

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Shong Ranch Improvement Request for Fence
Proposed Implementation Date:	Fall 2020
Proponent:	DNRC Grazing Lessee, Shong Ranch LLC
Location:	T7N-R6E Sections 14 & 24
County:	Meagher

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

The DNRC Grazing Lessee, Shong Ranch, has submitted a proposal to place an improvement on Montana State Trust Land grazing lease number 9568 located in Sections 14 & 24, T7N-R6E. The portion of the improvement located on Trust Land would include building a perimeter fence along the entire north boundary and a portion of the east boundary in Section 14, and a perimeter fence along the entire south and portion of the east boundaries of the tract in Section 24. Please see attached maps.

The tract in Section 14 is the E $\frac{1}{2}$ E $\frac{1}{2}$. Existing fence is located along the south boundary with a cross fence running NNW and is fenced in common with the lessees deeded land. The new fence would be installed on 1200' of the north boundary and 660' on east boundary of the State Trust Land.

The tract in Section 24 is the S $\frac{1}{2}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$. Existing fence begins on deeded land to the west of the tract and then goes through the middle of the tract for approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ mile before ending. This fence wasn't maintained and will be removed when the new perimeter fence is installed. The lessee would also like to install t-posts along the boundary of the State Trust Land to assist hunters with location ownership lines. Sections 24 was surveyed by a professional survey company, and the correct boundaries have been marked so the fence will be on the correct ownership lines.

These fences will separate the State Trust Lands from neighboring deeded lands and improve grazing management capabilities on both deeded and State Trust Land for the Shong Ranch.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

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

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

Jay Kolbe, Department of Fish, Wildlife, & Parks Wildlife Biologist
Patrick Rennie, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Archaeologist
Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program
Montana Natural Heritage Program

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

No other governmental agencies with jurisdiction or additional permit requirements were identified during the scoping for this proposed project. The project as proposed would involve only Montana Trust Land allocated to the Common Schools.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Alternative A: No action alternative. The proposed project would not be approved.

Alternative B: Action Alternative: Allow the proponent to install perimeter fences.

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.

According to Web Soil Survey; soils in Section 14 include Newlan creek-Sixteenmile-Absarook complex, Whitlash-Sixteenmile complex, Castner-Sixteenmile-Oraid complex, Castner-Sixteenmile-Rock outcrop complex and Fairway-Turrah complex. All of these soils have low to medium compactibility risk, and a very limited rating for fence posts with a depth of 24 inches or less. All of these soils have a slight off-road erosion hazard, except for Castner-Sixteenmile-Rock outcrop, which is found along the drainage on the east boundary.

Soils in Section 24 include Connieo, rubbly Burtoner, very stony Rock outcrop complex, Newlan creek-Sixteenmile-Absarook complex, and Nieman, very boulder-Woodhall, very boulder-Sebud complex. All of these soils have medium compactibility risk, and a very limited rating for fence posts with a depth of 24 inches or less. All of these soils have slight to moderate off-road erosion hazard.

Construction of the project would entail installing approximately 1860' of four strand barbed wire fence on Section 14 and approximately 3,165' of four strand barbed wire fence on Section 24. Soil would be disturbed where fence posts are put into the ground. Impacts to the soil would be minimal, due to the small scale of the project on the landscape.

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.

Section 24 has no natural waterways, and Section 14 has an unnamed tributary to Mayns Creek which flows through E $\frac{1}{2}$ NE $\frac{1}{4}$ and NE $\frac{1}{4}$ SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of the tract. A portion of the fence will cross this tributary in NE $\frac{1}{4}$ SW $\frac{1}{4}$. There was no water flowing in the tributary that begins near the eastern boundary of State Land. However, there is a small amount of flow from the unnamed tributary from the west, which flows through the north half of the State Land. This tributary exits the State Land approximately 750 feet south of the north boundary. See the topographic map below. The proposed fence would not cross any waterways. A search on the Ground Water Information Center found no results for either of these sections.

These fences would improve cattle grazing management capabilities on both deeded and State Trust Lands. This project would have a positive effect on water quality, quantity and distribution with improved cattle distribution.

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 would not be affected by this project.

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 proposed fences on Section 14 are located on Big Sagebrush Steppe ecological systems with very shallow and thin breaks range sites. Fences on Section 24 are located on Big Sagebrush Steppe and Rocky Mountain Subalpine-Montane Mesic Meadow ecological systems with shallow and very shallow range sites. Plant species present on both sections include big sagebrush, bluebunch wheatgrass, Idaho fescue, needle and thread grass, green needlegrass, threadleaf sedge, prairie junegrass, western yarrow, Hood's phlox, fringed sagewort and hairy goldenaster. Plant communities would not be significantly affected by this project due to the low amount of disturbance and short construction period. Cover, quantity, and quality of vegetative communities would improve with the perimeter fences and appropriate grazing management. The DNRC grazing lessee would continue to be responsible for weed management as described in the lease.

