

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Triangle Telephone Fiber Optic Easements
Proposed Implementation Date:	Summer/Fall 2020
Proponent:	Triangle Telephone Cooperative Association, Inc.
Location:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• S½SE¼, SE¼SW¼ of Section 29, Township 1 North, Range 15 East (Common Schools Trust) in Sweet Grass County• NW¼, NW¼SW¼ of Section 32, Township 1 North, Range 15 East (Common Schools Trust) in Sweet Grass County• Section 16, Township 1 South, Range 17 East (Common Schools Trust) in Sweet Grass County• NW¼NW¼, S½NW¼, NW¼SE¼, S½SE¼, SW¼ of Section 36, Township 1 South, Range 17 East (Common Schools Trust) in Sweet Grass County• Section 36, Township 2 North, Range 18 East (Common Schools Trust) in Stillwater County• NW¼, E½, SE¼SW¼ of Section 16, Township 2 South, Range 16 East (Common Schools Trust) in Sweet Grass County
County:	Sweet Grass and Stillwater Counties

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

Triangle Telephone Cooperative is applying for 20' wide easements on six parcels of Trust land in Sweet Grass and Stillwater Counties for the underground installation of fiber optic cable as described below (see Exhibits A thru F):

- **Section 29-T1N-R15E:** The proposed 20' wide (1.138 acre) easement would run on the north/west side of Dry Creek Road. There is also an existing 20' wide easement for buried telephone that was granted to Triangle in 1983. The new fiber optic is proposed to roughly parallel the existing telephone line easement and county road.
- **Section 32-T1N-R15E:** The proposed 20' wide (1.745 acre) easement would run on north/west side of Dry Creek Road. There is also an existing 20' wide easement for buried telephone that was granted to Triangle in 1983. The new fiber optic is proposed to roughly parallel the existing telephone line easement and county road.
- **Section 16-T1S-R17E:** The proposed 20' wide (4.233 acre) easement would run on the north/west side of a private driveway. There is also an existing 20' wide easement for buried telephone that was granted to Triangle in 1983. The new fiber optic is proposed to generally follows the existing telephone line easement, except for a few points of deviation.
- **Section 36-T1S-R17E:** The proposed 20' wide (2.448 acre) easement would run on the south/east side of Hump Creek Road along with an approximate ¼-mile section along the west section line. There are also two existing 20' wide easement for buried telephone/communication that were granted to Triangle in 1983 and 2005. The new fiber optic is proposed to roughly parallel the existing telephone line easement and the county road, except for a spur running up the west section line.
- **Section 36-T2N-R18E:** The proposed 20' wide (0.012 acre) easement would cross Springtime Road and provide a connection between two prior communication line easements. There have been three easements granted for 20' wide easement for buried telephone/communication lines that were granted to Triangle in 1983, 2000 and 2005. The new fiber optic easement would connect two existing facilities and cross Springtime Road near its intersection with Eder Road.
- **Section 16-T2S-R16E:** The proposed 20' wide (1.606 acre) easement would be located on the north/west side of Bridger Creek Road. There is also an existing 20' wide easement for buried telephone that was granted to Triangle in 1983. The new fiber optic is proposed to roughly parallel the existing telephone line easement and the county road.

The easements that have been applied for are a part of a larger project where Triangle is expanding fiber optic lines to their existing exchanges in Big Timber and Reed Point. The areas impacted by these applications are generally located between Big Timber and Reed Point on both sides of the Yellowstone River.

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. Settlement of Damages forms were obtained from the grazing lessees.

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

Montana Department of Environmental Quality – Storm Water Discharge Permit (Pending)
US Army Corps of Engineers (Pending)
Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program Consultation (Issued)
Montana Department of Transportation – Utility Occupancy & Location Agreement (Pending)
Stillwater County Encroachment Permit (Pending)
Sweet Grass County Encroachment Permit (Pending)

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Proposed Alternative: Issue 20' wide easements to Triangle Telephone Cooperative for the underground installation of fiber optic cable on the six parcels listed above in Sweet Grass and Stillwater Counties.

No Action Alternative: Deny the request by Triangle Telephone Cooperative to issue one or all six of the proposed 20' wide easements for fiber optic cable in Sweet Grass and Stillwater Counties.

