DS-252

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name: Land Breaking of tame/native grass and alfalfa former conservation reserve program acreage for conversion to dryland agriculture. State of Montana Lease Number 7250.	Proposed Implementation Date: Spring 2013
Proponent: Rasmussen Agri- Business Incorporated, 596 Ator Creek RD, Antelope, Montana 59211	
Type and Purpose of Action: Surface lessee, Rasmussen Agri- Business Incorporated has made a written request for breaking of tame/native grass 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 206.2 acres of crested wheatgrass, western wheatgrass and alfalfa formerly enrolled in the conservation reserve program. The land breaking would be a conversion from present use of tame/native grass and alfalfa 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:E2,, Section 16 Township 34 North Range 56 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.	Rasmussen Agri-Business Incorporated the surface lessee has made a request to break 206.2 acres (more or less) of crested wheatgrass; western wheatgrass and alfalfa, formerly conservation reserve program acreage on State land Lease Number 7250. 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 206.2 acres of former tame/native grass 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 206.2 acres of tame/native grass and alfalfa acreage. The new land use will be dryland agriculture to produce small grain & pulse crops.

II. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
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 tame/native grass and alfalfa vegetation. The area will continue to produce vegetation for dryland haying. Action Alternative: This type of project will impact the soils that are currently producing tame/native grass and alfalfa 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-Zahill loam, gently rolling 4 to 8% slopes. The Williams-Zahill loam is suitable for dryland agriculture. This soil type has moderate hazards to wind and water erosion. Williams-Zahill loam, undulating 0 to 4% slopes. The Williams-Zahill loam, undulating is suitable for dryland agriculture. This soil type has a moderate wind and water erosion capability. The lessee will mitigate impacts for the hazards of wind and water erosion. This will be accomplished through management practices such as continuous cropping and chemical fallow. The 206.2 acres requested for breaking will maintain current soil qualities and soil stability under dryland agriculture management. Mitigation: There will be areas of tract that may 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 tame/native grass 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 tame/native grass 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 tame/native grass and alfalfa plant community will remain intact. Action Alternative: The breaking of the tame/native grass and alfalfa plant community will permanently destroy the current plant

II. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
	community on the project area. The tame/native grass and alfalfa community consisting of crested wheatgrass, western wheatgrass and alfalfa. The former conservation reserve program acreage contains no known rare plant species. This plant community is currently tame/native grass and alfalfa. There are no solid stand native vegetative plant communities in the former conservation reserve program acreage.
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 tame/native grass 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 crested wheatgrass, western wheatgrass and alfalfa plant community. This type of tame/native grass 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 tame grass/native grass plant community. The remaining native/tame 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. The Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks comments on this project are as follows:"I am writing to comment on the request to break 206.2 acres of formerly enrolled Conservation Reserve Program acreage on DNRC Land in Sheridan County. Upon the site visit it was clear that the CRP in question was recently burned off in preparation for conversion. Earlier notification of the break request prior to vegetation removal would allow MFWP to better ascertain the quality of the stand and benefits to local wildlife. MFWP recommends that any freshly burned sensitive areas are allowed to go back to a vegetative stand naturally to produce a high quality stand fro wildlife and reduce runoff and erosion. Given the requirements to enroll into CRP and the recent burn. MFWP is not opposed to breaking the described lands for small grain production, and appreciates the reassurance that all environmentally sensitive drainages will be left in permanent vegetation. As described in your letter, MFWP also supports at least a 100 meter buffer around drainages for reptile and amphibian use, upland game bird nesting 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 dominate by crested wheatgrass and brome grass. This is unfortunate given the habitat that these CRP fields can still provide for nesting waterfowl, song birds and upland birds as well as many other small mammal, amphibian, and reptile species. Although it is uncertain whether the CRP program will have a general sign-up this coming year, MFWP offers a cost sharing

II. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
	opportunity, through our Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program in the form of a Seed Cost Share for those that plan to enroll in CRP with a higher conservation practice seed mix, such as a CP2 and a CP25 native grass mixture to increase the chance of re-enrolling the CRP and help off-set those additional cost. As you know, CRP that has been newly planted to formerly cropped fields can be some of the most productive stands. If you know of lessees who would be interested in such an opportunity, please feel free to direct then to contact our regional office in Glasgow, or our Upland Game Bird Biologist, Ryan Williamson at 406-895-2468. Thank you for the opportunity of comment on this matter. Mark G. Sullivan, R6 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? Sensitive Species or Species of special concern?	No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there will be no change to the current environmental resources of tame/native grass and alfalfa hay lands. 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, western wheatgrass and alfalfa vegetation. There are small areas of native rangeland located on portions of this tract. This native rangeland site will see no impacts from the land breaking process. 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 Matt Poole 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 visible to the general public from a rural gravel 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 in the vicinity of the project site. There are also scattered areas of conservation reserve program acreage scattered near project site.

II. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
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 tame/native grass 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. The land breaking project will not impact surrounding deeded lands.

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 tame/native grass 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 on State land 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	No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there will be no demands for government

substantial traffic be added to existing roads? Will other services (fire protection, police, schools, etc) be needed?	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 and 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 varying types of recreational values, some upland bird hunting and hunting whitetail/mule deer in its current status. The land breaking project will have some impacts to the recreational values associated with hunting on this tract of state land. There will be no impacts to recreational values on other bordering lands. The bordering lands contain habitat for upland birds and whitetail/mule deer. The bordering lands will provide hunting recreational values for upland birds and whitetail/mule deer.
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. The project will not impact cultural uniqueness and diversity of the surrounding deeded lands.
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, State land 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 Rasmussen Agri-Business Incorporated to break and estimated 206.2 acres more or less of crested wheatgrass, western wheatgrass and alfalfa vegetation located on this tract of State land. The 206.2 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:
Name Title

_____ Date:
Signature