

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Northern Telephone Cooperative, Inc. – Underground Telecommunications Facility
Proposed Implementation Date:	Fall of 2020
Proponent:	Northern Telephone Cooperative, Inc.
Location:	NE ¼ NE ¼ of Section 23, T.35N., R.3W.
County:	Toole
Trust:	Capitol Buildings

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

Northern Telephone Cooperative, Inc. (NTC, Inc.) proposes the installment of an underground telecommunications facility (Cable), with a Right of Way (ROW) corridor approximately 20 feet in length and with 10 feet on each side of a centerline in width, located on state land (lease number 6826) in Toole County, MT, referred herein as the "Project". **See, Attachment A**, Project Location Map. The Cable will provide improved telecommunications toll and distribution facilities to the Kevin Exchange area, as well as capabilities for future growth.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

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

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

The Project is located on state owned land and NTC, Inc. is the proponent. Agencies involved in the easement process include the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, (DNRC), Trust Lands Management Division.

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

NTC, Inc. is required to obtain a Right of Way (ROW) Easement for Utilities Over, Under, Along or Across State Lands from the DNRC. The DNRC is not aware of any other permits and/or easements required for the Project on the portion of state land described as NE ¼ NE ¼ of Section 23, Township 35 North, Range 3 West. NTC, Inc. has conveyed that they are obtaining a Private Easement with the property owner to the south and a permit with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) on the property to the north.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Alternative A (No Action Alternative): Deny NTC, Inc. permission to install the Cable on state land (lease number 6826).

Alternative B (Proposed Action): Grant NTC, Inc. permission to install the Cable on state land (lease number 6826).

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.

Soil Quality and Moisture:

There are three soil types found within the Project footprint.

Hillon-Joplin Loam, 8 to 25 percent slopes: These soils consist of very deep (more than 60 inches), well-drained soils that formed in glacial till. These soils are found on hill shoulders and back slopes. Available water capacity is 9.2 to 10.0 inches; mean annual precipitation for the region is 10 to 14 inches. (Soil Survey of Toole County, Montana Part 1, 2002). Per the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Web Soil Survey (WSS) this type of soil is rated as “Very Limited” for shallow excavations (i.e. Cable excavation). “Very limited indicates that the soil has one or more features that are unfavorable for the specified use. The limitations generally cannot be overcome without major soil reclamation, special design, or expensive installation procedures.” (Custom Soil Resource Report for Toole County, Montana, 2020).

Bascovy Clay Loam, 2 to 8 percent slopes: These soils consist of moderately deep (20 to 40 inches), well drained soils that formed in residuum derived from shale. These soils are found on sedimentary plains. Available water capacity is 4.6 inches; the mean annual precipitation for the region is 10 to 14 inches. (Soil Survey of Toole County, Montana Part 1, 2002). Per the NRCS WSS, this type of soil is rates as “Very Limited” for shallow excavations (i.e. Cable excavation). “Very limited indicates that the soil has one or more features that are unfavorable for the specified use. The limitations generally cannot be overcome without major soil reclamation, special design, or expensive installation procedures.” (Custom Soil Resource Report for Toole County, Montana, 2020).

Joplin-Hillon Clay Loam, 2 to 8 percent slopes: These soils consist of very deep (more than 60 inches), well-drained soils that formed in glacial till. These soils are found on till plains shoulders and back slopes. Available water capacity is 9.1 to 9.9 inches; mean annual precipitation for the region is 10 to 14 inches. (. (Soil Survey of Toole County, Montana Part 1, 2002). Per the NRCS WSS, this type of soil is rates as “Somewhat Limited” for shallow excavations (i.e. Cable excavation). “Somewhat limited indicates that the soil has features that are moderately favorable for the specified use. The limitations can be overcome or minimized by special planning, design, or installation”. (Custom Soil Resource Report for Toole County, Montana, 2020).