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 routes proposed in the easements almost exclusively parallel existing county roads and private access driveways, as well as along existing telephone easements. The fiber optic cable is proposed to be installed using the direct plow method. This entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. The direct plow method creates a narrow opening in the ground, inserts that cable and covers the cable and smooths the disturbed surface in a single pass. The direct plow method is considered a trenchless excavation method. 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.

There appear to be two water crossings, one in 36-1S-17E across Humpty Creek, as well as a couple of water crossings for the route on 16-1S-17E. All of these waterways are less than 10' wide. Triangle's storm water

permit from DEQ is pending, however, the BMPs required in that permit should protect the waterways from any impact from 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 fiber optic cable is proposed to be installed using the direct plow method. This entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. The direct plow method creates a narrow opening in the ground, inserts that cable and covers the cable and smooths the disturbed surface in a single pass. The direct plow method is considered a trenchless excavation method. The area disturbed by the installation activity and from vehicle travel could have short term impacts on vegetation. The easement document will require Triangle Telephone to control any noxious weeds introduced by its activities and reclamation of 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 and elk), small mammals, raptors and songbirds may traverse the six sections. The proposed project activities could temporarily disrupt wildlife movement and patterns during construction. 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:

S¹/₂SE⁴/₄, SE¹/₄SW¹/₄ of Section 29 and NW¹/₄, NW¹/₄SW¹/₄ of Section 32, Township 1 North, Range 15

East: The species of concern search result on this parcel included the Little Brown Myotis, Hoary Bat, Great Blue Heron, Bald Eagle, Black-tailed Prairie Dog, Greater Short-horned Lizard, Bobolink and Greater Sage-Grouse. Section 32 is located within Greater Sage-Grouse General Habitat and Triangle Telephone has obtained a consultation letter from the Montana Sage-Grouse Conservation Program. Based on the proposed location of the work, no direct impacts to other species listed is expected.

Section 16, Township 1 South, Range 17 East: The species of concern search result on this parcel included: Spiny Softshell, Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout, Bald Eagle, Hoary Bat, Veery, Little Brown Myosis and Great Blue Heron. The parcel is approximately ³/₄- mile north of the Yellowstone River, but does not have direct frontage that would impact any aquatic species. Based on the location of the work adjacent to an existing private driveway, no significant adverse impacts to the species listed is expected.

NW¹/₄NW¹/₄, S¹/₂NW¹/₄, NW¹/₄SE¹/₄, S¹/₂SE¹/₄, SW¹/₄ of Section 36, Township 1 South, Range 17 East: The species of concern search result on this parcel included: Spiny Softshell, Bald Eagle, Pinyon Jay, Hoary Bat,

Veery, Little Brown Myosis, Great Blue Heron, Green-tailed Towhee, Cassin's Finch, Brewer's Sparrow, Clark's Nutcracker, Bobolink, Sage Thrasher, and Baird's Sparrow. This parcel is located south of Interstate 90 and the north end is less than ½ mile south of the Yellowstone River, but there is no aquatic habitat on the parcel. The avian species may traverse the parcel, however the majority of work for the easement will be conducted adjacent to an existing county road. The potential for significant adverse impacts is small based on the location of the work and relatively short construction period.

Section 36, Township 2 North, Range 18 East: The species of concern search result on this parcel included: Hoary Bat and Golden Eagle. This easement is a very short connection across Springtime Road and is not expected to have a significant adverse impact on the two species of concern.

NW¼, E½, SE¼SW¼ of Section 16, Township 2 South, Range 16 East: The species of concern search result on this parcel included: Clark's Nutcracker and Grizzly Bear. The easement location on this parcel is directly adjacent to Bridger Creek Road and its installation is not expected to have significant adverse impacts on the two species of concern.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

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

The areas of potential effect were previously inventoried to Class III standards for cultural and paleontological resources. No such resources were identified. Cable installation work will result in *No Effect* to *Antiquities* as defined under the Montana State Antiquities Act. A formal report of findings has been prepared and is filed with the DNRC and the Montana State Historic Preservation Officer.

