The project will not impact the social structures of the local communities.
23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY: Will the action cause a shift in some unique quality of the area?	No Action Alternative: No impacts will occur to the cultural uniqueness and diversity under this alternative. Action Alternative: The project will not impact the cultural uniqueness and diversity of the State land.
24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:	No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there will be no social or economic impacts that would occur 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.

EA Checklist Prepared By: _____\S_____ _____Date:
Randy Dirkson Land Use Specialist

IV. FINDING	
25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:	No Action Alternative: The no action alternative; was not selected by the Glasgow Unit Office, Unit Manager. Action Alternative: Grant written permission to surface lessee Larry Bain to break and estimated 171.9 acres more or less of wheatgrass and alfalfa vegetation located on this tract of State land. The 171.9 acres will then be converted to dryland agriculture for small grain and pulse crop production. The total amount of acreage will be determined after areas are flagged that will not be broken for dryland agricultural production.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:	Action Alternative: The project will enhance the natural resources capabilities to produce dryland small grain and pulse crops on the State land. The land breaking project will increase revenue for the surface lessee and the State of Montana School Trust.

27. Need for Further Environmental Analysis:

[ ] EIS [ ] More Detailed EA [X] No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By: R. Hoyt Richards, Glasgow Unit Manager
Name Title

/s/
Signature

Date: May 18, 2012