Soil Stability:

Soils identified within the Project footprint have a Soil Erodibility (K) Factor of 0.17 to 0.28. The K Factor range is 0.02 to 0.69 (0.69 being the most susceptible to sheet and rill erosion by water). The K Factor is low to moderate for the Project site and can be mitigated with appropriate Best Management Practices (BMPs).

BMPs:

Cable excavation will have minimal soil disturbance, nonetheless, compliance with a granted easement will require NTC, Inc. to revegetate any disturbed area and control noxious weeds introduced by Project activities. The revegetation methods require a written plan be submitted to the local weed board for approval and the noxious weed control method will be reviewed by the DNRC – Conrad Field Office for approval.

Determination:

Effect; Not Likely to Adversely Effect. The Project has the potential to impact soils, however, with the implementation of the required BMPs, described above, it is not expected to result in significant cumulative impacts.

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.

Surface or Groundwater Resources:

There are no known Water Right claims within the Project footprint. There is an unnamed tributary (intermittent stream) located approximately 230 feet east of the Project that flows into Goeddertz Reservoir.

BMPs:

NTC, Inc. proposes Project activities be conducted before winter when water is at little to no flow in the adjacent stream to minimize impacts. Compliance with a granted easement will require NTC, Inc. to revegetate any disturbed area and control noxious weeds introduced by Project activities. The revegetation methods require a written plan be submitted to the local weed board for approval and the noxious weed control method will be

reviewed by the DNRC – Conrad Field Office for approval. Revegetation of any disturbed soil will prevent sediment run-off into the adjacent unnamed tributary.

Determination:

Effect, Not Likely to Adversely Effect. The Project has potential to cause increased sediment in the unnamed tributary due to soil disturbance from Cable excavation, however, the BMPs proposed by NTC, Inc. above would mitigate any cumulative impacts to water quality.

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.

Air Quality:

There are no Nonattainment areas located on or near the Project, per the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Nonattainment area maps (NEPAssist, 2020). The proposed Project will not result in any new air emissions.

Determination:

No Effect. It is not anticipated that the Project would result in cumulative impact to air quality.

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.

Vegetation Community:

Vegetation on the Project site consists of native grasses; a Field Evaluation conducted on 5/14/2014 by DNRC staff determined native grass species consist of Western wheatgrass (*Agropyron smithii*), Green needlegrass (*Stipa viridula*), Prairie sand-reed (*Calamovilfa longifolia*), Indian ricegrass (*Oryzopsis hymenoides*), Blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*), Sandberg bluegrass (*Poa secunda*), Prairie junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*), Threadleaf sedge (*Carex filifolia*), and Needle-and-thread (*Stipa comata*). No noxious weeds were identified on the tract during the Field Evaluation. The Natural Heritage Program database did not indicate species of concern within Township 35N, Range 3W.

BMPs:

Cable excavation will have minimal soil disturbance, nonetheless, compliance with a granted easement will require NTC, Inc. to revegetate any disturbed area and control noxious weeds introduced by Project activities. The revegetation methods require a written plan be submitted to the local weed board for approval and the noxious weed control method will be reviewed by the DNRC – Conrad Field Office for approval.

Determination:

Effect, Not Likely to Adversely Effect. The Project has potential to temporarily effect the vegetation community within the Project footprint. The BMPs proposed above will mitigate any long-term adverse effects and therefore cumulative impacts on vegetation resources are not expected.

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.

Habitat:

The Project site is not considered Critical Habitat per the EPA. The surrounding area provides habitat for a variety of big game species, predators, upland game birds, other non-game mammals, birds of prey, and various songbirds. The unnamed tributary to the east of the Project site provides seasonal water and is not expected to contain aquatic species.