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 proposed fence project could be in the area of known wildlife migration routes. There are many species of wildlife in this area including elk, deer and bears. The proposed fence would not impact their migration routes, as these are large animals able to cross fences without stress. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologist Jay Kolbe commented that these fences are typical in this area and Sage grouse markers should be installed on the proposed fences.

Construction practices used in the placement of the fence would be a one-time short duration occurrence to limit

disturbance and will not lead to negative cumulative effects on wildlife.

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 Heritage Program was queried for information regarding sensitive or endangered species located in the vicinity of the project area. The query results found no point observations in the sections where the project would be installed. However the query results contain habitat polygons for Greater Sage Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) with the presences of nests, chicks, juveniles or adults on a lek confirming a breeding area.

Sections 14 & 24 where the fence would be installed are both located within Greater Sage Grouse General Habitat. However as stated in Attachment F of Executive Order No. 12-2015 Executive Order Amending and Providing for Implementation of the Montana Sage Grouse Conservation Strategy; “*The following existing land uses and landowner activities are exempt from compliance with this strategy: f. Pole fences. Wire fences if fitted with visibility markers where high potential for sage grouse collisions has been documented.*” The lessee will be required to install markers on proposed fences.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

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

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 revealed that no cultural or paleontological resources have been identified in the APE. 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.

A field inspection by DNRC Land Use Specialist Dylan Craft and Helena Unit Manager Heidi Crum was completed on September 15, 2020. No cultural resources were found in the vicinity of the proposed project.

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 project is located in a rural part of Meagher County, and will alter aesthetics of the area temporarily during construction and minimally when the project is complete.

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 demands for additional environmental resources are required for this project. No cumulative effects to environmental resources should result from this project.

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 studies, plans, or projects were identified during the scoping for this project.

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 health or safety risks are posed by the project.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

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

If approved, this project is designed to assist the DNRC lessee to improve grazing management on state land.

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 project will not create or eliminate permanent jobs in the area.

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.

No significant increase in tax revenues are expected as a result of this project.

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 increased demand for government services are expected as a result of this project.

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 locally adopted environmental plans will be affected by this project.

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.

This project will not negatively alter recreational activities in the area.

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 change in population will result from this project.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:

Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

No change in social structures and mores are expected as a result of this project.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

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

The action would not affect 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 grazing lease which includes sections 14 & 24 (along with 2 other parcels in sections 13 and 14) generates approximately \$7,205 in grazing fees annually for Common Schools.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Heidi Crum	Date: 9/21/20
	Title: Helena Unit Manager	

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:


Alternative B: Action Alternative: Allow the proponent to install perimeter fences.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

Installation of the fence will help the lessee improve grazing management on State Trust Lands. No long term or cumulative impacts are anticipated from the implementation of this proposal.

