CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Harmon Ranch-CRP to Agricultural and Grazing Land Classification
Proposed Implementation Date:	Spring/Summer 2019
Proponent:	Harmon Ranch Inc., Box 584, Chester, MT 59522
Location:	Lease #4770, E2, Section 33, T31N, R6E
County:	Liberty
Trust:	Common Schools

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

CRP contract #1010A containing 294.30 acres expired on 09/30/2018. The lessee, Harmon Ranch Inc., has requested to break a portion of these CRP acres. Approximately, 212.56 acres are proposed to be broken up and returned to small grain production. The remaining 81.72 acres will be left in permanent cover and used for grazing land. The tract was last farmed in 1987. The lessee plans to spray the expired CRP out during the spring/summer of 2019 and then direct seed it to either winter wheat in the fall of 2019 or spring wheat in the spring of 2020.

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
Harmon Ranch Inc., Lessee, Lease #4770
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 Harmon Ranch Inc. permission to break 212.56 acres of expired CRP and return it to small grain production.

Alternative B (the Proposed action) – Grant Harmon Ranch Inc. permission to break 212.56 acres of expired CRP and return it to small grain production.
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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	6	40 bu/acre	40.00	33
0-4%	3E	2	6	38 bu/acre	30.75	33
0-4%	4E	5	3	35 bu/acre	124.39	33
0-4%	4E	3	3	30 bu/acre	17.42	33
TOTAL	3E				70.75	
TOTAL	4E				141.81	
TOTAL	BREAK				212.56	

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 38-40 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 30-35 bu/acre due to poor quality soils. The class 4E soils have a T factor of 3 which is lower than the required rating of 5 and 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-2 &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 have reviewed historical aerial photos and find no salinity conditions prior to the CRP forage establishment for State Lease #4770 in Section 33, T31N R6E, 212.56 acres. Keeping perennial forage as permanent cover on 81.72 acres close to Cottonwood Creek is a sound BMP.

Saline conditions are generally not found south of Chester but there are saline problems adjacent to Cottonwood Creek north of Chester that have been reclaimed with perennial forage.", see attached e-mail.

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 and Russian wildrye. 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.

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 212.56 acres of CRP which is only a very small portion of the total uncultivated acres held within Liberty County.

A review of Natural Heritage data through the NRIS was conducted. There were nine animal species of concern and one potential species of concern noted on the NRIS survey: Birds-Baird's Sparrow, Burrowing Owl, Ferruginous Hawk, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Greater Sage-grouse, Loggerhead Shrike, Long-billed Curlew, McCown's Longspur, Brewer's Sparrow, and Short-eared Owl. This tract of 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 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

- *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 30-40 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 $26.16/acre at a 42.36% share but will not be sustained due to the contract having expired on 09/30/2018. 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 follows 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 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:**	October 29, 2018
	Title:	Land Use Specialist, Conrad Unit, Central Land Office		

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

Alternative B (the Proposed action) – Grant Harmon Ranch Inc. permission to break 212.56 acres of expired CRP and return it to small grain production.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

The 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.