BMPs:

Impacts on wildlife will be temporary (e.g. noise impacts during construction days). Project activities will occur during the dryer months when the unnamed stream to the east will have little to no flow and outside of bird nesting season (March-August). Compliance with a granted easement will require NTC, Inc. to revegetate any disturbed area and control noxious weeds introduced by Project activities. The revegetation methods require a

written plan be submitted to the local weed board for approval and the noxious weed control method will be reviewed by the DNRC – Conrad Field Office for approval.

Determination:

Effect, Not Likely to Adversely Effect. The Project will have a temporary disturbance on wildlife within the vicinity of Project activities, however, with the proposed BMPs, described above, cumulative impacts on wildlife or their habitats are not expected.

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.

Species of Concern/Threatened/Endangered:

Federally listed species that occur in Toole County, Montana include Grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*), Red Knot (*Calidris canutus rufa*), and Whitebark Pine (*Pinus albicaulis*).

The National Heritage Program database identifies Eastern Red Bat (*Lasiurus borealis*), Hoary Bat (*Lasiurus cinereus*), Little Brown Myotis (*Myotis lucifugus*), Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*), Ferruginous Hawk (*Buteo regalis*), Chestnut-collared Longspur (*Calcarius ornatus*), Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*), McCown's Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*), and Brewer's Sparrow (*Spizella breweri*) as species of concern within Township 35N, Range 3W.

Wetlands:

The National Wetland Inventory identifies a Riverine habitat with a classification code of R4SBC and a Freshwater Emergent Wetland habitat with a classification code of PEM1C approximately 230 feet from the Project site; for a complete description of wetland classification codes go to <https://www.fws.gov/wetlands/data/Mapper.html>.

BMPs:

Impacts on wildlife will be temporary (e.g. noise impacts during construction days). Project activities will occur during the dryer months when the unnamed stream to the east will have little to no flow and outside of bird nesting season (March-August). Project activities will not occur during the bat hibernacula roosting period. Compliance with a granted easement will require NTC, Inc. to revegetate any disturbed area and control noxious weeds introduced by Project activities. The revegetation methods require a written plan be submitted to the local weed board for approval and the noxious weed control method will be reviewed by the DNRC – Conrad Field Office for approval.

Determination:

Effect, Not Likely to Adversely Effect. Per the Field Evaluation (2014) the Project site does not contain trees for canopy roosting which is the preferred roosting habitat of the Eastern Red Bat (*Lasiurus borealis*), and the Hoary Bat (*Lasiurus cinereus*) (Draft Bat Conservation Plan and Strategy for Montana, 2006). Project activities are expected to occur after the Little Brown Myotis (*Myotis lucifugus*) pups have become volant (approximately 22 days after birth which occurs late June to July) (Draft Bat Conservation Plan and Strategy for Montana, 2006). The Project has the potential to temporarily impact identified species on or near the Project site and habitat, however, with the implementation of the BMPs described above and the timing of Project activities cumulative impacts on species and their habitat is not expected.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

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

Historical and Archeological Sites:

DNRC staff inspected the proposed telecommunications Cable route. It was found to be within the boundaries of a stone feature site composed of tipi ring -size stone circles and low-profile cairns. The proposed route will currently avoid impacting any of the identified stone features on the state tract. **See, Attachment B,** Archaeological Sites.

Determination:

No additional archaeological work is recommended, and the proposed Project will result in No Adverse effect to Heritage Properties on state land.

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.

Visual and Noise:

The Project is located approximately 2 miles north of Kevin, Montana (population 137) and approximately 4 miles west of Interstate 15, Project activities are not expected to be visible from these two points. The proposed Project will not result in any above ground structures and noise impacts due to construction activities will be temporary (e.g. during construction days).

Determination:

No Effect. Given the distance of the Project from populated areas, no above ground structures are proposed, and the Project site being restored to original grade, it is not expected to have cumulative impacts on aesthetics.

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.

No Effect. The Project does not propose the use of limited natural resources and is not expected to have cumulative impacts to environmental resources.

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.

