

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Brian Aklestad-CRP to Agricultural Land Classification
Proposed Implementation Date:	Spring/Summer 2018
Proponent:	Brian Aklestad, Box 58, Galata, MT 59444
Location:	Lease #3667, N2, Section 36, T33N, R2E
County:	Toole
Trust:	Common Schools

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

CRP contract #436A containing 248.50 acres expired on 09/30/2017. The lessee, Brian Aklestad, has requested to break these CRP acres. The tract was last farmed in 1987. The lessee plans to spray the expired CRP out during the spring/summer of 2018 and then direct seed it to either a pulse or cereal crop in the spring of 2019.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

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

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

DNRC-Surface Owner
Brian Aklestad, Lessee, Lease #3667
Ryan Rauscher-MFWP
Montana Salinity Control Association
Montana Audubon Society

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

DNRC is not aware of any other agencies with jurisdiction or other permits needed to complete this project.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Alternative A (No Action) – Deny Brian Aklestad permission to break the expired CRP and return it to small grain production.

Alternative B (the Proposed action) – Grant Brian Aklestad permission to break the expired CRP and return it to small grain production.

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.

This tract consists of gently rolling to rolling topography. The below table outlines the soil types that will be broke.

Slope	Class	T-Factor	WEG	Estimated WW Yield	Acres	Section
0-4%	3E	5	5	41 bu/acre	95.50	36
0-4%	4E	5	3	41 bu/acre	2.00	36
0-4%	4E	5	3	27 bu/acre	65.00	36
0-8%	4E	5	3	29 bu/acre	86.00	36
TOTAL	3E				95.50	
TOTAL	4E				153.00	
TOTAL	BREAK				248.50	

Class 3 soils have severe limitations that restrict the choice of plants and require special conservation practices. Class 4 soils have very severe limitations that restrict the choice of plants or that require very careful management, or both. The letter "e" shows that there is an erosion hazard unless close-growing plant cover is maintained.

The class 3E soils have an expected yield of 41 bu/acre for winter wheat and are susceptible to wind and water erosion. These erosion concerns will be mitigated due to the residue produced not being destroyed by the utilization of no-till farming practices. Clearly, the majority of the soils on this tract meet DNRC's land break requirements.

The class 4E soils have an expected yield of 27-41 bu/acre for winter wheat. The class 4E soils have a WEG of 3 which is lower than the require rating of 4. These erosion concerns will be mitigated due to the residue produced not being destroyed by the utilization of no-till farming practices. Clearly, the majority of the soils on this tract meet DNRC's land break requirements.

The last noted practice types were CP-10 which is for already established grass. The reason for initial enrollment in CRP is for increased revenue and due to farming difficulties presented by the utilization of mechanical tillage which destroyed the resided produced by small grain production.

Jane Holzer, Montana Salinity Control Association commented, "I looked back in time on the requested CRP break for N2 Section 36 T33N R2E. There was no sign of saline problems prior to the rotation into CRP perennial forage. However, there are two recent severe saline seeps in the S2. Based on this, there would be a potential if the N2 is returned back to crop-fallow rotation so this would warrant long-term monitoring as the land is returned to cropland. I would suggest not cropping too close (as in before CRP) to the old creek meanders because that is where saline conditions could occur. The saline areas in the S2 are associated with a strong waterway coming from the east. There is not as strong a waterway showing at this time in the N2. It would be interesting to know why this N2 was enrolled in CRP – was there a saline problem starting or was it a time management/economical decision?

You have a bigger saline problem in the south half. The first saline area is shown in the 2004 aerial photo, and then there was a change as that seep receded and grew until the second seep appeared in 2013 (although it was so wet in 2009 the harvest pattern was altered). Both seeps were masked on the wet years but by the 2016 photo the problem became more severe, altering the cropping pattern around the first seep and reduced production on the 2nd seep. It appears the lessee tried re-cropping at least one season to deal with the excess moisture. The saline problems will continue to get worse so any management changes you can encourage would be beneficial. This area would benefit from a perennial forage rotation to reclaim the saline land before the two seeps get worse. You might consider getting the S2 enrolled in Continuous CRP-CP 18 for saline recharge areas. If you are interested, MSCA staff would help with this potential designation."-see attached E-mail.

Mitigation: By changing the proposed break area to only approximately 232.00 acres, the meanders next to Willow Creek will be left in permanent cover. This will eliminate the majority of the salinity and wildlife concerns from the proposed break area. These concerns will be further mitigated with the use of no-till farming not destroying the residue produced in small grain production.

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.

There are no documented and/or recorded water rights associated with the tract. Other water quality and/or quantity issues will not be impacted by the proposed action.

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.

No cumulative effects to air quality are anticipated.

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.