Additionally, during site visits to the parcels on 9 April 2020 by Area Manager Jeff Bollman, visual inspections were performed, and no cultural resources were noted. No significant adverse impact to historic or archaeological sites is expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

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 to existing county roads and a private driveway. The easement document will require Triangle Telephone to control any noxious weeds introduced by its activities and reclamation of any disturbed areas. Once the easement areas are rehabbed from the disturbance due to the installation, 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 would 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 these six Trust land parcels.

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 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 easements 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.

All of the subject parcels have legal public access via a county road. The installation is expected to occur in 2020 and could overlap archery and/or rifle hunting season(s). Impacts due to installation should be minimal, especially since the easements run parallel to roadways. The implementation of the proposed alternative is not expected to have a long-term 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 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 State will benefit by getting a one-time fee of \$21,634.20 from Triangle Telephone Cooperative for the purchase of the easements on these six Trust parcels and the breakdown of the fee per parcel is shown below. The Common Schools Trust will be the beneficiary of this payment.

Sec	TWN	RGE	Acres	Per Acre Value	Compensation
29	1N	15E	1.138	\$ 3,000.00	\$ 3,414.00
32	1N	15E	1.745	\$ 3,000.00	\$ 5,235.00
16	1S	17E	4.233	\$ 1,200.00	\$ 5,080.00
36	1S	17E	2.448	\$ 1,200.00	\$ 2,938.00
36	2N	18E	0.012	\$ 500.00	\$ 150.00
16	2S	18E	1.606	\$ 3,000.00	\$ 4,818.00
TOTAL					\$ 21,635.00

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Jeff Bollman, AICP	Date: 10 June 2020
	Title: Area Manager, Southern Land Office	

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

The proposed alternative has been selected and it is recommended that permanent 20' easements be granted to Triangle Telephone Cooperative for the purpose of installing underground fiber optic cable on the following parcels in Sweet Grass and Stillwater Counties:

- S $\frac{1}{2}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$, SE $\frac{1}{4}$ SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 29, Township 1 North, Range 15 East in Sweet Grass County
- NW $\frac{1}{4}$, NW $\frac{1}{4}$ SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 32, Township 1 North, Range 15 East in Sweet Grass County
- Section 16, Township 1 South, Range 17 East in Sweet Grass County
- NW $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$, S $\frac{1}{2}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$, NW $\frac{1}{4}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$, S $\frac{1}{2}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$, SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 36, Township 1 South, Range 17 East in Sweet Grass County
- Section 36, Township 2 North, Range 18 East in Stillwater County
- NW $\frac{1}{4}$, E $\frac{1}{2}$, SE $\frac{1}{4}$ SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 16, Township 2 South, Range 16 East in Sweet Grass County

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

The potential for significant adverse impacts on the requested six Trust land parcels 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. In most locations the cable would be installed adjacent to existing county roads. 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: /s/ Jeffrey Hermanns	Date: 6/15/20

