DS-252

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name: Land Breaking of tame grass rangeland for conversion to dryland agriculture. State of Montana Lease Number 10618	Proposed Implementation Date: Spring 2013
Proponent: Ralph Fisher P O Box 779, Scobey, Montana 59263	
Type and Purpose of Action: Surface lessee, Ralph Fisher has made a written request for breaking of tame grass rangeland acreage to the Glasgow Unit Office of the Department of Natural Resources & Conservation. The surface lessee has requested permission to break an estimated 60.6 acres of crested wheatgrass. The land breaking would be a conversion from present use of tame grass rangeland to dryland agriculture for the purpose of growing small grain or pulse crops. The acreage would be reclassified from tame grass rangeland to dryland agriculture for small grain or pulse crop production.	
Location: S2NW4, Section 23 Township 34 North Range 47 East	County: Daniels

I. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED: Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.	Ralph Fisher the surface lessee has made a request to break 60.6 acres (more or less) of crested wheatgrass rangeland on State land Lease Number 10618. 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 60.6 acres of tame grass rangeland. Under the no action alternative this acreage would be classified as is presently, rangeland for livestock grazing. Action Alternative: Grant permission to the surface lessee to break 60.6 acres of tame grass 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 tame grass vegetation. The area will continue to produce vegetation for grazing. Action Alternative: This type of project will impact the soils that are currently producing tame grass/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: Zahill loam, 8 to 15% slopes. The Zahill loam is suitable for dryland agriculture. This soil type has a moderate/high hazard to wind and water erosion. Williams loam, 2 to 8% slopes. The Williams loam has a moderate hazard to wind and water erosion. The mitigation for water and wind erosion will be accomplished through management practices such as continuous cropping and chemical fallow. The 60.6 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 grass 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 grass 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 grass plant community will remain intact. Action Alternative: The breaking of the tame grass plant community will permanently destroy the current plant community on the project area. The tame grass community consists of crested wheatgrass. The crested wheatgrass plant community contains no known rare plant species. This plant community is currently tame grass. There are minima native vegetative plant communities in the crested wheatgrass acreage.

II. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
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 grass 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 habitat resources. There will be major 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 rangeland plant community. The remaining native rangeland plant community will provide some habitat resources for song birds, upland game birds, waterfowl, and whitetail deer. Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks were contacted in writing for their comments concerning this proposal. The following is the comments submitted by Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks: "Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the request to break 60.6 acres of native rangeland on State Lease #10618. The lease in question is within an 80 acre native grassland parcel consisting of crested wheatgrass and needlegrass spp. Surrounding habitats include a large amount of native grasslands, small grain croplands and intermixed with some CRP lands. The lease has a small drainage running through it. The lease in question offers nesting habitat for upland birds, non-game grassland birds and is likely used by mule deer and pronghorn antelope. MFWP understands that the increase in prices for small grains and pulse crops has increased the desire to more land to dry-land agriculture. I cases of expired CRP that have become homogenous stands of crested wheatgrass and brome grass with limited wildlife utility, MFWP generally does not oppose their conversion. However, having reviewed the site, it is clear that although small in acreage, these parcels of native rangeland still have the potential to provide crucial native habitat to songbirds, small mammals, and may also provide lek habitat for sharp-tail grouse. Due to the diversity of habitat types within and around this particular lease, the ecological significance of the native rangeland for connectivity with surrounding habitats and the significant loss of native grasslands across Montana MFWP recommends that this lease be maintained in permanent native grassland cover. If one of the 2 listed parcels were broke we recommend that the CRP be broken, leaving the native parcel in permanent cover. Thank you for the opportunity to 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 grass rangelands. 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 no small areas of native rangeland located on this tract. All drainages will be left intact

II. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
	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 not visible to the general public. 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.
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 grass 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 grass 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 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 minimal recreational values, some upland bird hunting and hunting whitetail deer 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. The bordering lands contain habitat for upland birds and whitetail deer. The bordering lands will provide hunting recreational values for upland birds and whitetail 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: \Randy Dirkson\ \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 Ralph Fisher to break an estimated 60.6 acres more or less of crested wheatgrass vegetation located on this tract of State land. The 60.6 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: Matthew Poole Title: Land Use Specialist, Acting Unit Manager

S/Matthew Poole/S
Signature

Date: February 21, 2013