CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Rosebud Conservation District Forests in Focus Grant Project
Proposed Implementatio	July 2015 – December 2016
Proponent:	Rosebud CD
Location:	Private and state lands, sub-grantees to be determined.
County:	Rosebud, Custer, Powder River and Treasure

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

MT DNRC, through the Forests in Focus Grant Project, is granting Rosebud Conservation District (Rosebud CD) funds to conduct pre-commercial thinning, commercial thinning and forest fuels mitigation work on approximately 650 acres of non-industrial timber lands private and state lands located in Rosebud, Custer, Powder River and Treasure Counties. The funded activities will improve forest health, address decadent and stagnant stands, conifer encroachment of range lands, and reduce the fire hazard near populated areas. The grant will also fund salvage work to address clean-up of wildfires that burned primarily in 2012.

Partners in this grant project include: Custer County Rural Fire Department and the State of Montana DNRC Trust Lands Division, local landowners.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

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

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

The Montana DNRC conducted public scoping for the Forests in Focus Grant Project as a whole by soliciting comments at four public meetings, (held in Forsythe, Billings, Missoula, and Kalispell), and by publishing requests for comments in the legal advertisement sections of the following newspapers. The Miles City Star, the Billings Gazette, the Missoula Missoulian, and the Kalispell Daily Interlake. No comments on the project as a whole were received, either written or, at the meetings.

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

None known.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE: Grant is not awarded. The identified projects would not be completed within the timeframe. Increased fire hazard may occur as trees and brush continue to grow.

ACTION ALTERNATIVE: Grant is awarded. Projects funded would remove merchantable and sub-merchantable trees and brush and/or burned trees from the properties thereby improving forest health, public safety, and reducing the fire hazard on approximately 650 acres. Work would be accomplished primarily by logging equipment and mechanical mastication with hand crews utilized where lands are steep and not readily accessible to vehicles. Improvement of fuel breaks is a priority.

Issues surrounding this proposed action have either been resolved or mitigated through initial project design. Recommendations from partners to minimize direct, indirect and cumulative effects have been incorporated into the project.

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.

Soils in the project areas will be a mix but will generally be shallow to moderately deep sandy to clayey in texture with moderate to high erosion risk.

NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE: No new impacts.

ACTION ALTERNATIVE: Soil disturbance will be minor in some areas to none in others. Activities will be primarily with tracked or wheeled logging equipment and masticators. Surface disturbance will occur but where it is excessive grass seed and other mitigation measures will be incorporated to prevent erosion. No new roads are planned for any of this project.

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 ACTION ALTERNATIVE: No new impacts.

ACTION ALTERNATIVE: None of the identified project work is located near a stream. Therefore no impacts are anticipated. If changes are made to a project location such that it now includes or borders a stream the MT Forestry Best Management Practices and the Streamside Management Zone Law will be implemented to ensure water quality is not affected.

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.

NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE: No new impacts.

ACTION ALTERNATIVE: Particulate would be released into the atmosphere when the slash piles are burned. Slash would only be burned outside of the May 1 – Sept 30 fire season and will be ignited only when ambient air conditions are suitable and air dispersal flows are adequate to lift the smoke into the winds aloft for rapid and thorough dispersal. There will likely be no cumulative impacts on air quality as a result of 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 project area consists of Ponderosa Pine stands (burned and unburned) with smaller amounts of Rocky Mountain Juniper interspersed throughout. Some areas may be brush or sagebrush only.

NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE: No new impacts.

ACTION ALTERNATIVE: The treatment for these stands will decrease fuel levels, retain healthy well-formed seed trees, and provide a fire fuels break. Treatments consist of hand and mechanical falling, mechanical skidding, lopping and scattering, masticating (grinding or chipping), or mechanical and/or hand piling for later burning. Impacts for green stands will be a significant reduction in the number of stems per acre bringing the treated stands more into line with historical conditions, for burned areas the dead trees/shrubs will be felled/cut, (with the exception of any identified wildlife trees if they can be safely left standing), any merchantable material removed and the remaining slash piled for later burning.