Exhibit A – Proposed Easement location on Section 29-1N-15E

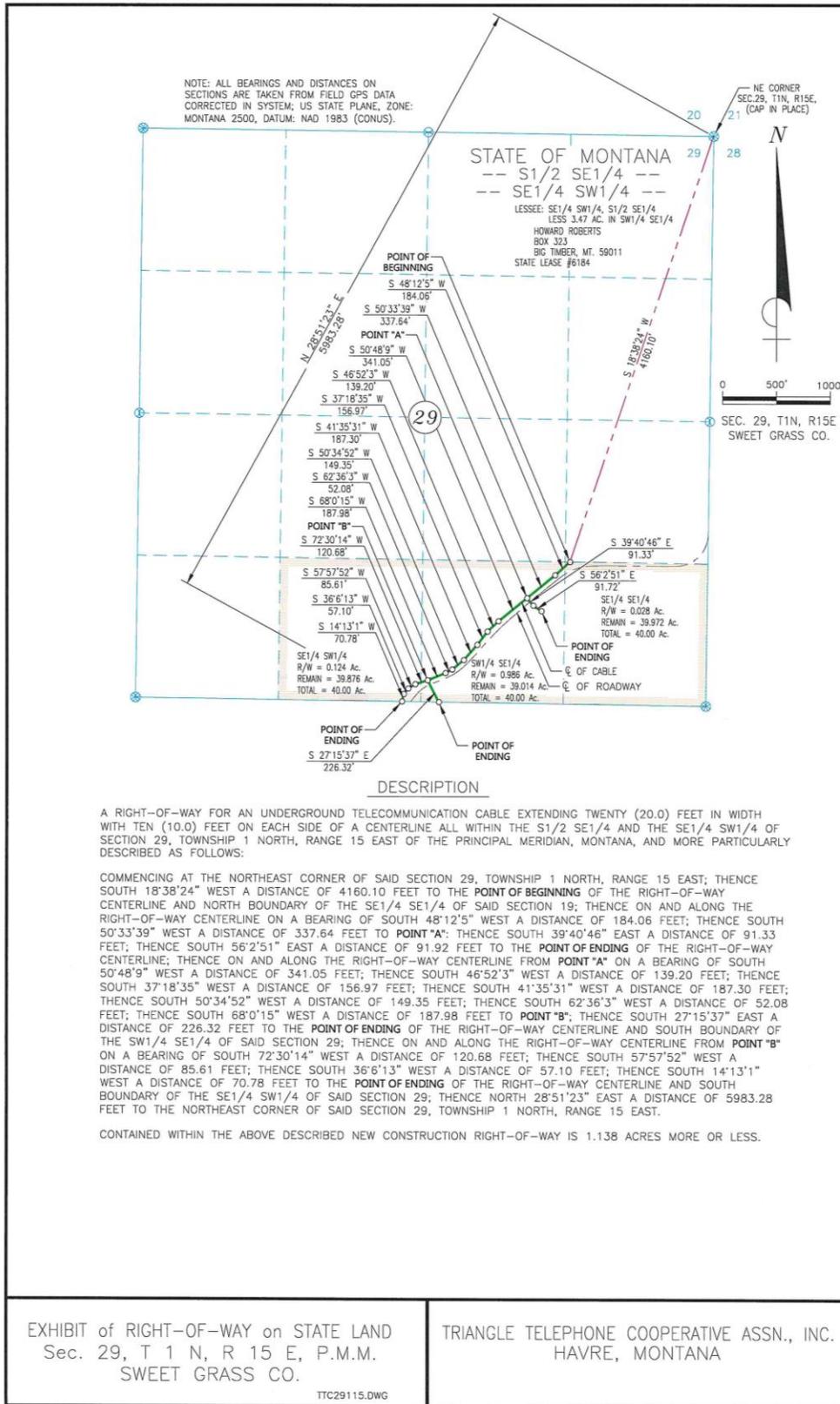