Surrounding lands are owned by private, state, and federal landowners with a surface use of ag and grazing and a sub-surface use for mineral extraction. Any future development in the area will likely be restricted to utility or mineral development, with minimal impacts on surface. Future development or projects are not expected to have negative cumulative impacts.

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.

Determination:

No Effect. Any risk to human health and safety will be restricted to personnel on the construction crew performing the work and it is assumed that NTC, Inc. will abide by all Occupational Safety and Health Administration laws. The Project is not expected to have cumulative impacts on human health and safety.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

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

Land Use:

The Project footprint is located on grazing land.

BMPs:

Compliance with a granted easement will require NTC, Inc. to revegetate any disturbed area, control noxious weeds introduced by Project activities, and bury the Cable below plow depth so as to no interfere with potential future cultivation of the land. The revegetation methods require a written plan be submitted to the local weed

board for approval and the noxious weed control method will be reviewed by the DNRC – Conrad Field Office for approval.

Determination:

No Effect. The Project is not expected to impact existing and future land use activities on the tract.

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.

Effect, Beneficial Effect. The Project will have a beneficial impact through increasing employment opportunities for this region for the short term (e.g. # of active construction days). Negative and long-term cumulative impacts on the employment market are not expected.

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.

Effect, Beneficial Effect. The Project will add to the tax revenue, no cumulative impacts on taxes and revenue are expected.

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

No Effect. The Project is a small scale with a duration of 2 to 3 days and funded by the NTC, Inc. No additional governmental services are required for the Project, cumulative impacts are not expected.

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.

No Effect. The Project is in compliance with State and County laws and NTC, Inc. is in the process of obtaining all necessary permits to complete the Project, see **Section II (2)** for a full list of permits/approvals.

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.

Legal Access and Recreation Opportunities:

The proposed Project is located on legally accessible land via Sunburst Road. Recreation potential consists of hunting.

Determination:

No Effect. The Project will not result in any permanent impacts to the land, impact access, or recreational opportunities. The Project is not expected to have cumulative impacts on recreational and wilderness activities.

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.

No Effect. The Project is a small scale with a duration of 2 to 3 days, it is not expected to have cumulative impacts on population and housing.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:

Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

No Effect. The Project is located approximately 20 miles east of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation and approximately 10 miles southeast of the Rim Rock Hutterite Colony. Archeological finds located near the Project site (e.g. tipi ring -size stone circles and low-profile cairns) will not be impacted. Cumulative impacts to social structures are not expected.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

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

No Effect. The Project is a small scale with a duration of 2 to 3 days and the surface will be re-seeded, it is not expected to cumulatively impact the unique quality 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 Project will benefit the School Trust in terms of compensation for the easement incumbancers based on fair market value.

Any future development in the area will likely be restricted to utility or mineral development, with minimal impacts on surface. Future development or projects are not expected to have negative cumulative impacts.

The Project will provide improved telecommunications toll and distribution facilities to the Kevin Exchange area, as well as capabilities for future growth and therefore will have a benefit to rural residents in northern Toole County.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Michaela Hanson	Date: 8/4/2020
	Title: Land Use Specialist	

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:


Alternative B (Proposed Action): Grant NTC, Inc. permission to install the Cable on state land (lease number 6826).