The expired CRP vegetation is introduced species consisting of primarily crested wheatgrass, smooth brome, and alfalfa. The tract was last farmed in 1987. The vegetative community will be altered by the reclassification. The conversion of CRP to small grain production will increase the overall productivity of the tract as the current grass stand has very low vigor.

A review of Natural Heritage data through the NRIS was conducted and there were no plant species of concern noted or potential species of concern noted on the NRIS survey.

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.

No comments were received from Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks.

Mitigation: Only 232.00 acres of the proposed 248.50 acres will be broke, leaving the meanders next to Willow Creek in permanent cover. This will eliminate the majority of the salinity and wildlife concerns from the proposed break area.

Converting existing CRP acres to agricultural land will decrease wildlife thermal and hiding cover. This reduction of cover may adversely impact various wildlife species including songbirds, upland game birds, waterfowl, antelope, white tailed deer, and mule deer. Agricultural land may provide a limited food source for wildlife species including deer, antelope, upland game birds and migrating waterfowl. No comments were received from the Montana Audubon Society.

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.

There are no threatened or endangered species, sensitive habitat types, or other species of special concern associated with the proposed project area. Montana FWP did provide site specific comments regarding wildlife, (see item #8). At this time, no known unique, endangered, fragile or limited environmental resources have been identified within the proposed project area. The project consists of 232.00 acres of CRP which is only a very small portion of the total uncultivated acres held within Toole County.

A review of Natural Heritage data through the NRIS was conducted for T33N, R2E. There were zero animal species of concern, one potential species of concern, and zero potential species of concern noted on the NRIS survey: Fish-Brook Stickleback. This tract of expired CRP does not contain many, if any of this species. If any are present, they may be dispersed into surrounding permanent cover.

With the use of the USDA-NRCS Conservation Plan, minimum cumulative effects are anticipated.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

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

Patrick Rennie, DNRC archaeologist, was contacted and he stated that due to the CRP being previously farmed, no historical, archaeological, or paleontological resources would be present.

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.

Since the field is currently in CRP and the surrounding tracts are all either CRP, grazing, or farmed, reclassification as agricultural and grazing land will not affect the aesthetics of the area.

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.

The demand on environmental resources such as land, water, air, or energy will not be affected by the proposed action. The proposed action will not consume resources that are limited in the area. There are no other projects in the area that will affect the proposed project.

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.

There are no other projects or plans being considered on the tract listed on this EA.

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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.

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:

Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.

The proposed project will not change human safety in the area.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

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

The reclassification to agricultural land will increase the vegetative productivity on this tract. The estimated WW yield is 27-41 bu/acre. In a 50-50 crop fallow system, economic returns will vary between \$20.00/acre to \$30.00/acre. The current CRP payment is \$32.46/acre at a 43.00% share, but will not be sustained due to the contract having expired on 09/30/2017. Converting these acres to cropland, the Common Schools trust would see an increase in revenue.

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.

The proposed action will not significantly affect long-term employment in the surrounding communities.

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.

The proposed action will increase the tax revenue due to the increased revenue generated in small grain production.

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

There will be no increases in traffic, no changes in traffic patterns, and no need for additional fire protection, or police services.

There will be no direct or cumulative effects on government services.

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.

The proposed action is in compliance with State and County laws. No other management plans are in effect for the area.

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.

This tract of state land is rural and generally has low recreational value. The tract is not legally accessible and the proposed action is not expected to impact general recreational and wilderness activities on this state tract.

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

The proposal does not include any changes to housing or developments.

No direct or cumulative effects to population or housing are anticipated.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:

Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

There are no native, unique, or traditional lifestyles or communities in the vicinity that would be impacted by the proposal.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

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

The proposed action will not impact the cultural uniqueness or diversity of the area.

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.

The proposed conversion of expired CRP to agricultural land will greatly improve the productivity on the tract and increase the return to the trust. The current grass stands have lost their vigor and have very low productivity. No other unique circumstances exist.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Tony Nickol	Date: February 16, 2018
	Title: Land Use Specialist, Conrad Unit, Central Land Office	

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

Alternative B (the Proposed action) – Grant Brian Aklestad permission to break the expired CRP and return it to small grain production.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

I have reviewed the proposed action and comments received and decided that it is prudent to break 232 acres for cropland production. 16.5 acres on the west side of the CRP adjacent to willow creek will not be broke. he lessee must work with FSA and NRCS and obtain a Conservation Plan and comply with all sod busting regulations. The proposed action will help meet TLMD objectives by increasing revenue to the school trust.