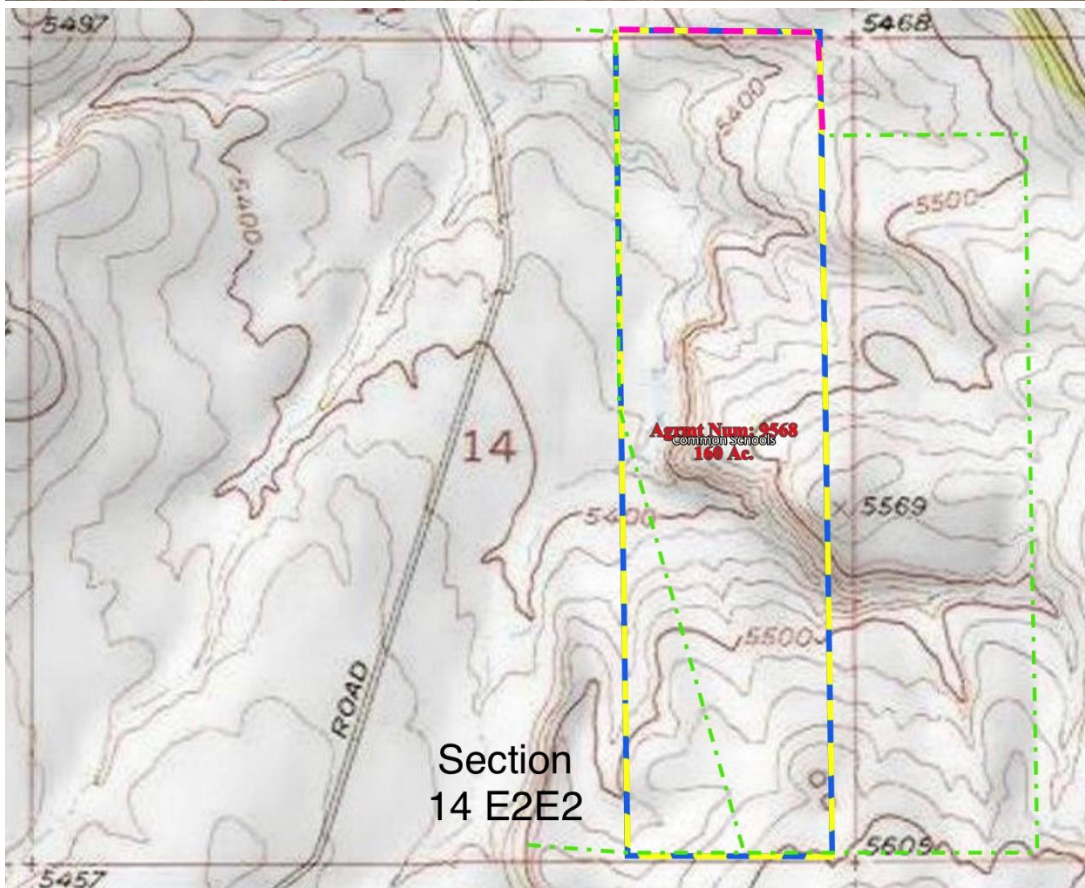
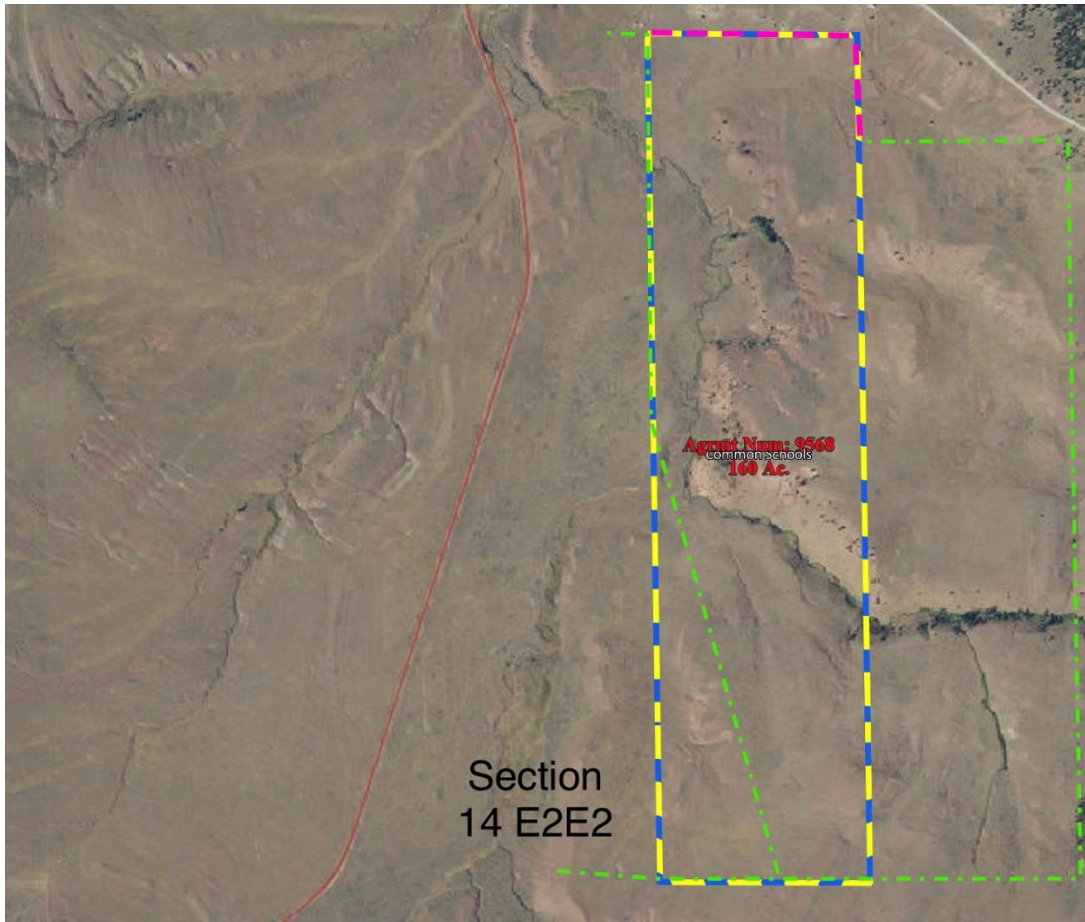
27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

EIS More Detailed EA No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	Name: J. Andrew Burgoyne
	Title: Trust Lands Program Manager
Signature: 	Date: 9/29/20

Section 14 aerial and topographic maps.

Yellow/blue dashed lines indicate State Trust Land boundaries. Green dashed lines are existing fences. Pink dashed lines are proposed fences.



Section 24 aerial and topographic maps.

