

## Environmental Assessment Checklist

**Project Name: Northwestern Energy-Turah**

**Proposed Implementation Date: 4 months in 2027**

**Proponent: Northwestern Energy**

**Location: Clark Fork River Crossing within section 18 T12N R17W**

**County: Missoula**

### Type and Purpose of Action

#### Description of Proposed Action:

Northwestern Energy (NWE) proposes to abandon the existing natural gas pipeline crossing the Clark Fork River east of Turah, MT following the installation of a new natural gas pipeline as part of the proposed "Clinton Reroute Project". The existing crossing is authorized by Easement No. D-15449. Proposed activities would take place on .16 acres within the low water mark of the Clark Fork riverbed in section 18 T12N R17W, Missoula County.

The proposed project is necessary to ensure that the natural gas pipeline meets current federal regulations passed forth from The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA). The requirements dictate that all materials are traceable, verifiable and complete within certain class locations on a gas transmission system. The project will also allow Northwestern Energy to continue to supply quality natural gas to its customers and this work should be completed as soon as possible to stay on track with PHMSA requirements. The current plan is to replace the existing crossing via horizontal drill and leave the existing pipeline abandoned in place. Removal of the transmission pipeline would require work within the channel, additional environmental permitting and mitigation measures and cause more disturbance to the river than necessary. In addition to the environmental concerns, removal of the existing pipeline would increase project costs and delay the timing to complete the project. At the current time, NWE has determined that it is necessary to abandon the existing pipeline to ensure the most efficient permitting process and limit environmental impacts for the proposed pipeline replacement project.

### Project Development

#### PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:

Affected landowners along the proposed route of the natural gas line have been contacted by

Northwestern Energy. DNRC ownership is limited to the land below the low water mark at the Clark Fork River crossing.

## OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS

**NEEDED:** (*Conservation Easements, Army Corps of Engineers, road use permits, etc.*)

- **Missoula Conservation District Board-** Representatives from Northwestern Energy informed DNRC that the Conservation district will be notified and an application will be submitted closer to the project start date.

## ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

**No-Action Alternative:** Not granting the easement request for installation of a gas pipeline and abandoning existing pipeline.

**Action Alternative :** Granting an easement for the installation of a gas pipeline and abandoning the existing pipeline in place.

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## Impacts on the Physical Environment

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Evaluation of the impacts on the No-Action and Action Alternatives including direct, secondary, and cumulative impacts on the Physical Environment.

### VEGETATION: Action and No Action Alternative

DNRC only has jurisdiction within the low water mark of the Clark Fork River at the proposed location. Because there is no vegetation within the low water mark of the Clark Fork River, there will be no impacts to vegetation within the low water mark for both the Action and No Action Alternative.

### SOIL DISTURBANCE AND PRODUCTIVITY:

**No Action:** The existing condition of these resources would remain unchanged.

**Action Alternative:** The existing pipeline would be abandoned in place to limit disturbance. The new pipeline would be horizontally drilled under the riverbed and no disturbance to the bed or banks is anticipated to take place. The existing condition would remain unchanged.

Impacts to geologic features, soil quality, stability, and moisture within the DNRC Navigable Water jurisdiction are not anticipated with this project.

### WATER QUALITY AND QUANTITY:

**No Action:** The existing condition of these resources would remain unchanged.

**Action Alternative:** Surface water would not be encountered by the proposed action. Directional bore would pass through groundwater when it crosses under the riverbed. The proposal would require the contractors to use a water-based mud with bentonite clay as this will be non-toxic and consist of natural materials. Contractors would be prohibited from using

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any environmentally non-compatible polymers or oils as additives to the mud. The drillers would be required to dispose of spent drilling mud and other spoils at a designated disposal site to prevent any releases of these materials to the river (this would be outside of DNRC jurisdiction).

## FISHERIES:

**No-Action:** No direct or indirect impacts would occur to affected fish species or affected fisheries resources.

**Action Alternative:** The existing pipeline would be abandoned in place to limit disturbance. The proposal is for an underground natural gas line. No in-stream activities would occur. No impacts to fisheries would be expected.

## WILDLIFE:

**Existing Conditions:** Limited habitats for terrestrial and avian wildlife exist in the project area. Some use of the DNRC-managed project area by aquatic mammals, birds, and amphibians is possible. Surrounding uplands and riparian habitats likely supports a variety of wildlife species native to western Montana, however proximity to numerous forms of human disturbance, including Highway 90, Montana Rail Link railroad, human residences, and agricultural activities has likely altered wildlife use of the vicinity. The nearest known bald eagle nest is roughly 1.1 miles upriver from the proposed easement and exists in close proximity to several forms of disturbance including Highway 90, Montan Rail Link railroad, and numerous other human developments. This nesting pair appears to be somewhat habituated to elevated levels of human disturbance in the area and have had several nests along this section of the Clark Fork River. No recent observations of yellow-billed cuckoos have occurred in the vicinity; 1 likely transient observation in Missoula (approx. 14 miles downstream) occurred in 2012, otherwise observations since the 1980s are lacking.

