

## CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

<b>Project Name:</b>	NWE VC - Granite Creek 7200 KV Electric Distribution Line
<b>Proposed Implementation Date:</b>	Winter 2015
<b>Proponent:</b>	NorthWestern Energy
<b>Location:</b>	Section 36, Township 5 South – Range 3 West (Common School Trust)
<b>County:</b>	Madison County

### I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

NorthWestern Energy (NWE) has applied for a Right of Way Utility Easement to replace an existing overhead poweline which was built in 1910. To rebuild the poweline in the existing corridor would have environmental impacts to the existing terrain and road less area where it is currently located.

Instead NWE is applying to rebuild this powerline along the shoulder of the county road to reduce impacts and reduce costs of rebuilding the existing line. The new easement would be 30 feet wide (15 feet each side of the centerline) and would be approximately 4,942 feet in length. The total area of the utility easement would be 3.41 acres.

### II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

#### 1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED: *Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.*

Patrick Rennie MT DNRC Archeologist  
Madison County Planner  
Madison County Commissioners  
MT FWP Wildlife Biologist, Dean Waltee  
Montana Natural Heritage Program  
MT FWP Fisheries Biologist, Matt Yeager

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

There are no other government agencies with jurisdiction for this proposal.

#### 3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

- A. Action Alternative:** Grant NorthWestern Energy a utility easement to bury a 72000 kV electric distribution powerline along the shoulder of the Granite Creek County Road in Section 36, Township 5 South- Range 3 West in Madison County.
- B. No Action Alternative:** Deny NorthWestern Energy a utility easement to bury a 72000 kV electric distribution powerline along the shoulder of the Granite Creek County Road in Section 36, Township 5 South- Range 3 West 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 majority of the soils that would be affected by this proposal are 135- Tiban very stony loam 15-45 percent slopes. With a minor component being 94-Oro Fino-Poin complex, 15 to 45 percent slopes. The Tiban soils are gravelly till and or alluvium and or colluvium.

The parent material for the Oro Fino –Poin is loamy colluvium and or residuum weathered from gneiss. Both soil types are well drained and have low production capabilities. Land capability classification for the Tiban soil is 7s and for the Oro-Poin is 7e. These soils are droughty and have moderate erosion potential where they are disturbed. Erosion is controlled by installing standard drainage features and grass seeding where needed. These soils dry out rapidly after snowmelt or rain. Rutting can occur if the soils are worked when they become saturated.

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

**Action Alternative:** Some soil disturbance would occur under this alternative although it would occur where the already has been disturbance in the right of way. If powerline is put in during dry or frozen conditions no long term or cumulative impacts to soils would be anticipated. Disturbed areas will be seeded with grass seed and erosion barriers installed if the need arises.

#### 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 East Fork of Granite Creek, a perennial fish bearing stream runs parallel to the existing Granite Creek County Road for approximately 2/3 of this proposed project. Matt Yeager Fisheries biologist with the FWP was scoped for this proposal but did not have concerns with the installation of the underground powerline near the stream. He has seen similar projects in the past and no long term or cumulative impacts occurred with this type of project.

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

**Action Alternative:** minor soil disturbance along the county road could cause short term sediment to end up in the East Fork of Granite Creek, however this would only be during the construction phase of the proposal and no long term or cumulative impacts would be anticipated from this proposal.

#### 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 located 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 Twin Bridges area.

**No Action Alternative:** No changes to Air Quality standards would occur if this alternative is chosen.

**Action Alternative:** during the construction phase of the installation of the powerline poles and line, a small increase in dust particulates in the air will occur. This change in air quality standards would only be short term, and no long term or cumulative effects would be 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.*

The Montana Natural Heritage Program was scoped for this proposal. There have not been any rare or sensitive plants, or cover types identified with in the project location. The proposal will disturb some of the native vegetation that occurs along the shoulder of the road. However the corridor has already been disturbed and continues to be disturbed during road maintenance activities on the road. Disturbed areas should be re- seeded with a native grass seed mix. This is steep mountains terrain with Douglas fir and juniper growing on it.

**No Action Alternative:** No changes to the current vegetative communities would occur under this alternative.

**Action Alternative:** There would be short term impacts to the current vegetation cover under this alternative however disturbed areas will be re- seeded and the cover will grow back rapidly. No long term or cumulative impacts would be anticipated from 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.*

The area is used by both large and small mammals, and birds. Large game species include elk, deer, moose, bear and predators. There are a number of sensitive bird species that can be found in the area along with the possibility of an occasional wolverine passing through. These wildlife species may be disturbed during the construction phase of this proposal but once the powerline has been installed no long term or cumulative effects to wildlife would be anticipated.