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

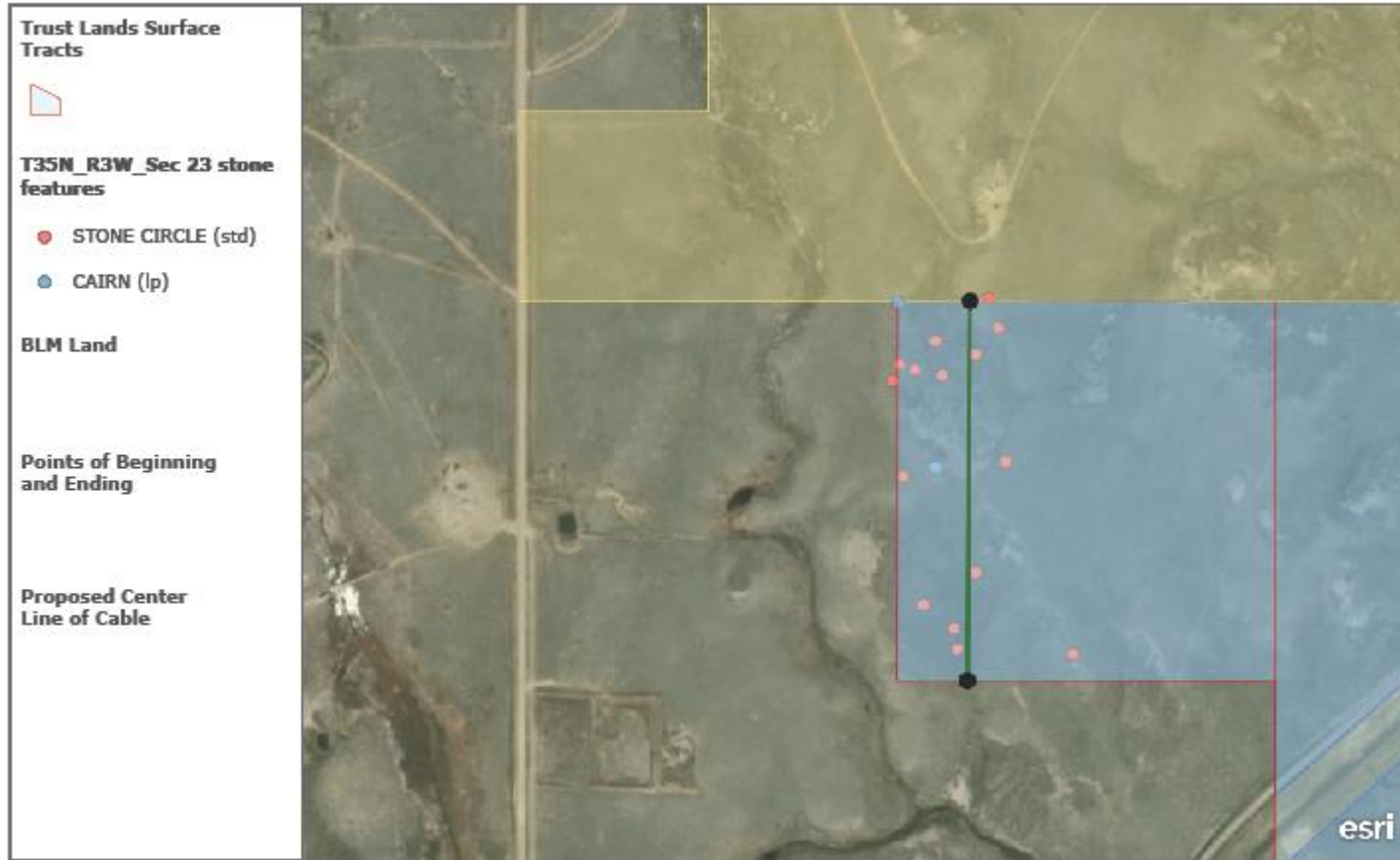
No significant impacts are expected. Temporary disturbance will occur as a result of Project activities, but it has been determined that the effects will not be cumulative or significantly adverse. Granting of the easement for installation of the Cable will benefit rural residents in northern Toole County.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

EIS More Detailed EA No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	Name: Erik Eneboe Title: Conrad Unit Manager
Signature: 	Date: 8-11-2020

Northern Telephone Cooperative, Inc. -Underground Telecommunications Facility



600ft
USDA FSA, GeoEye, Maxar, CNES/Airbus DS
8/4/2020

<https://mtdnrc.maps.arcgis.com/home/webmap/print.html>

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