Exhibit B – Proposed Easement location on Section 32-1N-15E

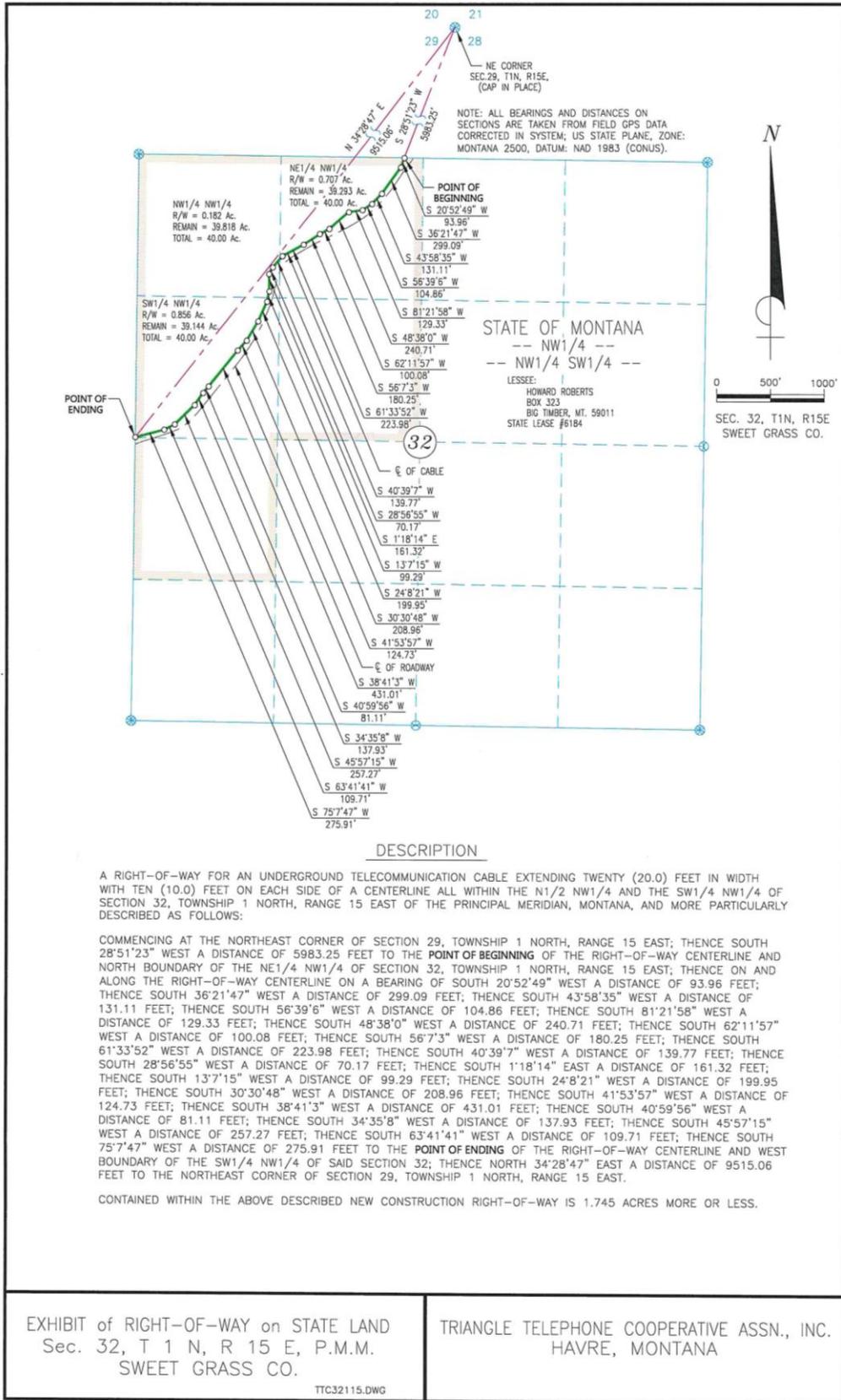


Exhibit C – Proposed Easement