CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	USDA Public Road & Parking Lot Easement Proposal
Proposed Implementation Date:	Summer 2020
Proponent:	U.S. Department of Agriculture
Location:	Section 26, Township 6 North, Range 12 East (Common Schools)
County:	Wheatland

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

The United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service has made application for two easements on state school trust land located at Section 26, Township 6 North, Range 12 East to provide access to USFS land:

1. Establish a parking lot and public access, and
2. Administrative access road.

These easement requests are the result of successful negotiation of a reciprocal access agreement between the USFS and McFarland-White Ranch. The USFS has acquired administrative access easement and a public access easement for all lawful purposes from the McFarland-White Ranch and has agreed to manage the public access road in accordance with the current and any future Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest Travel Plan designation for the Big Elk Creek Trail No. 640 for the Castle and Crazy Mountains. Currently, access to Trail No. 640 would be for non-motorized uses, as this is the designation of the Big Elk Creek Trail No. 640.

Likewise, the USFS will manage the public access easement as non-motorized across State Trust Land in accordance with the current and any future Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest Travel Plan designation for the Big Elk Creek Trail No. 640 for the Castle and Crazy Mountains. Currently, access to Trail 640 would be for non-motorized uses, as this is the designation of the Big Elk Creek Trail No. 640.

The public easement application requests a two-acre parking lot (trailhead) located adjacent to the Big Elk county road. The parking area (trailhead) will be established and constructed large enough to accommodate 10-15 trucks / trailers. The USFS will manage this easement as a primitive trailhead restricting overnight use or campfires. This easement area would be fenced out from livestock with a four strand barb wire fence and partially graveled. A primitive trail will be either be constructed or user created or a combination of both to the USFS boundary approximately three miles distant.

The public easement area is expected to see most use September through November associated with big game hunting. Incidental use is expected April through September from horseback and hiking enthusiasts. Little use is expected December through March.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

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

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

This draft EA will be available for 30 days for public comment. Public comment should be sent to JHedrick@mt.gov.

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

Wheatland County road approach permit for Big Elk Creek.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Proposed Alternative: Approve the USFS administrative and public easement. The administrative easement includes a primitive road and the public access easement would lead to the establishment of a parking lot and trail on State Trust Land to provide public access to the Big Elk drainage within the National Forest.

No Action Alternative: Deny the request to for administrative access and public access that would establish a parking lot and trail on state land.

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 soils within the proposed easement area are comprised of gravelly loam to very cobbly loam soils. The NRCS Soil Survey indicates these soils have a rating as being somewhat limited in regard to development of a local road/street due to the frequency of larger rocks that may be found within the soil profile. However, this is not anticipated to significantly impact the proposed action.

A portion of the parking area may be graveled as necessary to prevent vehicle rutting and provide a parking surface.

No significant adverse impacts to geology and soil quality, stability and moisture are expected from 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 locations do not cross any streams or bodies of water.

No significant adverse impacts to water quality, quantity or distribution are expected from 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.

Some temporary dust may be produced during the construction process, but this will be short-term and minimal. If dust becomes extreme, mitigation measures may be required. Other sources of pollutants would be exhaust from equipment associated with the construction, but this would also be a short-term effect.

No significant impacts 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.

A portion of the vegetation within the proposed parking area would be graveled for the project.

The proposed administrative access road is an existing primitive road that could be improved under this proposal. This improvement would remove some vegetation within the right-of-way but is not anticipated to significantly impact the vegetative cover in the area.

The proposed public access route construction would require stripping of the trail route to improve it for use by the public. This improvement is not anticipated to significantly impact the vegetation cover in the area.

Yellow Toadflax is known to be in the area, and the new public parking lot and access route could act as a vector for the spread of this noxious weed. The USDA will be responsible for weed management within the proposed parking lot, access route, and the proposed administrative access route.

No long term, significant adverse impacts to vegetative cover, quantity or quality are anticipated 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.

The construction of a new trail system and parking area will displace wildlife in the immediate area for the period during construction. Once construction is completed, wildlife will be able to use this area as they had previously. It is anticipated that this tract will see more use by the public after construction has been completed and this may impact the use of the proposed easement area by wildlife species. It is not anticipated to significantly impact wildlife species though as this tract is already directly adjacent to Big Elk Road, which is a county road and receives frequent traffic use.

Due to the nature of the proposed action, it is not anticipated that this action will have any significant adverse impacts to the above listed species of concern or other wildlife species that may traverse this tract.

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 was completed, and one species of concern was identified in the area of potential effect. The species is:

Species Group	Common Name	Scientific Name
Birds	Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos

There have been no observations of the Golden Eagle on any portion of Section 26, Township 6 North, Range 12 East. The observations noted are more than three miles to the east and northeast of the proposed project location. The subject state land is flat and does not contain perching or nesting habitat for Golden Eagles.

