

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Mid-Rivers Telephone Roundup Area Fiber Optic Easement
Proposed Implementation Date:	Spring/Summer 2020
Proponent:	Mid-Rivers Telephone Cooperative, Inc.
Location:	West ½ of Section 32, Township 6 North, Range 26 East (Common Schools Trust)
County:	Musselshell County

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

Mid-Rivers Telephone Cooperative is applying for a 16' wide easement on a parcel of Trust land in Musselshell County for the underground installation of fiber optic cable as described as the West ½ of Section 32-T6N-R26E. The proposed 16' wide (2.18 acre) easement would be located along the west side of Majerus Road (see Exhibit A).

This easement is a part of a larger project where Mid-Rivers is expanding fiber optic lines from their existing exchange in Roundup, some of which are replacing existing outdated copper service. This parcel is located approximately 15 miles south of Roundup.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

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

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

No formal public scoping was performed by DNRC for this proposed project. A Settlement of Damages form was obtained from the grazing lessee. In addition, Mid-Rivers sent a letter to an existing easement holder where the proposed fiber optic easements crossed or paralleled their easements. The party contacted was Global Rail, LLC.

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

Montana Department of Environmental Quality – Storm Water Discharge Permit (Pending)
Montana Department of Transportation – Utility Occupancy & Location Agreement (Pending)
Musselshell County Encroachment Permit (Pending)

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Proposed Alternative: Issue a 16' wide easement to Mid-Rivers Telephone Cooperative for the underground installation of fiber optic cable on the West ½ of Section 32, T6N R26E in Musselshell County.

No Action Alternative: Deny the request by Mid-Rivers Telephone Cooperative to issue a proposed 16' wide easement for fiber optic cable installation in Musselshell County on the West ½ of Section 32, T6N R26E.

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.

The route proposed in the easement is generally located along the west side of Majerus Road, a county road. The fiber optic cable is proposed to be installed using the direct plow method that entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. This method creates a narrow opening in the soil, inserts the cable, covers that cable and smooths the disturbed soil in a single pass. This installation method is considered trenchless. Based on the proposed action and relatively short disturbance time for cable installation, no significant adverse impacts to geology and soils are expected by implementing the proposed action.

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.

The proposed easement does not cross any surface water. Mid-Rivers has applied for their storm water permit from DEQ and the BMPs that will be required in that permit should protect any nearby waterway from impacts during installation of the new fiber optic cable. No significant adverse impacts to water quality, quantity or distribution are anticipated by implementing 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.

There may be short-term isolated impacts from the equipment exhaust that is used to install the fiber optic cable. No significant adverse impacts to air quality are expected by implementing the proposed action.

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 cable is proposed to be installed using direct plow method that entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. This method creates a narrow opening in the soil, inserts the cable, covers that cable and smooths the disturbed soil in a single pass. This installation method is considered trenchless. The area disturbed by the trenching activity and from vehicle travel could have short term impacts on vegetation. The easements will also contain a clause that any timber cut would be set aside to be disposed of by the DNRC. The easement document will also require Mid-Rivers Telephone to control any noxious weeds introduced by its activities and reclaim any disturbed areas. No significant long term adverse impacts to vegetative cover, quantity or quality are expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

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.

A variety of big game (antelope, deer, elk and mountain lions), small mammals, raptors, songbirds and turkeys may traverse the subject sections. The proposed project activities could temporarily disrupt wildlife movement and patterns. Due to the relatively short project duration and nature no significant adverse impacts to terrestrial, avian and aquatic life and habitats are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

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.

A search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program database indicated the following: six species of concern found for this parcel were the: Pinyon Jay, Spotted Bat, Townsend's Big Ear Bat, Greater-Sage Grouse, Red-Headed Woodpecker, and Cassin's Finch. None of the species were observed on the parcel, just in the general area. This section is located within Greater Sage Grouse General Habitat and Mid-Rivers completed a consultation with the Montana Sage Grouse Conservation Program.

Due to the nature of the proposed action, the installation of underground fiber optic cable, it is not expected to have a significant long-term effect on any of the species identified on or around this parcel. The surface disturbance will be temporary and located parallel and adjacent to an existing county road.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

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

Multiple Class III cultural and paleontological resources inventories have conducted of the area of potential effect on state land. Despite a detailed examination, no cultural or fossil resources were identified in the easement corridors. No additional archaeological or paleontological investigative work is recommended. The proposed project will have *No Effect to Antiquities* as defined under the Montana State Antiquities Act. Formal reports of findings are available through the DNRC and the Montana State Historic Preservation Officer.

Additionally, during a site visit on 25 November 2019 by Area Planner Jeff Bollman, a visual inspection was performed, especially on areas outside of previously disturbed areas, and no cultural or paleontological resources were identified.

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.

The proposed action would result in the installation of underground fiber optic cable adjacent and parallel to an existing county road. Once the easement areas are rehabbed from the installation disturbance, the only indication that there is an underground fiber optic line would be from any above-ground warning markers. Therefore, no significant adverse impact to aesthetics is expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

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 significant adverse impacts to environmental resources of land, water, air or energy are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

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 known studies or future actions planned for this Trust land parcel.

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.</i>• <i>Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.</i>• <i>Enter "NONE" if no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.</i>

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:

Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.

No significant adverse impacts to human health and safety would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

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

The location of the easement does not traverse any crop lands. No significant adverse impacts to industrial, commercial and agricultural activities and production would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

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 have no significant impact on the quantity and distribution of employment.

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 have no adverse impact on tax revenue.

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

The implementation of the proposed alternative will not generate any additional demands on governmental 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.

Implementation of the proposed alternative will not conflict with any locally adopted plans.

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.

The subject parcel does have legal public access via a county road (Majerus Road). The fiber optic cable installation is expected to occur in the Spring of 2020 (weather dependent) and could overlap spring turkey season. Impacts due to installation should be minimal as the easements run parallel to existing roads or highways and installation will be of a relatively short duration. The implementation of the proposed alternative is not expected to have a long-term adverse impact on recreational use of these Trust land parcels.

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 significant adverse impacts to density and distribution of population and housing would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

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 proposed alternative.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

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

The proposed alternative will not have a significant adverse impact on cultural uniqueness or diversity.

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 Common Schools Trust Permanent Fund will benefit by getting a one-time fee of \$1,090 from Mid-Rivers Telephone Cooperative for the purchase of the easements on this Trust parcel.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Jeff Bollman, AICP	Date: 27 January 2020
	Title: Area Planner, Southern Land Office	

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

The proposed alternative has been selected and it is recommended that permanent 16' easements be granted to Mid-Rivers Telephone Cooperative for the purpose of installing underground fiber optic cable on the following Trust land parcels in Musselshell County: West ½ of Section 32, Township 6 North, Range 26 East.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

The potential for significant adverse impacts to the Trust lands listed above are minimal due to the nature of the proposed action which would entail the issuing of the easements and installation of underground fiber optic cable. The easement is located adjacent to and parallel to Majerus Road, an existing county road. There are no natural features that could produce adverse impacts or species of concern occupying the parcels that are expected to be impacted by implementing the proposed action.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

EIS

More Detailed EA

No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	Name: Jeff Hermanns	
	Title: Area Forester, Southern Land Office	
Signature: Jeffrey Hermanns		Date: 1/27/20

Exhibit A – Proposed Easement location on the West 1/2 of Section 32-6N-26E

