

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	<i>Biological Offset Bald Eagle Cottonwood Reforestation Project</i>
Proposed Implementation Date:	May 18 to 21, 2016, and 3 days in April to June 2017.
Proponent:	Montana DNRC in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Location:	Island immediately south of Cascade, Montana
County:	Cascade

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

A wildland fire occurred on an island in the Missouri River south of Cascade, Montana on June 12, 2015. The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) provided mutual-aid assistance to the Cascade Volunteer Fire Department during the suppression efforts of this fire. During the suppression efforts, a cottonwood tree containing an active bald eagle nest was felled on the north end of the 38-acre island. Please refer to Attachments A-1 and A-2. DNRC staff met with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) staff on March 17, 2016 and agreed to the following terms for a biological offset plan. To provide biological offset for the loss of cottonwood trees associated with fire suppression activities, DNRC would complete the following measures on the portion of the subject island that is owned by DNRC: plant 200 cottonwood seedlings on desirable growing sites and protect with biodegradable nets in spring 2016 and plant an additional 200 cottonwood seedlings in a like manner in spring 2017.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

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

At the time of the incident in June 2015, several newspaper articles were published about the incident in local newspapers, including the *Billings Gazette* and *Great Falls Tribune*. Local neighbors were aware of the fire and incident. DNRC has been in frequent communication with staff biologists from the US Fish and Wildlife Service and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks during the development of this proposal.

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

This project is being conducted at the request of, and in cooperation with, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Region 6 Office, Denver, CO, and Montana Field Office.

3. ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT:

Several alternatives were discussed during the development phase of this proposed action. These included: 1) erecting one artificial nest structure in the general location where the original nest tree was located; and 2) conducting similar planting of cottonwood seedlings, but in lesser numbers (150-200) and within only 1 spring window. The proposal to plant 200 seedlings during two consecutive spring seasons was agreed to help ensure the success of an ample number of young trees on the site. Erecting the artificial nest structure was considered to be infeasible by DNRC due to substantial logistical and maintenance difficulties associated with establishing the structure on the island in the middle of the Missouri River.

No Action Alternative- Under the No Action Alternative, the biological offset agreement would not be carried out at this time. No cottonwood seedlings would be planted in the project area.

Action Alternative- Under the Action Alternative, DNRC will carry out the terms of a biological offset agreement made with USFWS. DNRC will plant 200 cottonwood seedlings on desirable growing sites and protect the

seedlings with biodegradable nets in spring 2016. DNRC will also plant an additional 200 cottonwood seedlings in a like manner in spring 2017.

III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- Minor direct, indirect and cumulative effects would be associated with soil disturbance caused by planting 400 cottonwood seedlings over two spring seasons on the island. The overall general area where planting would occur is approximately 1 acre.

5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be associated with disturbance caused by planting 400 cottonwood seedlings over two spring seasons on the island. Some short-term litter potential would be present due to the protective nets that would be used. However, the nets are rated to biodegrade within 5 years, which is a reasonable time to allow for seedlings to become well established.

6. AIR QUALITY:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- Minor direct, indirect and cumulative effects would be associated with vegetation changes caused by planting 400 cottonwood seedlings over two spring seasons on the island. The overall general area where planting would occur is approximately 1 acre. Successful establishment of seedlings would promote growth of cottonwood forest and groves on the selected sites. This would alter the existing non-forested sites and could change localized vegetation community types on the small affected area.

8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- Minor direct, indirect and cumulative effects would be associated with habitat changes caused by planting 400 cottonwood seedlings over two spring seasons on the island. The overall general area where planting would occur is approximately 1 acre. Successful establishment of seedlings would promote growth of cottonwood forest and groves on the selected sites and provide future benefits for a number of cavity-nesting species and species that require large structures for nesting such as bald eagles. A very small amount of currently non-forested habitat could be altered, which would be less beneficial for species that prefer those habitat conditions.