**No Action Alternative:** No changes to wild life habitat would occur under this alternative.

**Action Alternative:** Short term disturbance to wildlife during the construction phase of this proposal may occur however, once the underground powerline is in, very little maintenance or wildlife disturbance will occur due to the powerline.

**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.*

An NRIS search of the area identified, three bird species of concern, Cassin's Finch, Brewers Sparrow, and Clark's Nutcracker, along with wolverine's and West Slope Cutthroat trout are found in the vicinity of this project.

**Brewer's Sparrow** (*Spizella breweri*) – Brewer's sparrow is a BLM sensitive species. According to the Montana Natural Resource Information Service (NRIS), the species prefers nesting in sagebrush averaging 16 inches in height. The roads location isn't near any sage brush thus use of the area by brewer's sparrow is limited. The Brewer's sparrow could use the area during certain times of the year; however the proposed project would not significantly alter the current vegetative community so little impact to the bird is anticipated.

**No Action Alternative:** No changes to the natural environment would occur to Brewer's Sparrow or their habitat if this alternative is chosen.

**Action Alternative:** The action alternative should not have any long term, or cumulative effects on Brewer's Sparrow or their habitat. The installation activity may cause some short term disturbance but the duration of the project will not be long and ground disturbance will be minimal.

**Wolverine (*Gulo gulo*)** – Wolverines are listed as sensitive species by both the BLM and USFS. Per Montana Natural Resource Information Service (NRIS) wolverines have been seen within three miles of the proposed easement site. This proposal however has a small foot print and use by wolverines will be intermittent in nature and the proposal should not alter the current existing habitat in the area significantly. No long term or cumulative effects to wolverines, or their habitat are anticipated from this proposal.

**No Action Alternative:** No changes to the natural environment would occur to Wolverine's or their habitat if this alternative is chosen.

**Action Alternative:** The action alternative should not have any long term, or cumulative effects on Wolverine's or their habitat. The installation activity may cause some short term disturbance but the duration of the project will not be long, and the amount of ground disturbance will be minimal.

**Westslope Cutthroat Trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkia lewisi*)** – Westslope Cutthroat trout are listed by both the USFS and BLM as a sensitive species and a Species of Concern within the State of Montana. Current populations are outside of the direct impact area posed by the proposal. Westslope Cutthroat trout are found in the upper reaches of Mill Gulch Creek, but currently are not present in Granite Creek where the proposal is located. As proposed the project should not cause erosion or stream degradation so no long term or cumulative effects are anticipated from this proposal to Westslope Cutthroat trout.

**No Action Alternative:** No changes to the natural environment would occur to West Slope Cutthroat trout or their habitat if this alternative is chosen.

**Action Alternative:** The action alternative should not have any, short term, long term, or cumulative effects on Westslope Cutthroat trout or their habitat.

**Cassin's Finch (*Haemorhous cassinii*)** is listed by the state of Montana as an S3,G5 species meaning that it is potentially at risk in Montana due to declining numbers, extent and /or habitat even though it may be abundant in some areas. This birds breeding habitat is coniferous forests in mountainous regions of North America. They move to lower elevations in the winter. These birds forage in trees, and sometimes in ground vegetation. They mainly eat seeds, buds, berries, and some insects. The location of this proposal is in prime habitat for the bird, however the project will not destroy any of the bird's habitats and any long term or cumulative impacts are not anticipated if the action alternative is chosen.

**No Action Alternative:** No changes to the natural environment would occur to Cassin's Finch or their habitat if this alternative is chosen.

**Action Alternative:** The action alternative should not have any long term, or cumulative effects on Cassin's Finch or their habitat. The installation activity may cause some short term disturbance, but the duration of the project will not be long, and the amount of ground disturbance will be minimal.

## **10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:**

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

Patrick Rennie, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Archeologist was scoped for this project and no known cultural resources were found in a search of the database, and no evidence was found during a field inspection that was conducted on October 15, 2015.

Neither of the two proposed alternatives will impact any known historical or archeological sites at the location of the proposed powerline. If the action alternative is chosen NWE will be instructed to suspend operations and contact the DNRC if cultural resources are uncovered during the construction of the powerline.

**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.*

This proposal will remove an existing overhead powerline with a new buried underground line. The project would improve aesthetics with little new disturbance to the area. The line will be buried in the shoulder of the Granite Creek County Road. Disturbed areas will be re-seeded with native grass seed.

**No Action Alternative:** No changes to aesthetics would occur under this alternative.

**Action Alternative:** Aesthetics would improve under this alternative. An existing overhead powerline would be removed and an underground line will be installed instead.

**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 either of the proposed alternatives.

**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 in this particular area during the scoping for this proposal. Neither of the proposed alternatives will impact other environmental documents pertinent to this proposal.

