CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	NorthWestern Corp (NWE) Relocation of Distribution Line
Proposed Implementation Date:	Spring 2020
Proponent:	NorthWestern Energy Corp
Location:	Section 7, Township 8 South, Range 4 West **(Capital Building Trust)**
County:	Madison County

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

NorthWestern Energy Corp (NWE) has applied for a utility easement (ROW) to move an existing overhead 7200 kV powerline located next to the Ruby River and installed in 1930 to a location on state land. The existing powerline is located next to the river and there are areas along the line with difficult access and structures that become impossible to maintain. The powerline would be re-located along the shoulder of an existing Madison County road and be placed on state trust land in the E1/2, NE1/4 NW/14 of Section 7, T8S R4W in Madison County. Moving the powerline would allow safe and reliable power to the customers in the Upper Ruby Valley. All impacts and ground disturbance would be kept to a minimum at the reroute location. The project will install 28 single poles and 3 of the poles will have guy lines on them. One of the poles will be a corner pole with 2 guys.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

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

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

Montana Natural Heritage Program
Madison County Planner
Madison County Commissioners
Patrick Rennie, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Archaeologist
Dean Waltee, Department of Fish, Wildlife, & Parks, Wildlife Biologist
Maloney Ranches -Lessee

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

NWE has applied to the Montana Sage Grouse Conservation Program for approval. They are currently waiting to hear back on approval of the project and possible mitigation measures that may apply. The DNRC will not process their application until it's properly vetted and approved by the Program. Any mitigation measures that the Program applies to this project will be incorporated into the final right of way easement.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Action Alternative: Recommend approval to grant NWE a utility easement to move an existing overhead 7200 kV distribution powerline from the existing location along the Ruby River to the shoulder of the Ruby Valley County Road on state land in Section 7, T8S R4W in Madison County.

No Action alternative: Deny NWE to move an existing overhead 7200 kV distribution powerline from the existing location along the Ruby River to the shoulder of the Ruby Valley County Road on state land in Section 7, T8S R4W in Madison County.

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 moving and construction of a powerline, including digging and setting power poles, along with stringing the power line in the shoulder of the upper Ruby County road should not cause any damage to the soils in this area. Compaction and rutting will not occur if the work is done during dry conditions. Soils in the area are already disturbed due to maintenance of the County road.

Action Alternative: Some rutting and soil disturbance could occur if work is done during wet, saturated conditions. Mitigation measures would include limiting construction operations to dry or frozen ground and smoothing out and grass seeding disturbed areas.

No Action Alternative: No changes to the soil conditions will occur under this alternative.

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.

No surface water resources are located within the project area. This tract is part of a checkerboard ownership pattern of trust land and private land with no naturally occurring surface water present. Neither of the two alternatives will affect or cause degradation or cumulative effects to water quality.

Action Alternative: Under this alternative, there will be some ground disturbance that occurs during the construction phase of the project. Because of the lack of surface water present on the tract, no long-term cumulative effects to water quality would occur.

No Action Alternative: No changes to water quality would occur under this alternative.

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.

This proposed powerline easement is in a sparsely populated area. The area currently meets EPA ambient air quality standards and is not located in a class I air shed. The granting of this easement would not cause any long term or cumulative impacts to air quality standards in the Upper Ruby valley.

Action Alternative: This alternative will cause some disturbance during the construction phase of the project, and a small increase in dust particulates in the air will occur. This change in air quality standards would be of short duration, and no long term or cumulative effects would be anticipated.

No Action Alternative: No changes to air quality standards would occur if this alternative is chosen.

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.

Action Alternative: This alternative will cause some disturbance to native vegetation during the construction phase of the project. Noxious weeds could be introduced to the area which could have long term effects to the surrounding vegetation.

Mitigation measures for the action alternative could include treating the area with herbicide prior to construction and then requiring 2 years of follow up herbicide treatment. In addition, all disturbed areas should be broadcast seeded with native grass upon completion of the powerline installation.

No Action Alternative: No changes to the current vegetative cover type will occur under this 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.

Action Alternative: A variety of big game, small mammals, raptors, songbirds, may use these areas along the installation corridor. Installation of the overhead distribution line would be near the existing Upper Ruby Road, overhead transmission lines and public road rights-of-way. Due to the relatively small disturbance area and brief installation period, minimal impacts are anticipated. The amount of disturbance will be minimal. No long-term change in habitat will occur and no long term or cumulative effects to these species are anticipated.