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.

NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE: No new impacts.

ACTION ALTERNATIVE: The project areas hold the potential for a wide variety of wildlife species. The primary species that inhabit the area are mule deer, whitetail deer, elk, Merriams turkey, toads, cottontail rabbits, raptors, migratory prairie birds and others. The project operations will produce only minor environmental impacts to wildlife species because of the short operational time frame. All projects are located near developed areas which will limit wildlife interactions. Identified wildlife trees will be left standing in the burned areas where it is safe to do so.

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.

NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE: No new impacts.

ACTION ALTERNATIVE: One Threatened bird species, the Yellow-Billed Cuckoo, has been documented in parts of Custer, Powder River, and Rosebud Counties. The bird utilizes prairie riparian habitat. No projects are expected to occur in habitat types where the Cuckoo would be present. One Endangered bird, the Least Tern, has been documented in parts of Custer County. The bird utilizes habitat along large prairie rivers. No projects are expected to occur in habitat types where the Least Tern would be present. If either bird is encountered on a project work would immediately stop until a mediation plan was put into place.

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

All project work will take place on private or state lands. Initially, no cultural or paleontological resources were identified within the project areas. Project areas on state lands will be evaluated prior to any work proceeding.

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.

NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE: No new impacts.

ACTION ALTERNATIVE: The proposed project work will produce temporary visual impacts and some minor changes to the existing visual landscape. This effect would be mitigated over time as the disturbed sites recover and the slash piles are burned. The effects would also be more in line with historical visuals for the area. The scattered nature of the timber and grasslands and the adjacent developed areas combined with minimal impacts during the work will result in no cumulative aesthetic impacts from the proposed activity.

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.

The project would not use resources that are limited in the area. The selective fuels reduction and stewardship work will have no cumulative effects on limited resources.

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.

None known.

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.

Human health will not be impacted by the proposed projects. Safety considerations and temporary risks would increase for the professional contractors working within the sale area. There are no unusual safety considerations associated with the proposed projects. The general public or local residents will not face increased health or long term safety hazards because of the sale.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

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

Rangeland is expected to be improved allowing more grass to grow and burned areas will be cleared to allow regeneration of trees, shrubs, and grasses creating better grazing opportunities.

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.

People are currently employed in the wood products and land treatment industries in the region. Due to the relatively small size of these projects there will be no measurable cumulative impact from this proposed action on 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.

People are currently paying taxes from the wood products and land treatment industries in the region. Due to the relatively small size of the projects there will be no measurable cumulative impact from this proposed action on tax revenues.

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

There would be no measurable cumulative impacts related to demand for government services due to the relatively small size of the projects.

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.

This project is being proposed by local organizations and has been determined to be consistent with all local applicable management 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.

This project will not directly affect access to recreational or wilderness activities but will act as a barrier to wildfire for populated areas and will rehabilitate some state lands near populated areas that could be utilized for recreational purposes.

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.

There would be no measurable cumulative impacts related to population and housing due to relatively small size of the projects and the fact that people are already employed in this occupation in the region.

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

No impacts are anticipated.

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

No impacts are anticipated.

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 award of this grant money will allow for a short-term boost in employment and will provide a higher degree of security from wildfires for developed areas within or adjacent to the projects.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	**Name:**	Roger Ziesak	**Date:**	July 31, 2015
	Title:	Forest Practices Program Manager		

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

The Action Alternative is the selected Alternative. A Forests in Focus Grant will be awarded to this project as designed and described in the proponent's proposal.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

Impacts are anticipated to be minimal to none and will be short-term. Any impacts are also anticipated by the proponents to be beneficial to the local population and economy through reduction of direct wildfire risk to homes, property, and businesses and through improved rangelands.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

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

EA Checklist Approved By:	**Name:**	Paula Short		
	Title:	Forestry Assistance Bureau Chief		
Signature:	Paula Short		**Date:**	8/3/15