# CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

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| **Project Name:** | Right-of-Way for Buried Fiber Telecommunication Cables |
| **Proposed Implementation Date:** | Fall 2026 |
| **Proponent:** | Triangle Communications |
| **Location:** | NW4NW4, Section 16, T20N, R17E |
| **County:** | Fergus |
| **Trust:** | Common Schools |

## I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

The proposed action is the authorization of a Right-of-Way for the installation, operation, and maintenance of underground fiber-optic infrastructure across state-owned land. The purpose of the action is to allow the applicant to construct telecommunications facilities necessary to provide and improve broadband service within the project area, while ensuring the use of state land is consistent with DNRC's trust responsibilities, existing land uses, and applicable management requirements.

## 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
Proponent: Triangle Communications
Surface Lessees: AG#10144 J&L River Ranch LLC.
Other: Patrick Rennie, Montana State Trust Lands Archeologist,
Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program

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

The DNRC has jurisdiction over the proposed project, which would be administered by the Northeastern Land Office (Lewistown Unit). The proponent is responsible for obtaining all necessary permits for the proposed project and for resolving any surface damage with the surface lessees.

### 3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

**Alternative A (No Action)** – Under the No Action Alternative, the Department would not approve the requested Right-of-Way authorization, and the proposed installation of underground fiber-optic facilities across state-owned land would not occur. Existing land uses and management practices would continue unchanged.

**Alternative B (the Proposed Action)** – Under the Action Alternative, the Department would approve and issue a Right-of-Way authorization for the installation, operation, and maintenance of underground fiber-optic facilities across state-owned land, subject to applicable terms, conditions, and permitting requirements. The proponent would be responsible for obtaining all necessary permits and for addressing surface disturbance and reclamation in coordination with surface lessees.

## 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.*

Soil within the project area, as identified through the Web Soil Survey, are rated as somewhat limited for shallow excavations due to soil texture, seasonal moisture conditions, rock fragments, and the potential presence of dense subsurface layers. These conditions may affect trenching efficiency and excavation stability; however, they can be effectively managed through standard construction practices and appropriate best management measures. No soil conditions are present that would preclude installation of the proposed water line, and no long-term impacts on soil resources are anticipated.

Some soils within the broader project vicinity are rated as very limited for shallow excavations; however, these areas do not overlap with the proposed disturbance area and are not expected to be affected by construction activities. All planned excavations would occur within soils rated as somewhat limited; therefore, the very limited rating is not considered applicable to the proposed 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 perennial surface waters occur within the proposed disturbance area. Construction may cause short-term, localized increases in sediment or turbidity, especially during wet conditions. Using best management practices would reduce these effects. Because the project would disturb a small area within an already managed rangeland setting, impacts on water quality and quantity are expected to be minimal. No long-term or significant impacts to surface or groundwater 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.*

Short-term impacts to air quality would include minor dust and exhaust emissions from construction equipment. No long-term impacts on air quality are anticipated beyond short-term dust and exhaust emissions during construction. No significant cumulative 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.*

The project area consists of rangeland alongside a surfaced gravel road. Construction would temporarily remove or disturb vegetation along the right-of-way. Impacts would be localized and short-term, with vegetation expected to recover following reclamation and reseeding to preexisting agriculture conditions.

**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 project area consists of rangelands adjacent to an existing road. Construction may temporarily displace wildlife; however, these effects would be localized and short-term, and conditions are expected to return to pre-project conditions following reclamation and reseeding. No surface waters are present within the disturbance area; therefore, impacts to fish or aquatic habitat are not 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.*

The proposed fiber optic cable installation will cross rangeland and previously disturbed areas associated with existing roadway corridors and routine roadway maintenance activities. Review of available data, field observations, and consultation with the Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team (MSGOT) identified no federally listed threatened or endangered species, active sage grouse leks, wetlands, or other unique, fragile, or limited environmental resources within the proposed disturbance area that would be adversely affected by the project.

