

## CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

<b>Project Name:</b>	Mid Rivers Grass Range FTTP Fiber Optic Upgrade
<b>Proposed Implementation Date:</b>	May 2023
<b>Proponent:</b>	Mid-Rivers Telephone cooperative Inc. d.b.a Mid Rivers Communications
<b>Location:</b>	15N 24E 16, 16N 23E 16, 11N 24E 28, 11N 24E 17, 15N 21E 3, 16N 20E 1, 17N 20E 35, 13N 22E 36, 15N 25E 28
<b>County:</b>	Fergus, Musselshell and Petroleum
<b>Trust:</b>	University of Montana (15N 25E 28) Veterans Home (16N 20E 1 and 35) Common Schools (All other tracts)

### I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

The purpose of these easements would be to upgrade the fiber optic phone and internet system in the Grass Range area as part of a nationwide push to increase access to rural broadband internet.

### 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 Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC)  
Northeastern Land Office (NELO) Lewistown Unit Office and Southern Land Office (SLO)  
Proponent: Mid-Rivers Telephone cooperative Inc. d.b.a. Mid Rivers Communications  
Surface Lessees: Lazy 4J Inc, Marcus Lewis, Tranel Ranch, Descheemaker Herefords, East Fork Holdings LLC, Heart K LLC, Wilk Ranch Montana LTD LP, Tiegen Ranch  
Other: Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team (MSGOT)

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

The DNRC, and NELO have jurisdiction over this proposed project.

The proponent is responsible for acquiring all necessary permits for the proposed project and settling all surface damages with the surface lessees.

#### 3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

**Alternative A (No Action)** – Under this alternative, the Department does not grant a right of way easement for the installation of a buried fiber optic line.

**Alternative B (the Proposed Action)** – Under this alternative, the Department does grant a right of way easement for the installation of a buried fiber optic line.

### 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.*

None of the soils that would be affected by these easements had ratings available for off road erosion potential. However since all of them are located near existing disturbances with established erosion control vegetation and the minimal ground disturbance caused by the trenchless installation method there should be no major erosion issues.

Most of the soils affected are rated as either somewhat or severely limited for shallow excavations. This should not be an issue because a trenchless installation method will be used. This method involves using the ripper on the back of a bulldozer that drops the cable or conduit in as it goes. Therefore there are no excavations that stay open and will not cause any safety issues and the limitations of the soils should not come into effect.

All soils are rated as severe for soil rutting hazard. This is easily remedied by only doing work when the conditions are dry. This will be a requirement of the easements which will alleviate any rutting issues.

No significant cumulative impacts to geology or soil quality, stability, and moisture are anticipated.

#### 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.*

There are several streams that this project is proposed to cross. The fiber optic line would cross Fords Creek in two places. The first crossing would be on 16N 20E 1 and the other crossing would be at 17N 20E 35. Both will be bored under the creek and have no streambed impacts. 310 permits have been secured by the proponent for all stream crossings.

No significant impacts to local or regional water resources are anticipated.

#### 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 significant impacts to air quality are 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.*

All easements are located within or next to current road ROWs that are already dominated by introduced species such as smooth brome and crested wheatgrass. Since the method of install will be a trenchless method there will be very little soil disturbance and the introduced grasses will revegetate quickly. Any areas of disturbance that are larger than that normally produced by a trenchless installation method will be reseeded using the seed mix and rates detailed in Appendix B.

Several plant species of concern have been noted in the vicinity of 15N 24E 16 and 16N 23E 16, however all observations are more than a mile from the project areas. Also, the disturbed areas will be within existing disturbances so no significant impacts to vegetation are anticipated.



**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 significant impacts to terrestrial, avian, or aquatic habitats are anticipated.

**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.*

Most of the species of concern in the project areas are small birds. The exceptions are the sage grouse, black tailed prairie dog, and burrowing owl. The latter two should not be directly affected because there are no active prairie dog towns in the easement areas, the observations were all outside the actual disturbance area. There are a number of bats species observed in some areas as well but construction will take place during daylight far from the noted roost areas.