Due to the nature of the proposed action, it is not anticipated that this action will have any significant adverse impacts to the above listed species of concern or other wildlife species that may traverse this tract.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:
Identify and determine effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.

A Class III cultural and paleontological resources inventory was conducted of the area of potential effect on state land. Despite a detailed examination, no cultural or fossil resources were identified in the easement corridor. No additional archaeological or paleontological investigative work is recommended. The proposed project will have *No Effec*t to *Antiquities* as defined under the Montana State Antiquities Act. A formal report of findings is on file with the DNRC and the Montana State Historic Preservation Officer.

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.

A 2-acre fenced enclosure and trailhead will be a new visual aspect of the landscape.

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 government actions planned for this Trust parcel.

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.

No significant adverse impacts to human health and safety are expected to 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.

Granting an easement to the USFS will remove two acres from the 640-acre grazing lease held by the McFarland-White Ranch. The McFarland-White Ranch is in support of the USFS easement application.

A signed Lessee Settlement form was included in the proposed easement application materials.

No significant adverse impacts to industrial, commercial and agricultural activities and production are expected to 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 not have a 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 not have an 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

Some increase in demand for USFS recreational management and enforcement is expected as a result of establishing a new trailhead. USFS law enforcement officers, located in Harlowton, Townsend and Lewistown, are capable of managing enforcement responsibilities associated with the easement request.

Access to the USFS may result in increased hunter use days on Forest Service lands within the Big Elk Creek drainage which may lead to increase demand for Montana DFWP game warden 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.

Public access across the route acquired across private land will be managed in accordance with the current and any future Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest Travel Plan designation for the Big Elk Creek Trail No. 640 for the Castle and Crazy Mountains. Currently, access to Trail 640 would be for non-motorized uses, as this is the designation of the Big Elk Creek Trail No. 640.

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 state land is legally accessible via one mile of frontage on the Big Elk Creek county road. The state land parcel is flat and provides no cover for game animals to hide from vehicles on the county road. Creation of a parking lot and increased human activity will reduce the number of game animals that make use of the subject state land. However, as game availability on the subject land is low, the creation of a parking lot will have little effect on existing public recreational use.

The implementation of the proposed alternative is not expected to have an adverse impact on the ability of recreational use of these Trust lands.

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 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 State will benefit by getting a total, one-time fee of $20,000 from the USFS for the purchase of the easement. The Common Schools Trust will be the beneficiary of this payment.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	**Name:**	Jocee Hedrick	**Date:**	6/12/2020
	Title:	Lewistown Unit Manager, NELO		