Potential habitat suitability (MNHP 2026) in the vicinity was predicted to be low suitability or generally unsuitable. While potential habitats for yellow-billed cuckoos may exist in the vicinity, no habitats occur in the project area. No known active great blue heron rookeries are known in the vicinity, but an abandoned rookery exists approximately 1 mile upstream from the site (MNHP 2026); potential habitats exist in the vicinity, but not in the project area. While northern hoary bats and fringed myotis have not been documented in the vicinity, some use is possible. A suite of avian species likely travel along the Clark Fork River and could use the project area and/or surrounding terrestrial habitats. Similarly, several waterfowl species likely use the aquatic habitats in the project area for foraging.

**No-Action:** No further disturbance to wildlife would occur. No changes to exiting habitats would occur. Collectively, no direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to terrestrial wildlife would be anticipated.

**Action Alternative:** By granting an easement, installation of a natural gas pipeline would be anticipated, which could introduce some short-duration disturbance to terrestrial wildlife species in the vicinity during proposed activities. No long-term changes in disturbance to resident wildlife species would be anticipated. Potential work (4 months) could occur starting in spring, which could overlap the bald eagle nesting season or occur outside of the outside of the bald eagle nesting season; overall minimal effects to bald eagles would be anticipated given this pair seems semi-habituated to the disturbance levels in the area. No appreciable changes to existing habitats would be anticipated. Similarly, potential activities could overlap the yellow-billed cuckoo nesting season should they be in the vicinity, thus some disturbance would be possible, but no effects to nesting habitats would occur and

generally negligible effects to yellow-billed cuckoos would be anticipated. Collectively, negligible effects to the existing suite of wildlife species would be anticipated with the proposed easement.

**Wildlife References**

MNHP. 2026. Montana Natural Heritage Program. Environmental Summary Report for Latitude 46.76994 to 46.83415 and Longitude -113.74590 to -113.82348. Retrieved on 1/7/2026.

**AIR QUALITY:**

**No Action:** The condition of these resources would remain unchanged.

**Action Alternative:** No impacts to air quality would occur as a result of this project.

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES / AESTHETICS / DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:**

Because only the bed of the Clark Fork River is state-owned land in the project's area of potential effect, there are no cultural resource concerns. Issuance of an easement will have No Effect to state owned heritage properties as defined in the State Antiquities Act.

**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.

**Impacts on the Human Population**

Evaluation of the impacts on the proposed action including **direct, secondary, and cumulative** impacts on the Human Population.

Will Alternative result in potential impacts to:	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number		
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative							
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High				
<b>No-Action</b>																
Health and Human Safety	X				X				X							
Industrial, Commercial and Agricultural Activities and Production	X				X				X							

Northwestern Energy Turah-Navigable Water Easement  
Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation EACv2.0

Quantity and Distribution of Employment	X				X				X					
Local Tax Base and Tax Revenues	X				X				X					
Demand for Government Services	X				X				X					
Recreational and Wilderness Activities	X				X				X					

Will Alternative result in potential impacts to:	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number		
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative							
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High				
Density and Distribution of population and housing	X				X				X							
Social Structures and Mores	X				X				X							
Cultural Uniqueness and Diversity	X				X				X							
<b>Action</b>																
Health and Human Safety	X				X				X							
Industrial, Commercial and Agricultural Activities and Production	X				X				X							
Quantity and Distribution of Employment	X				X				X							
Local Tax Base and Tax Revenues	X				X				X							
Demand for Government Services	X				X				X							
Access To and Quality of Recreational and Wilderness Activities	X				X				X							
Density and Distribution of population and housing	X				X				X							
Social Structures and Mores	X				X				X							
Cultural Uniqueness and Diversity	X				X				X							

**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.*

None.

**Other Appropriate Social and Economic Circumstances:**

**No Action:** The No Action alternative would not generate any return to the trust at this time.

**Action:** Granting of the proposed easement would return approximately \$2,945 to the Public Land- Navigable Rivers trust.

**Environmental Assessment Checklist Prepared By:**

**Name:** Amy Helena  
**Title:** Missoula Unit Manager  
**Date:** January 7, 2026

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**Finding**

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**Alternative Selected**

I select the Action Alternative; granting an easement involving .16 acres of State-owned property below the low water mark of the Clark Fork River.