No Action Alternative: No impacts to terrestrial, avian and aquatic life and habitats would occur if this alternative is chosen.

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.

The Montana Natural Resource Information Service (NRIS) was queried for information regarding sensitive or endangered species located near the project area. The query results are listed below:

Bald Eagle (Haliaeetus leucocephalus) – Bald eagles are a protected species under U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service regulations, it is also a BLM sensitive species and classified in the State of Montana as a species potentially at risk. The proposed project will not alter the existing vegetative community type and would not influence use of the area by bald eagles. The project would not have cumulative effects on bald eagle habitat or species distribution in the area.

Ferruginous Hawk (Buteo regalis) Ferruginous hawks have been documented using the general area around the project as nesting and hunting habitat. The state of Montana lists the bird as an S3B species meaning it is at potential risk because of limited and potentially declining numbers, extent or habitat even though it may be abundant in some areas. The low surface impacts resulting from the project would not significantly alter vegetative composition or nesting habitat for the hawks. The primary vegetation on-site is native grass species and they would not be impacted if the project is approved. The project would not cause direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to this species.

Golden Eagle (Aquila chrysaetos) – Golden eagles are a protected species under U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service regulations; it is also a BLM sensitive species and classified in the State of Montana as a species potentially at risk. The proposed project will not alter the existing vegetative community type and would not influence use of the area by golden eagles. The project would not have cumulative effects on golden eagle habitat or species distribution in the area.

Greater Sage-grouse (Centrocercus urophasianus) Greater sage Grouse use has been recorded in the project area and is listed as general sage grouse habitat by the state of Montana. The FWP has identified 1 lek in the vicinity of the proposal which is approximately 3.0 miles away from the project location. At this time the area does have the necessary habitat for sustained sage grouse use due to a lack of sagebrush cover. No impacts to sage grouse or their habitat would be anticipated from this proposal.

Hoary Bat – (Lasiurus cinereus) **–** The hoary bat is potentially at risk because of limited and/or declining numbers, range and/or habitat, even though it may be abundant in some areas. The mammal lives in riparian and forest habitats. Hoary bats are thought to prefer trees at the edge of clearings, but have been found in trees in heavy forests, and open wooded glades. Hoary bats have an important ecosystem role as insect consumers. The proposed alternatives for this project should not disturb any prime Hoary Bat habitat. Neither of the proposed alternatives should have any direct, indirect or long-term cumulative impacts on the hoary bat population in the area of the proposal.

Brewer's Sparrow (Spizella breweri) – Brewer's sparrow is a BLM sensitive species. Per Montana Natural Resource Information Service (NRIS), the species prefers nesting in sagebrush averaging 16 inches in height. The proposed project would not significantly alter the current vegetative community and proper management of cattle grazing of the affected pastures should not alter the vegetation on-site or lead to negative cumulative effects on Brewer's sparrow populations of the area.

Sage Thrasher (Oreoscoptes montanus) – Sage thrashers are listed as sensitive by the BLM and State of Montana. The proposed project will not increase human use of the area and would not significantly alter the current vegetative community. The project would not cause cumulative impacts to the sage thrasher.

Westslope Cutthroat Trout (Oncorhynchus clarkia lewisi) – Westslope cutthroat trout (WSCT) are listed by both the USFS and BLM as a sensitive species and a Species of Concern within the State of Montana. Current populations of WSCT are outside of the direct impact area proposed by this project. The MT FWP constructed a fish barrier in the Jack Creek drainage approximately ½ mile above where the powerline will be installed. The upper reaches of Jack Creek and Greenhorn Creek support populations of WSCT however Jack Creek dries up before reaching the Upper Ruby Road so this proposal will not impact WSCT or their habitat. No impacts would be expected.

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

Action Alternative: A Class I (literature review) level review was conducted by the DNRC staff archaeologist for the area of potential effect (APE). This entailed inspection of project maps, DNRC's sites/site leads database, land use records, General Land Office Survey Plats, and control cards. The Class I search results revealed that no cultural or paleontological resources have been identified in the APE, and the APE was previously inventoried for cultural resources.

Proposed powerline construction is expected to have *No Effect* to *Antiquities*. No additional archaeological investigative work will be conducted in response to this proposed development. However, if previously unknown cultural or paleontological materials are identified during project related activities, all work will cease until a professional assessment of such resources can be made.