Other significant negative impacts are not expected.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

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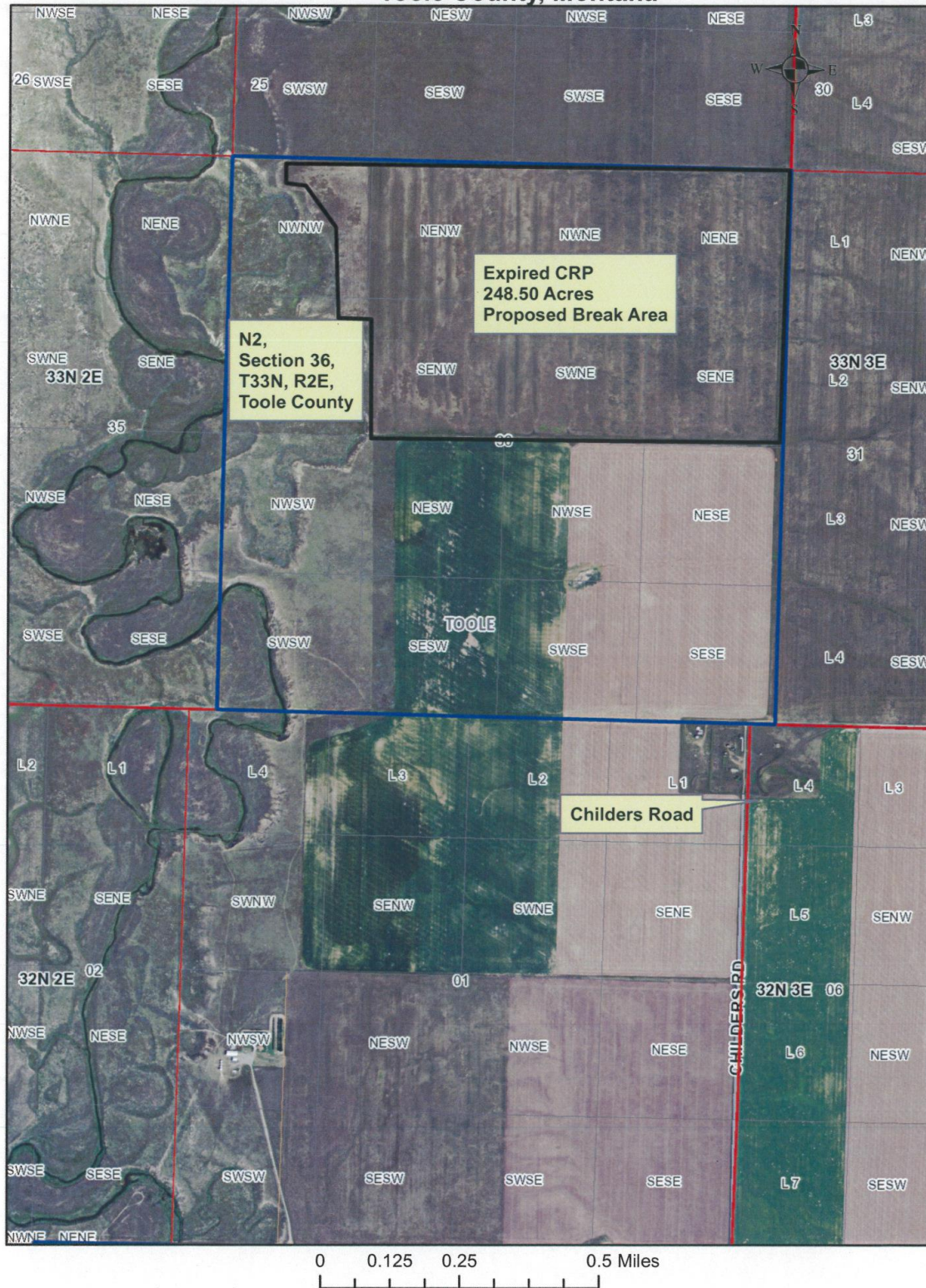
More Detailed EA

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No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	Name: Erik Eneboe
	Title: Conrad Unit Manager, CLO, DNRC
Signature: 	
Date: February 20, 2018	

Toole County, Montana



Nickol, Tony

From: Jane Holzer MSCA <msca@3rivers.net>
Sent: Monday, February 05, 2018 11:02 AM
To: Nickol, Tony
Cc: 'Scott Brown'
Subject: CRP break request in Toole County

Tony

I looked back in time on the requested CRP break for N2 Section 36 T33N R2E. There was no sign of saline problems prior to the rotation into CRP perennial forage. However, there are two recent severe saline seeps in the S2. Based on this, there would be a potential if the N2 is returned back to crop-fallow rotation so this would warrant long-term monitoring as the land is returned to cropland. I would suggest not cropping too close (as in before CRP) to the old creek meanders because that is where saline conditions could occur. The saline areas in the S2 are associated with a strong waterway coming from the east. There is not as strong a waterway showing at this time in the N2. It would be interesting to know why this N2 was enrolled in CRP – was there a saline problem starting or was it a time management/economical decision?

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Toole County, Montana