**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.*

This project will take place in a public right-of-way, the Granite Creek County Road. Although the road sustains minimal use due to its remote location it does receive some travel by the public. To complete the project NWE will need to have heavy equipment on a steep winding road with poor sight distances which could cause safety concerns to the public. The project will require signage and possibly flagmen.

**No Action Alternative:** Health and safety risks will remain the same under this alternative.

**Action Alternative:** The action alternative could cause some safety risks to the public if chosen. Mitigation may include flagmen and signage at the construction site.

**15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:**

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

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

**Action Alternative:** The installation of the powerline could have some short term effects on cattle grazing if the line is put in while livestock are present on the lease, however no long term or cumulative effects to agricultural activities are anticipated.

**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.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will create nor 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.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will increase tax revenues nor result in an increase or decrease of the tax base.

**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 either of the proposed alternatives.

**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.*

There currently aren't any locally adopted environmental plans and goals that DNRC is aware of in this area. The Madison County Commissioners and the County Planner were both contacted for this proposal. Commissioner Shultz is in full support of this project. There is concern that the age of the poles on the existing line may cause them to fall down into the county road. The guy lines on some of the poles are in the county right away and in some cases interfere with maintenance of the road. They are also concerned that if a line comes down it could start a wildland fire. Commissioner Shultz is in favor of replacing the overhead line with an underground powerline.

**No Action Alternative:** No changes to the powerline would occur under this alternative. The power poles could break and fall down into the county road causing possible safety concerns or wild fires.

**Action Alternative:** Under this alternative the deuterated power poles would be removed and a new underground powerline would be buried into the shoulder of the road. Allowing for easier maintenance of the county road and removing a possible safety concern.

**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.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will affect nor 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.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will affect distribution of population or housing in the Twin Bridges or surrounding area.

**22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:**

*Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.*

Neither of the proposed alternatives will affect social structures or mores of the surrounding area.

**23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:**

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

Neither of the proposed alternatives will affect cultural uniqueness and diversity 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.*

**No Action Alternative:** There would be no revenue generate to the trust under this alternative.

**Action Alternative:** The estimated return to the trust would be \$2,728 to the common school trust if the action alternative is chosen.

<b>EA Checklist Prepared By:</b>	<b>Name:</b> Timothy Egan	<b>Date:</b> 11/06/2015
	<b>Title:</b> Dillon Unit Manager	

**V. FINDING**

**25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:**

Alternative A

**26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:**

The EA checklist did not identify issues that weren't reasonable mitigated.

**27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:**

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EIS

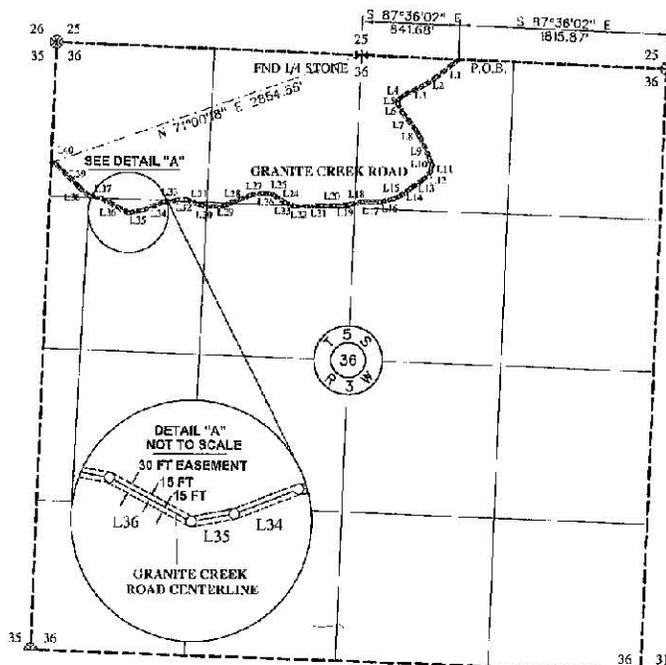
More Detailed EA

No Further Analysis

<b>EA Checklist Approved By:</b>	<b>Name:</b> Hoyt Richards
	<b>Title:</b> CLO Area Manager
<b>Signature:</b> /s/	
<b>Date:</b> 12/4/2015	

STATE LAND EASEMENT  
 SEC. 36 T. 5 S. - R. 3 W.  
 UNDERGROUND  
 ELECTRIC POWERLINE

SEE DETAIL "B" FOR R.O.W. ACREAGE



LEGAL DESCRIPTION:

AN EASEMENT THIRTY (30) FEET WIDE SECTION 36 T. 5 S., R. 3 W. P.M.M. BEGINNING AT A POINT ON THE NORTH-BOUND NORTHEAST CORNER, A PL RECORDED 10/48, AND S 87°36'02" THENCE S 51°35'13" W 244.30 FEET; S 52°47'51" W 88.95 FEET; THENCE S 180.59 FEET; THENCE S 29°51'44" E THENCE S 08°14'14" W 64.54 FEET; S 52°29'53" W 119.81 FEET; THENCE 150.37 FEET; THENCE S 79°39'33" W THENCE S 84°53'18" W 133.81 FEET; N 56°2'55" W 118.15 FEET; THENCE 111.44 FEET; THENCE S 88°32'27" W THENCE N 88°27'11" W 104.55 FEET; S 89°01'53" W 200.12 FEET; THENCE 103.16 FEET; THENCE N 49°45'16" W THE WEST BOUNDARY OF SAID SECTION

THE SIDE LINES OF THIS EASEMENT IN SECTION 36.

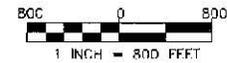
EASEMENT LINE TABLE

L1	S 51°35'13" W	244.30'
L2	S 52°47'51" W	88.95'
L3	S 180°00'00" W	180.59'
L4	S 29°51'44" E	64.54'
L5	S 52°29'53" W	119.81'
L6	S 150°37'00" W	150.37'
L7	S 79°39'33" W	133.81'
L8	N 56°2'55" W	118.15'
L9	S 111°44'00" W	111.44'
L10	S 88°32'27" W	104.55'
L11	N 88°27'11" W	104.55'
L12	S 89°01'53" W	200.12'
L13	S 103.16' E	103.16'
L14	N 49°45'16" W	103.16'
L15	S 87°36'02" E	1815.37'
L16	S 87°36'02" E	941.63'
L17	S 51°35'13" W	244.30'
L18	S 52°28'38" W	116.02'
L19	S 64°45'51" W	197.02'
L20	S 32°47'51" W	66.53'
L21	S 03°33'05" W	40.93'
L22	S 27°40'19" E	88.37'
L23	S 37°51'28" E	180.59'
L24	S 29°51'44" E	65.68'
L25	S 22°21'02" E	208.20'
L26	S 22°29'05" E	61.58'
L27	S 08°14'14" W	64.54'
L28	S 43°50'44" W	85.00'
L29	S 85°43'35" W	143.43'
L30	S 52°29'53" W	116.81'
L31	S 86°3'25" W	55.32'
L32	S 78°02'22" W	121.95'
L33	S 89°37'41" W	150.37'
L34	S 79°39'33" W	117.91'
L35	S 65°25'59" W	131.34'
L36	N 88°28'23" W	107.89'
L37	S 84°58'18" W	133.81'
L38	N 87°39'45" W	102.22'
L39	N 71°54'51" W	88.25'
L40	N 53°21'55" W	115.15'
L41	N 69°21'35" W	46.30'
L42	N 83°18'29" W	62.22'
L43	S 78°47'56" W	111.44'
L44	S 88°32'27" W	232.13'
L45	S 82°29'18" W	102.38'
L46	N 79°58'41" W	134.20'
L47	N 88°27'11" W	104.55'
L48	S 87°34'11" W	77.87'
L49	S 81°46'10" W	117.75'
L50	S 89°0'53" W	200.12'
L51	S 79°50'50" W	127.01'
L52	N 61°51'48" W	289.62'
L53	N 80°18'58" W	103.16'
L54	N 49°45'16" W	115.14'
L55	N 45°22'44" W	262.23'
L56	N 73°15'38" W	36.30'

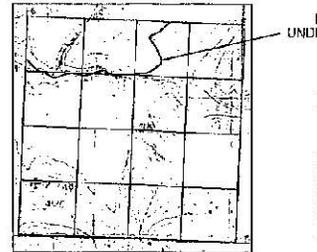


- LEGEND
- FOUND SECTION CORNER
  - ⊕ FOUND QUARTER CORNER
  - ⊗ SECTION CORNERS, NOTHING FOUND OR SET.
  - COMPUTATION POINT
  - SECTION LINES
  - PROPOSED UNDERGROUND ELECTRIC POWERLINE
  - - - TIE TO SECTION CORNER

1/4 SEC. T. R.  
 36 5S 3E  
 P.M.M. MONTANA,  
 MADISON COUNTY



LOCATION MAP NOT TO SCALE



Section 36  
 T.5S. R.3W. P.M.M.  
 USGS MAP TAKEN FROM  
 VIRGINIA CITY QUADRANGLE  
 7.5 MINUTE SERIES  
 PROVISIONAL EDITION 1988  
 4611: CR-TF-024