location on Section 16-1S-17E

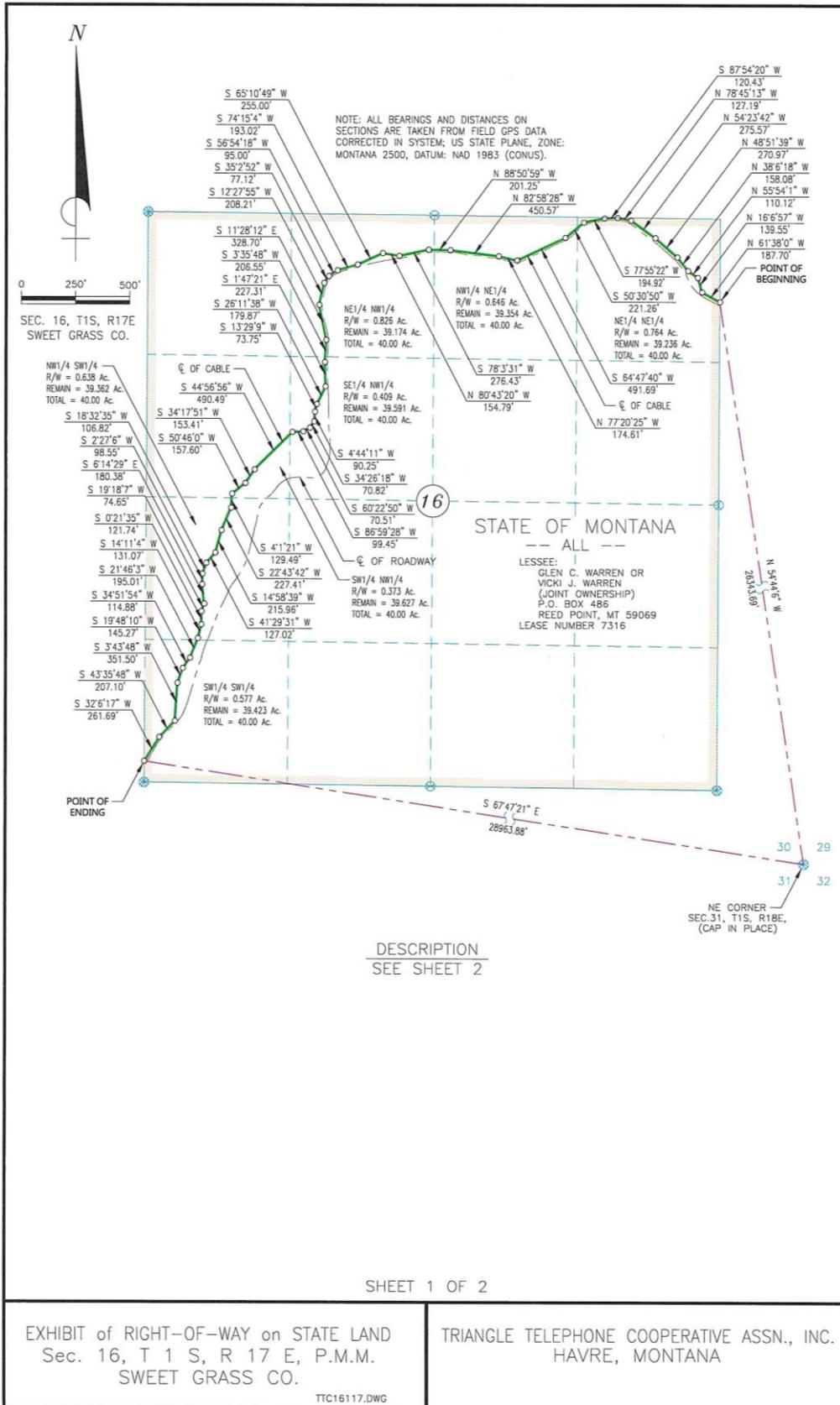
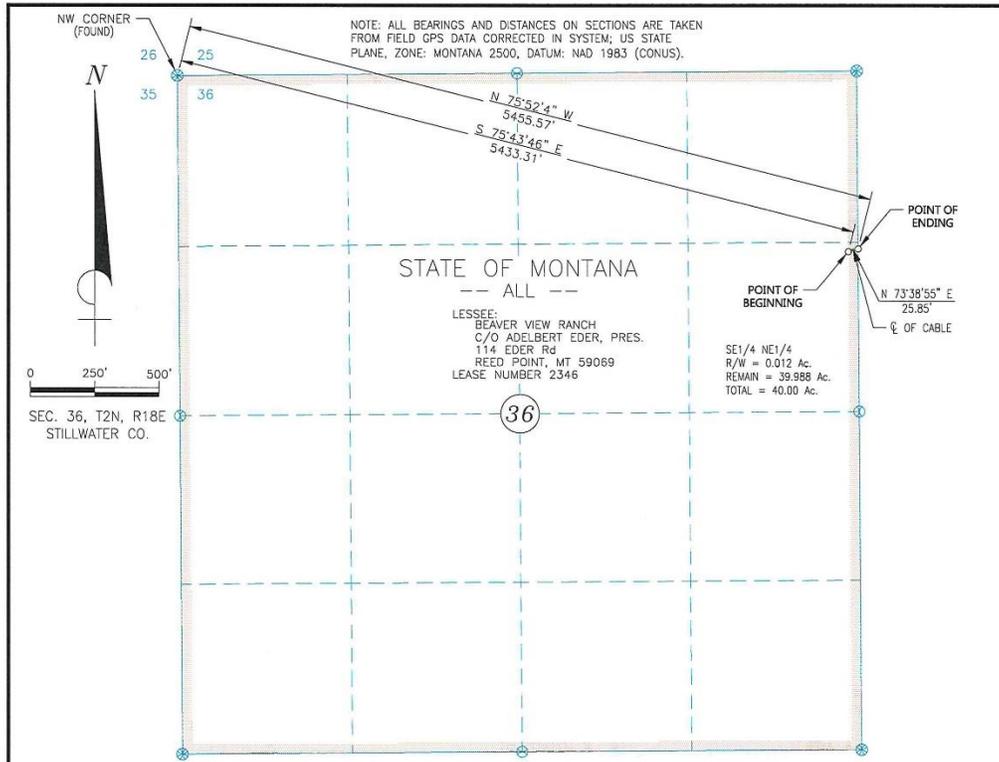