The proposed project occurs within designated sage grouse habitat; however, MSGOT determined that the project is not located within two miles of any active sage grouse lek in General Habitat. The project has been designed to minimize impacts to sage grouse habitat by utilizing a trenchless plow installation method and locating the proposed cable within MSGOT-approved co-location distances associated with existing road corridors or areas determined to meet the spirit of co-location. The trenchless installation method minimizes surface disturbance by creating a narrow opening, installing the cable, and restoring the disturbed area in a single pass without removal of soil or vegetation root structure.

Based on the proposed construction methods, project location, and adherence to MSGOT guidance and Executive Order 12-2015, impacts to sage grouse habitat and other sensitive resources are expected to be minimal. Temporary disturbance associated with construction activities will be managed through reclamation and noxious weed control measures. No long-term or cumulative impacts to sage grouse populations, habitat, or other unique, fragile, or limited environmental resources are anticipated.

**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 results revealed that no cultural or paleontological resources have been identified in the APE, and the APE has been inventoried multiple times over the past 20 years for cultural resources.

Proposed telecommunications cable installation will have *No Effect* to *Antiquities*. 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.

**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.*

Construction may cause short-term visual changes, including equipment, trenching, and temporary soil disturbance, along with localized, temporary noise during the work period. Because the project is small and

located in a transportation corridor, overall effects on visual quality are expected to be minimal, and no long-term visual or noise impacts are anticipated after reclamation and revegetation.

**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 is situated within a transportation corridor. Standard construction practices are expected to limit short-term impacts on soil, water, and air resources. Given the project's small scale and its location within a previously disturbed roadway, cumulative effects are anticipated to be negligible, with no significant or long-term impacts to land, water, air, or energy 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.*

No other environmental studies and planning documents relevant to the project area were identified.

## 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 completed fiber opt is not expected to pose a risk to public health or safety. No significant impacts on human health or safety are anticipated.

**15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:**
*Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.*

The project will not add to or deter from existing industrial, commercial, or agricultural activities in the area. No significant direct, indirect, or cumulative effects 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.*

This project may result in minor, short term construction related employment and expenditures. However, no long term changes to the local or regional 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.*

No changes to tax revenue are expected. No significant direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts are expected.

**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*

The project will not increase traffic, school attendance, or need for additional fire or police services. No significant cumulative impacts are anticipated.

**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 applicable zoning or management plans affect this project. No significant impacts are anticipated.

**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.*

Temporary, minor access disruptions may occur during construction but will be short-term. No significant impacts to recreation are anticipated.

**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 project does not involve housing or population changes. No significant impacts are anticipated.

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

No native, unique, or traditional communities are present; no significant impacts are anticipated.

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

No unique cultural, historical, or aesthetic qualities will be affected. No significant 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 project will result in a one-time $500.00 fee to Common Schools Trust. No significant cumulative economic or social impacts are anticipated.

## V. FINDING

### 25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

**Alternative B (the Proposed Action)** – The Department would approve and issue a Right-of-Way authorization for the installation, operation, and maintenance of underground fiber-optic facilities across state-owned land, subject to applicable terms, conditions, and permitting requirements. Existing land uses would continue, and reclamation measures would be implemented following construction.

### 26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

Based on the analysis of the proposed action and alternatives, potential impacts to environmental resources are expected to be minor, localized, and temporary. Short-term effects may occur during construction, including temporary soil disturbance, vegetation removal, dust generation, and noise from equipment. These effects would be mitigated through standard construction practices, reclamation, and revegetation measures.

The disturbance footprint is limited to previously disturbed rangeland within sage-grouse and black-footed ferret habitat. Mitigation measures will minimize potential effects on these and other sensitive species. No perennial waters, unusual geologic features, or visually prominent landscapes would be affected. Air and water quality impacts would be minimal and short-term, and cumulative effects from existing or reasonably foreseeable activities in the area are expected to be negligible.