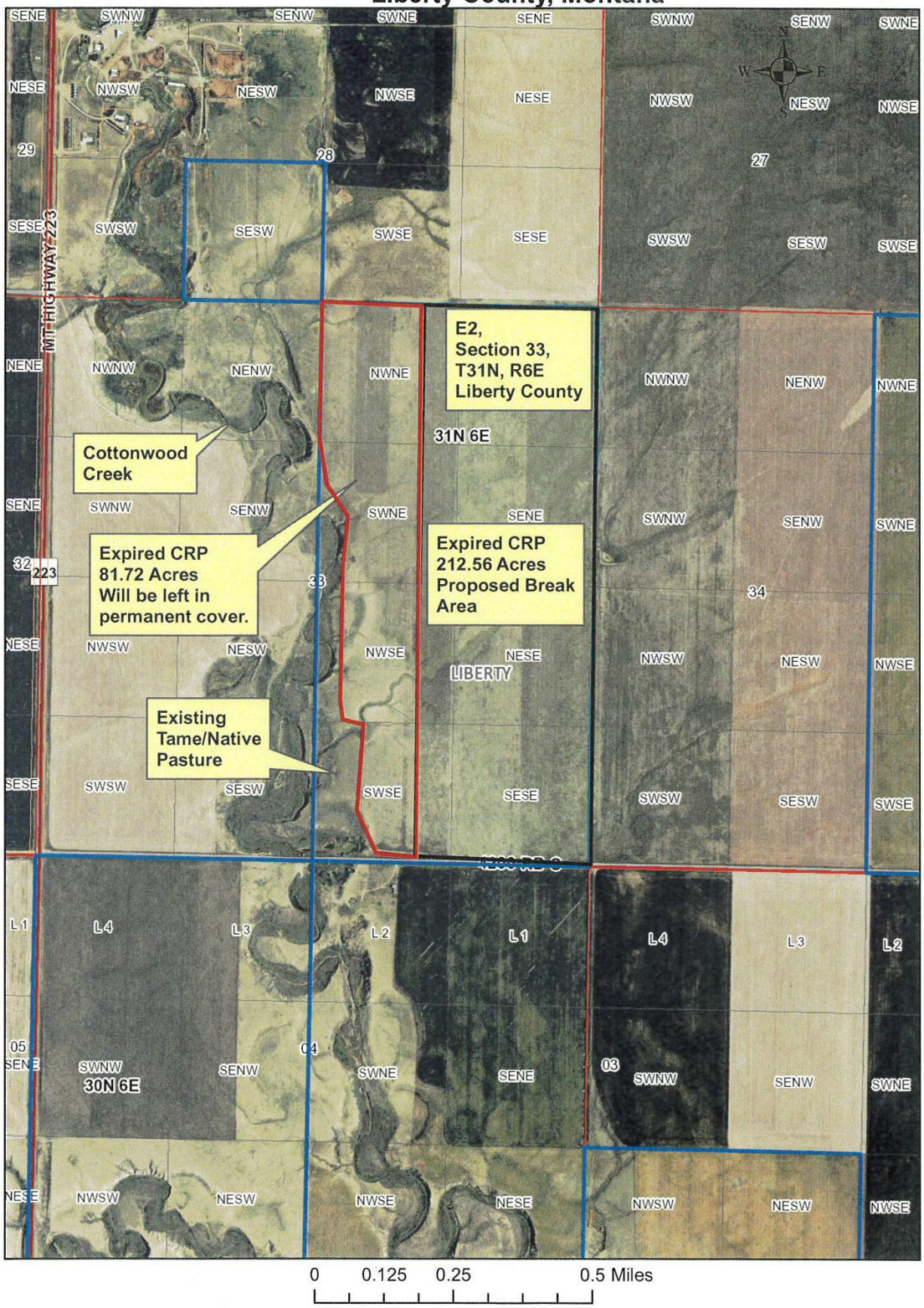
Other significant negative impacts are not expected.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

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

EA Checklist Approved By:	**Name:** Erik Eneboe **Title:** Conrad Unit Manager, CLO, DNRC	
Signature:		**Date**: Nov. 1, 2018

Liberty County, Montana



Nickol, Tony

From: Jane Holzer MSCA <msca@3rivers.net>
Sent: Tuesday, October 23, 2018 6:09 PM
To: Nickol, Tony
Subject: CRP breaking request in Liberty County

I have reviewed historical aerial photos and find no salinity conditions prior to the CRP forage establishment for State Lease #4770 in Section 33, T31N R6E, 212.56 acres. Keeping perennial forage as permanent cover on 81.72 acres close to Cottonwood Creek is a sound BMP.

Saline conditions are generally not found south of Chester but there are saline problems adjacent to Cottonwood Creek north of Chester that have been reclaimed with perennial forage.

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