Exhibit E – Proposed Easement location on Section 36-2N-18E



DESCRIPTION

A RIGHT-OF-WAY FOR AN UNDERGROUND TELECOMMUNICATION CABLE EXTENDING TWENTY (20.0) FEET IN WIDTH WITH TEN (10.0) FEET ON EACH SIDE OF A CENTERLINE ALL WITHIN THE SE1/4 NE1/4 OF SECTION 36, TOWNSHIP 2 NORTH, RANGE 18 EAST OF THE PRINCIPAL MERIDIAN, MONTANA, AND MORE PARTICULARLY DESCRIBED AS FOLLOWS:

COMMENCING AT THE NORTHWEST CORNER OF SAID SECTION 36; THENCE SOUTH 75°43'46" EAST A DISTANCE OF 5433.31 FEET TO THE POINT OF BEGINNING OF THE RIGHT-OF-WAY CENTERLINE; THENCE ON AND ALONG THE RIGHT-OF-WAY CENTERLINE ON A BEARING OF NORTH 73°38'55" EAST A DISTANCE OF 25.85 FEET TO THE POINT OF ENDING OF THE RIGHT-OF-WAY CENTERLINE AND EAST BOUNDARY OF THE SE1/4 NE1/4 OF SAID SECTION 36; THENCE NORTH 75°52'4" WEST A DISTANCE OF 5455.57 FEET TO THE NORTHWEST CORNER OF SAID SECTION 36.

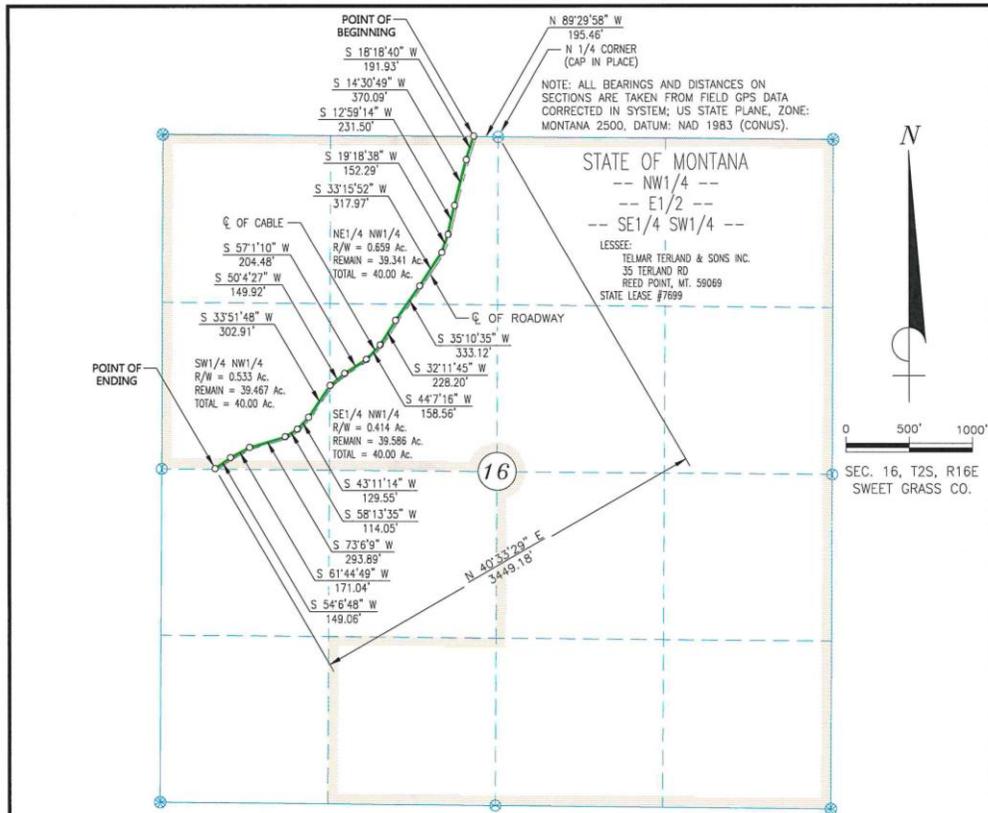
CONTAINED WITHIN THE ABOVE DESCRIBED NEW CONSTRUCTION RIGHT-OF-WAY IS 0.012 ACRES MORE OR LESS.