**Significance of Potential Impacts**

The action alternative will not result in significant environmental impacts.

**Need for Further Environmental Analysis**

<input type="checkbox"/> EIS	<input type="checkbox"/> More Detailed EA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> X No Further Analysis
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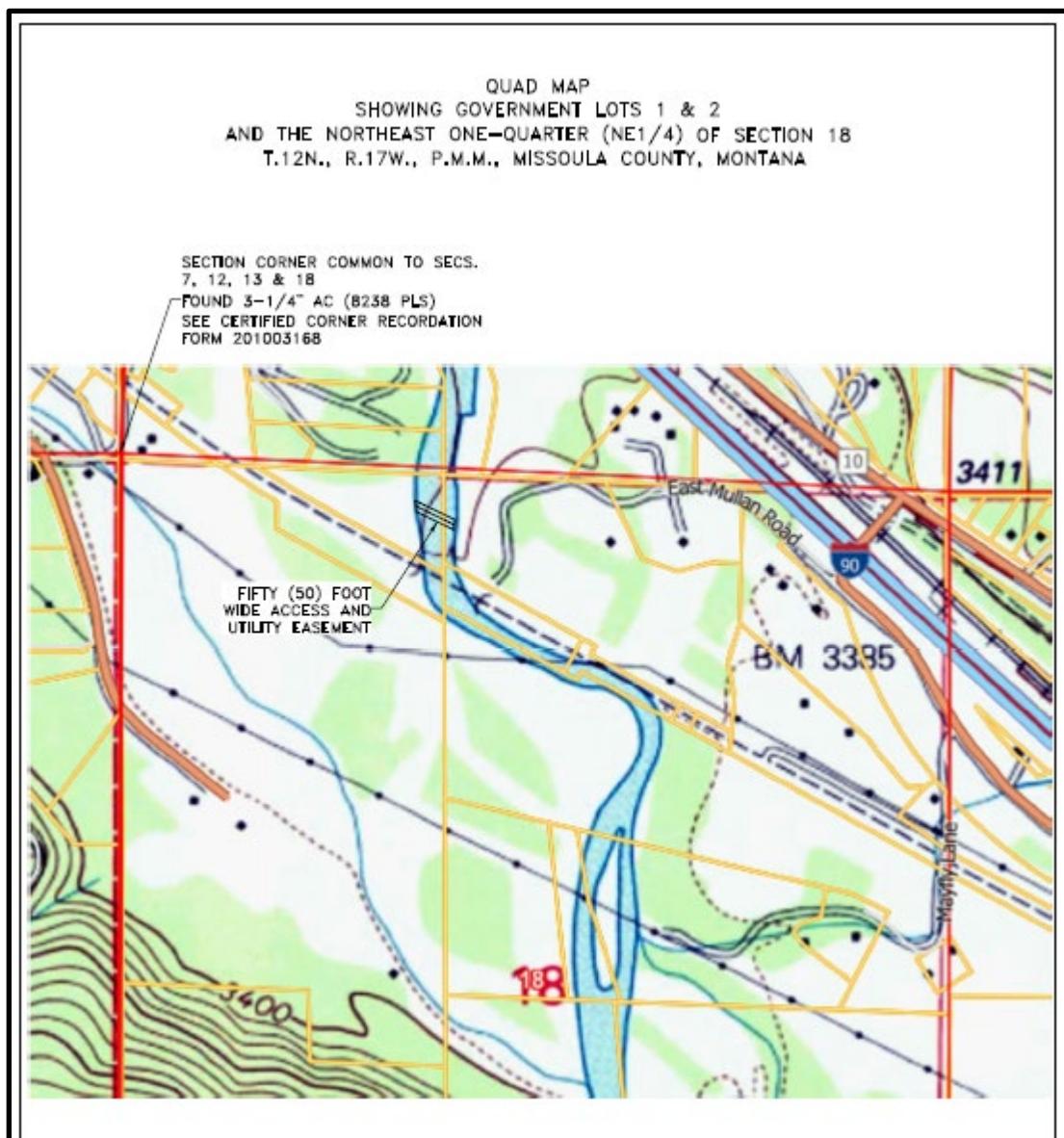
**Environmental Assessment Checklist Approved By:**

**Name:** Sierra Farmer  
**Title:** Trust Lands Program  
**Manager Date:** January 8, 2026  
**Signature:** /s/



## **Attachment A - Exhibits**

A-1: Northwestern Energy Turah-Easement



A-2: Nine Mile Creek Utility Easement