Given the limited scale of the project, the existing rangeland context of the site, and the mitigation measures proposed, the action is not expected to result in significant direct, indirect, or cumulative environmental impacts. Under the No Action Alternative, no environmental impacts would occur, and existing conditions would be maintained.

### 27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

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| | EIS | | More Detailed EA | X | No Further Analysis |

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| **EA Checklist Prepared By:** | **Name:** Josh Stoychoff<br>**Title:** Lewistown Unit Manager | |
| **Signature:** Josh Stoychoff | | **Date:** 7/1/26 |

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| **EA Checklist Approved By:** | **Name:** Jocee Hedrick<br>**Title:** Area Manager, Northeastern Land Office | |
| **Signature:** Jocee Hedrick | | **Date:** 6/30/26 |

# Appendix A: Soil Ratings

Table — Shallow Excavations — Summary by Rating Value

Summary by Rating Value

Summary by Rating Value

| Rating | Acres in AOI | Percent of AOI |
|---|---|---|
| Very limited | 13.2 | 100.0% |
| **Totals for Area of Interest** | **13.2** | **100.0%** |

Table — Soil Compaction Resistance — Summary by Rating Value

Summary by Rating Value

Summary by Rating Value

| Rating | Acres in AOI | Percent of AOI |
|---|---|---|
| Low resistance | 13.2 | 100.0% |
| **Totals for Area of Interest** | **13.2** | **100.0%** |

# Appendix B: Reclamation Seed Mix

| Species | % of Seed mix | Pounds PLS/ac |
|---|---|---|
| Western Wheatgrass | 35 | 2.8 |
| Slender wheatgrass | 35 | 2.8 |
| Bluebunch Wheatgrass | 15 | 1.2 |
| Green Needlegrass | 10 | 0.8 |
| Lewis flax or purple prairie clover | 5 | 0.4 |

# Appendix C: Species of Concern

Observed Species of Concern

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| SOC | Northern Hoary Bat | Lasiurus cinereus | Riparian and forest | Migratory Summer Breeder |
| SOC | Great Blue Heron | Ardea herodias | Riparian forest | Resident Year Round |

Potential Species of Concern

| MT S | Common Name | Scientific Name | Habitat | Distribution |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SOC | Little Brown Myotis | Myotis lucifugus | Generalist | Resident Year Round |
| SOC | Double Bladderpod | Physaria brassicoides | Breaklands/badlands | Present |
| SOC | Slim-pod Venus'-looking- | Triodanis leptocarpa | Grasslands | Present |
| SOC | Merriam's Shrew | Sorex merriami | Sagebrush grassland | Resident Year Round |
| SOC | Grizzly Bear | Ursus arctos | Generalist | Resident Year Round |
| PSOC | Four-wing Saltbush | Atriplex canescens | Sagebrush steppe and saline soils of badlands | Present |
| SOC | Long-billed Curlew | Numenius americanus | Grasslands | Migratory Summer Breeder |
| SOC | Black-tailed Prairie Dog | Cynomys ludovicianus | Grasslands | Resident Year Round |
| SOC | Preble's Shrew | Sorex preblei | Sagebrush grassland | Resident Year Round |
| PSOC | Little Indian Breadroot | Pediomelum hypogaeum va | Grasslands/Woodlands (Open, sandy soil) | Present |
| SOC | Bobolink | Dolichonyx oryzivorus | Moist grasslands | Migratory Summer Breeder |
| SOC | Brewer's Sparrow | Spizella breweri | Sagebrush | Migratory Summer Breeder |
| SOC | Sage Thrasher | Oreoscoptes montanus | Sagebrush | Migratory Summer Breeder |
| SOC | Scribner's Ragwort | Senecio integerrimus var. sc | Sagebrush shrublands and grasslands, usually with clay soils | Present |
| SOC | Greater Sage-Grouse | Centrocercus urophasianus | Sagebrush | Resident Year Round |
| SOC | Burrowing Owl | Athene cunicularia | Grasslands | Migratory Summer Breeder |