EXHIBIT of RIGHT-OF-WAY on STATE LAND
Sec. 36, T 2 N, R 18 E, P.M.M.
STILLWATER CO.

TRIANGLE TELEPHONE COOPERATIVE ASSN., INC.
HAVRE, MONTANA

TTC36218.DWG

Exhibit F – Proposed Easement location on Section 16-2N-16E



DESCRIPTION

A RIGHT-OF-WAY FOR AN UNDERGROUND TELECOMMUNICATION CABLE EXTENDING TWENTY (20.0) FEET IN WIDTH WITH TEN (10.0) FEET ON EACH SIDE OF A CENTERLINE ALL WITHIN THE E1/2 NW1/4 AND THE SW1/4 NW1/4 OF SECTION 16, TOWNSHIP 2 SOUTH, RANGE 16 EAST OF THE PRINCIPAL MERIDIAN, MONTANA, AND MORE PARTICULARLY DESCRIBED AS FOLLOWS:

COMMENCING AT THE NORTH QUARTER CORNER OF SECTION 16, TOWNSHIP 2 SOUTH, RANGE 16 EAST; THENCE NORTH 89°29'58" WEST A DISTANCE OF 195.46 FEET TO THE POINT OF BEGINNING OF THE RIGHT-OF-WAY CENTERLINE AND NORTH BOUNDARY OF THE NE1/4 NW1/4 OF SAID SECTION 16; THENCE ON AND ALONG THE RIGHT-OF-WAY CENTERLINE ON A BEARING OF SOUTH 18°18'40" WEST A DISTANCE OF 191.93 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 14°30'49" WEST A DISTANCE OF 370.09 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 12°59'14" WEST A DISTANCE OF 231.50 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 19°18'38" WEST A DISTANCE OF 152.29 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 33°15'52" WEST A DISTANCE OF 317.97 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 35°10'35" WEST A DISTANCE OF 333.12 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 32°11'45" WEST A DISTANCE OF 228.20 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 44°7'16" WEST A DISTANCE OF 158.56 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 57°1'10" WEST A DISTANCE OF 204.48 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 50°4'27" WEST A DISTANCE OF 149.92 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 33°51'48" WEST A DISTANCE OF 302.91 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 43°11'14" WEST A DISTANCE OF 129.55 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 58°13'35" WEST A DISTANCE OF 114.05 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 73°6'9" WEST A DISTANCE OF 293.89 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 61°44'49" WEST A DISTANCE OF 171.04 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 54°6'48" WEST A DISTANCE OF 149.06 FEET TO THE POINT OF ENDING OF THE RIGHT-OF-WAY CENTERLINE AND SOUTH BOUNDARY OF THE SW1/4 NW1/4 OF SAID SECTION 16; THENCE NORTH 40°33'29" EAST A DISTANCE OF 3449.18 FEET TO THE NORTH QUARTER CORNER OF SECTION 16, TOWNSHIP 2 SOUTH, RANGE 16 EAST.

CONTAINED WITHIN THE ABOVE DESCRIBED NEW CONSTRUCTION RIGHT-OF-WAY IS 1.606 ACRES MORE OR LESS.

EXHIBIT of RIGHT-OF-WAY on STATE LAND
 Sec. 16, T 2 S, R 16 E, P.M.M.
 SWEET GRASS CO.

TRIANGLE TELEPHONE COOPERATIVE ASSN., INC.
 HAVRE, MONTANA

TTC16216.DWG