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

USFS proposed action without change

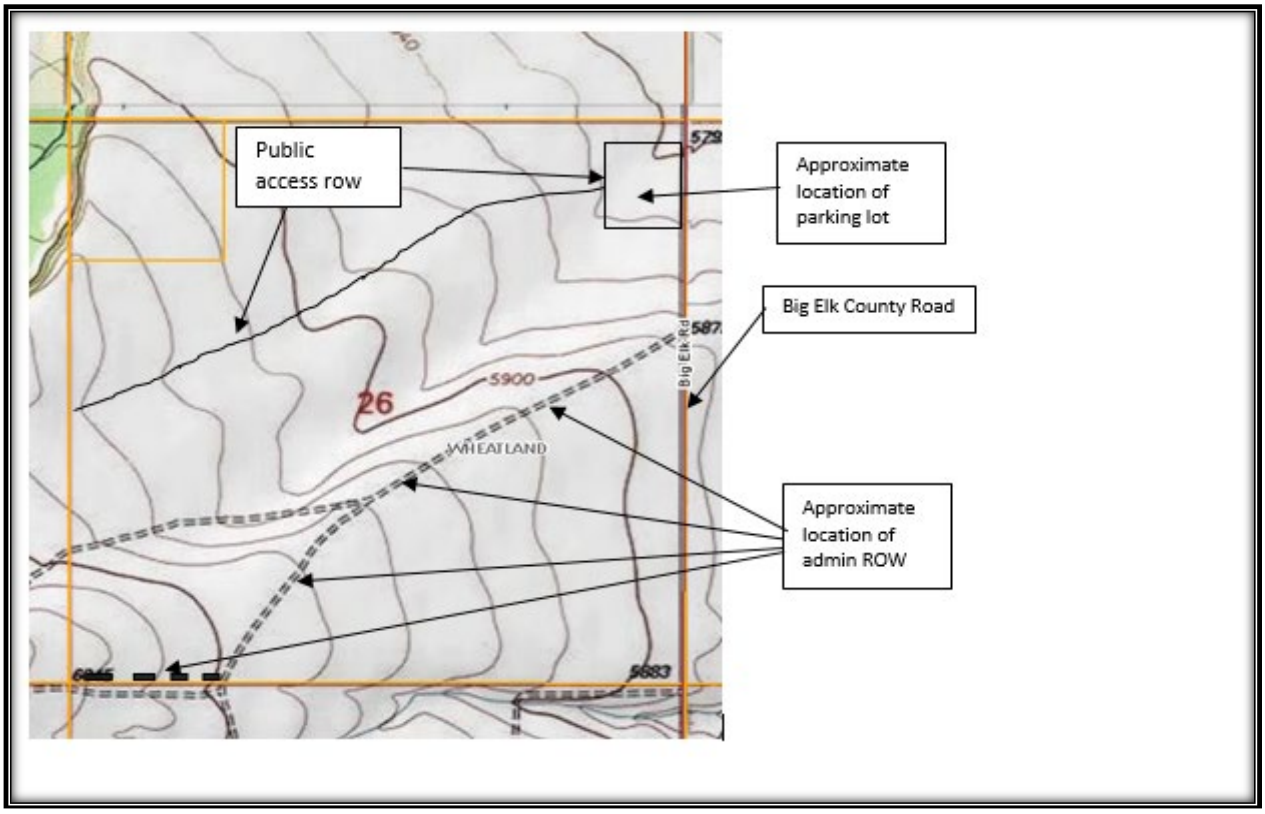
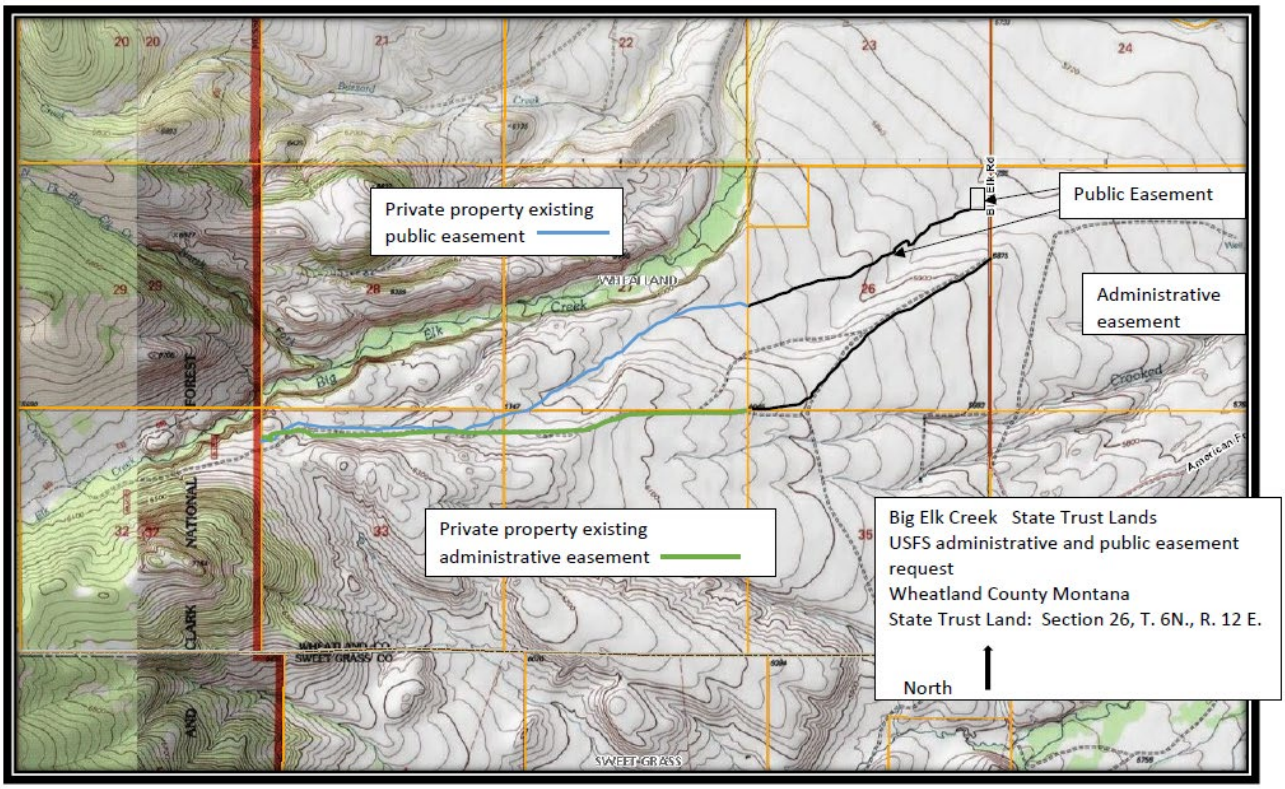
26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

No significant impact

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

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

EA Checklist Approved By:	**Name:**	Clive Rooney
	Title:	Area Manager, Northeastern Land Office
Signature: s/Clive Rooney/s		**Date**: 07/21/2020

Big Elk Creek State Trust Lands Easement Request

Section 26, Township 6 North, Range 12 East