9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- Minor direct, indirect and cumulative effects would be associated with habitat changes associated with planting 400 cottonwood seedlings over two spring seasons on the island. The overall general area where planting would occur is approximately 1 acre. Successful establishment of seedlings would promote growth of cottonwood forest and groves on the selected sites and provide future benefits for a number of cavity-nesting species and species that require large structures for nesting such as bald eagles. A very small amount of currently non-forested habitat could be altered, which would be less beneficial for species that prefer those habitat conditions. No other unique, endangered, fragile or limited resources are known.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be associated with disturbance caused by planting 400 cottonwood seedlings over two spring seasons on the island. However, if previously unknown cultural or paleontological materials are identified during project related activities, all work will cease until a professional assessment of such resources can be made.

11. AESTHETICS:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- Minor direct, indirect and cumulative effects would be associated with vegetation changes caused by planting 400 cottonwood seedlings over two spring seasons on the island. The overall general area where planting would occur is approximately 1 acre. Successful establishment of seedlings would promote growth of cottonwood forest and groves on the selected sites. This would alter the existing non-forested sites and could change localized vegetation community types on the small affected area. Some recreationists floating the river and stopping on the island may observe some of the light yellow tree nets, which may appear out of place and unnatural. Minimal additional effects would be anticipated.

12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA:

DNRC is not aware of any other studies, plans, or projects associated with this tract.

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated. Some trespass cattle use is possible at this site.

Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated. Some trespass cattle use is possible at this site.

16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated. The work associated with the project would involve approximately 150 total hours of contracted staff time.

17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated. The work associated with the project would involve approximately 150 total hours of contracted staff time.

18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS:

No Action Alternative- The biological offset agreement would not be carried out at this time.

Action Alternative- This project would be conducted to fulfill a biological offset agreement (May 5, 2016) between DNRC and the USFWS.

20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- Minor direct, indirect and cumulative effects would be associated with vegetation changes caused by planting 400 cottonwood seedlings over two spring seasons on the island. The overall general area where planting would occur is approximately 1 acre. Successful establishment of seedlings would promote growth of cottonwood forest and groves on the selected sites. This would alter the existing non-forested sites and could change localized vegetation community types on the small affected area. Some recreationists floating the river and stopping on the island may observe some of the light yellow tree nets, which may appear out of place and unnatural. Minimal additional effects would be anticipated.

21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:

No Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

Action Alternative- No direct, indirect or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Ross Baty Title: Forest Management Wildlife Biologist	Date: May 10, 2016
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V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation has completed the environmental assessment (EA) for the proposed action that addresses biological offset activities for a prior bald eagle nesting site on an island in the Missouri River, south of Cascade, MT. After a thorough review of the EA, the project file, Department policies, standards, and guidelines, I have made the following decisions concerning this action:

The alternatives proposed for consideration in this EA were the No Action and the Action Alternative. Under the Action Alternative, DNRC will carry out the terms of a biological offset agreement made with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Action Alternative has been selected for the following reasons:

- The Action Alternative meets the project Purpose and Need listed under Section I. of the EA:
 - Provide biological offset for the loss of cottonwood trees associated with fire suppression activities.
- The Action Alternative is consistent with State and local policies, laws, and regulations.
- The Action Alternative is required to meet the terms of the biological offset agreement made with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

Upon review of the project and analysis herein, I find that none of the impacts are severe, enduring, geographically widespread, or frequent. Further, I find that the quantity and quality of the natural resources, including any that may be considered unique or fragile, will not be adversely affected to a significant degree. I find no precedent for the future actions that would cause significant impacts, and I find no conflict with local, State, or federal laws, requirements, or formal plans. In summary, I find that adverse impacts would be avoided, controlled, or mitigated by the design and implementation of the project to an extent that they are not significant.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