No Action Alternative: No impacts to historical and archaeological sites would occur under this 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.

Action Alternative: The location of the proposed project is in sparsely populated area and will not impact aesthetics significantly. The overhead powerline will tie into an existing distribution line along the Upper Ruby Road. Due to the relative remoteness of the project area and short duration of the installation period,

aesthetics should not be adversely affected. No long term or cumulative effects to aesthetics are anticipated from this alternative.

No Action Alternative: No impacts to aesthetics will occur under this 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.

Action Alternative: No demands for additional environmental resources are required for this project. No short term, long term or cumulative effects to Environmental Resources should result from this proposed alternative.

No Action Alternative: No impacts on the demand for environmental resources of land, water, air or energy will occur under this 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.

No other environmental documents pertinent to the area are currently under consideration.

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.

Action Alternative: This proposal could cause some safety concerns during the installation phase of the project. Additional traffic on rural roads and heavy equipment could increase the possibility of a traffic accident. Mitigation measures include requiring NWE to provide signage or flagman during the moving of the overhead power line.

No Action Alternative: No impacts to Health and Safety would occur under this alternative.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:
Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.

Action Alternative: No changes to agricultural activities would occur if this alternative is chosen.

No Action Alternative: No impacts to agricultural activities will occur under this 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.

Action Alternative: The proposal will not create nor eliminate permanent jobs in the area under this alternative.

No Action Alternative: No impacts to quantity and distribution of employment will occur.

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.

Action Alternative: This proposed alternative will not increase tax revenues or result in an increase or decrease of the tax base.

No Action Alternative: No impacts to the local or state tax base or tax revenue will occur.

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.

Action Alternative: This proposed alternative will not increase the demand for government services.

No Action Alternative: No increase in demands for government services will occur under this alternative.

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.

Action Alternative: No known zoning laws or management plans are in place for any of the proposed locations under this alternative.

No Action Alternative: No impacts to local government plans will occur under this alternative.

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.

Action Alternative: The proposed project would not affect recreational access. No impacts to recreational activities are anticipated under this alternative.

No Action Alternative: No impacts to access and quality of recreational and wilderness activities would occur if this alternative is chosen.

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.

Action Alternative: This alternative will not affect distribution of population or housing in the Lima or surrounding areas of Southwestern Montana.

No Action Alternative: No impacts to population would occur under this alternative.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:
Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

Action Alternative: This proposed alternative will have no effect on social structures or mores of the surrounding area.

No Action Alternative: No impacts will occur.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:
How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?

Action Alternative: This alternative will not affect cultural uniqueness and diversity of the area. The cable will be underground and will not be visible to the public.

No Action Alternative: No impacts will occur to cultural uniqueness and diversity under this alternative.

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.

Action Alternative: This alternative will provide NWE easy access to maintain their 7200-kV distribution line and provide uninterrupted power to their rural customers in the upper Ruby Valley. Granting an easement to NWE for 3.145 acres will generate $4,718.00 for the Capital Buildings Trust.

No Action Alternative: Under this alternative, the Twin Bridges area would not receive an upgrade in telecommunications coverage and no money would be generated for the three state land trusts.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Timothy Egan	Date: March 16, 2020
	Title: Dillon Unit Manager	

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

Action Alternative: Recommend approval to grant NWE a utility easement to move an existing overhead 7200 kV distribution powerline from the existing location along the Ruby River to the shoulder of the Ruby Valley County Road on state land in Section 7, T8S R4W in Madison County.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

As proposed, this project will allow NWE to move their overhead distribution line out of the Ruby River drainage where it is currently difficult to access and maintain on to state land that is easily accessible from the Upper Ruby Road. The new powerline location is flat and is easily accessible along the shoulder of the Madison County Road for the most part. No long term or cumulative negative impacts are anticipated from the implementation of this proposal. Mitigation measures should include: washing equipment prior to entering state land, operating in dry or frozen conditions when possible, repairing all soil disturbance as necessary, re-vegetating disturbed areas with grass seed and monitoring for resulting noxious weed infestations for 3 years.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

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

EA Checklist Approved By:	Name: Andy Burgoyne	
	Title: Trust Land Program Manager, CLO	
Signature: 		Date: March 16, 2020

Approximate Power Line Locatior