To mitigate the affects on sage grouse the proponent must follow the recommendations laid out by MSGOT in the letter found in Appendix E. All easement areas are adjacent to existing disturbances with frequent human use, mostly roads, as such the habitat is already degraded and the only affect for most of the species of concern will be temporary displacement if they are even present. Species of concern reports with a one mile buffer around the easement areas can be found in Appendix C.

No significant impacts to unique, endangered, fragile or limited environmental resources are anticipated, though temporary displacement of local wildlife may occur during the project.

**10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:**

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

A Class III cultural and paleontological resources inventory was conducted of the area of potential effect on state land. Despite a detailed examination, no cultural or fossil resources were identified in the easement corridor. No additional archaeological or paleontological investigative work is recommended. The proposed project will have *No Effect* to *Antiquities* as defined under the Montana State Antiquities Act. A formal report of findings is forthcoming and will be made available through the DNRC and the Montana State Historic Preservation Officer. No significant effects on historical, archaeological, or paleontological resources anticipated.

**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 significant impacts on the aesthetics of the area are anticipated.

**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 limited environmental resources will be significantly impacted because of this project. This project will also not add any significant cumulative demands on environmental 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.*

There are no other projects or plans being considered on the tracts listed in this EA Checklist.

#### 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.*

The only risk to human health and safety would be during the construction of the project. It would be the responsibility of the proponent to mitigate any risks during construction. After construction there will be some health and safety benefits provided by increased internet access. The better internet will allow residents of the area to have better access to telehealth and phone service for better communication with emergency services.

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

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

The resulting broadband internet access from these easements could potentially provide recipients the ability to use E-commerce for more profitable operations and better marketing of agricultural products. However all benefits to industry, commerce, and agriculture are incidental and not a direct result of the easements.

This project will not add to or deter from other industrial, agricultural, or commercial activities in the area.

##### 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.*

These easements would not directly create any jobs but may indirectly create opportunities for employment for the end users of the internet access. With the current trend for more teleworking having high quality broadband internet would create possible opportunities end users to access teleworking labor markets that are currently inaccessible.

The project will not create or eliminate any jobs, so no significant effects to the employment market are anticipated.

##### 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.*

There are no direct or cumulative effects to taxes or revenue for the proposed 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*

There will not be any significant increases in traffic, school attendance, or need for fire and police protection if this project is approved.

##### 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 are no zoning or other agency management plans affecting 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.*

There will be no significant direct or cumulative effects on access to or quality of recreation and wilderness activities because of this project.

**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*

The proposed project does not include any changes to housing or developments.

**22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:**

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

There are no native, unique or traditional lifestyles or communities in the vicinity that would be significantly impacted by the proposal.

**23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:**

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

The proposed project will have no significant impact on any culturally 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.*

This Project would result in an \$11,196.50 return to the trust in easement fees. \$192 would go to the University of Montana Trust. \$3,960.00 would go to the Veterans Home trust. \$7,044.50 would go to the common Schools trust.

The proposed project will not have any significant cumulative economic or social effect.

## V. FINDING

### 25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:


**Alternative B (the Proposed Action)** – Under this alternative, the Department does grant a right of way easement for the installation of a buried fiber optic line.

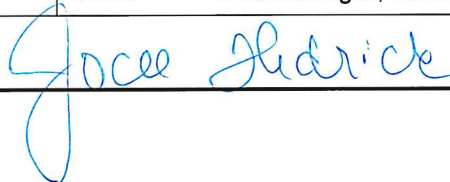
### 26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

I have evaluated the potential environment effects and have determined no significant impact to the environment because of this project.

### 27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

☐ EIS      ☐ More Detailed EA      ☒ No Further Analysis

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<b>Signature:</b> 	<b>Date:</b> 7 MARCH 2023

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<b>Signature:</b> 	<b>Date:</b> 3/2/23