EIS More Detailed EA No Further Analysis

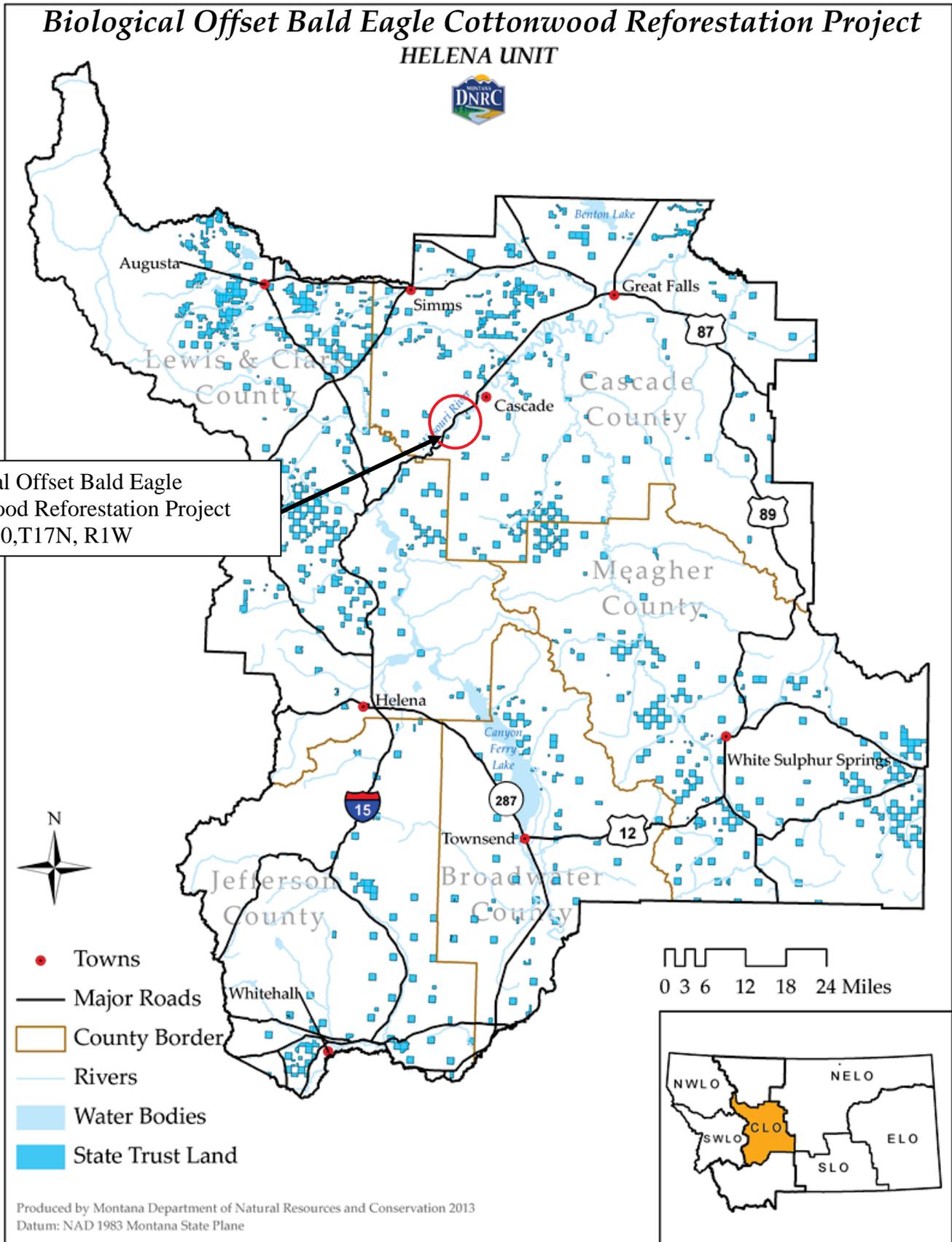
EA Checklist Approved By:	Name: Hoyt Richards
	Title: Area Manager Central Land Office
Signature: <i>Hoyt Richards</i>	Date: May 17, 2016

Attachment A

Area Maps

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A-1 Biological Offset Bald Eagle Cottonwood Reforestation Project Vicinity Map



A-2: Biological Offset Bald Eagle Cottonwood Reforestation Project Area Map

Montana DNRC Island, Cascade MT
Original Bald Eagle Nest Site Location
SECTION 10, T17N, R1W

