

Environmental Assessment Checklist

Project Name: Northwestern Energy Pipeline Flathead River

Proposed Implementation Date: Summer 2026

Proponent: Kalispell Unit, Northwest Land Office, Montana DNRC

County: Flathead

Type and Purpose of Action

Description of Proposed Action:

Northwestern Energy is proposing a right of way easement through navigable water of the Flathead River. The project consists of a thirty (30) foot wide utility access across the Flathead River. Commencing at the low watermark of the south side of Flathead river on the section line of Sections 2 and 11, then approximately 1250' NW to the low water mark of the north side of the Flathead River in Section 2, for a total of approximately 1.01 AC. The project is located approximately 3.75 miles east of Columbia Falls near the intersection of Highway 2 E and Berne Rd. (refer to Attachments vicinity map A-1) and includes the following sections:

Beneficiary	Legal Description	Total Acres
Common Schools		
Public Buildings		
MSU 2 nd Grant		
MSU Morrill		
Eastern College-MSU/Western College-U of M		
Montana Tech		
University of Montana		
School for the Deaf and Blind		
Pine Hills School		
Veterans Home		
Public Land Trust – Navigable Rivers	NE4 Sec. 11 T 30N R20W SE4 of Sec. 2 T30N R19W	1.01
Acquired Land		

Objectives of the project include:

- Replacement of an existing pipeline which will be abandoned upon completion.
- Continued safe delivery of natural gas to the residents of the flathead valley.

Proposed activities include:

- The sale of an approximately 1.01 acre right of way easement to Northwestern Energy.

The lands involved in this proposed project are held by the State of Montana in trust for Montana Public Land-Trust Navigable Rivers Trust per the Enabling Act of February 22, 1889; 1972 Montana Constitution, Article X, Section 11. The Board of Land Commissioners and DNRC are required by law to administer these trust lands to produce the largest measure of reasonable and legitimate return over the long run for the beneficiary institutions (Section 77-1-202, MCA).

Project Development

SCOPING:

- DATE:
 - March 1 – April 1, 2026
- PUBLIC SCOPED:
 - Daily Interlake
 - Flathead Beacon
 - Glacier Rivers, LLC
 - Columbia Falls Aluminum Co.
 - Joseph Hauser
 - BNSF
- AGENCIES SCOPED:
 - MT. Dept. of Transportation
 - USFS – Manager Kalispell
 - U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
 - MT Dept. of Environmental Quality
 - MT Fish Wildlife & Parks
 - Flathead Conservation District
- COMMENTS RECEIVED:
 - How many: 1
 - Concerns: environmental disruption

DNRC Hydrologist, Tony Nelson, and DNRC Biologist, Victoria Forristal, were consulted during the writing of this Environmental Assessment Checklist. All DNRC Trust Lands Bureau Chiefs; Dan Rogers, Trevor Taylor, Kelly Motichka, and Deidra Kloberdanz, as well as DNRC Trust Lands Archaeologist Patrick Rennie were also consulted.

OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED: *(Conservation Easements, Army Corps of Engineers, road use permits, etc.)*

- **Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (DFWP)**- A Montana Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act Permit (310 Permit) is required from local conservation district for activities that may affect the natural shape and form of a stream's channel, banks, or tributaries. Such activities include:
 - Horizontal directional drilling under the Flathead River.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

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No-Action Alternative: An easement would not be sold to Northwestern Energy. The energy company would have to seek an alternative route in order to continue delivering natural gas to Flathead valley residents.

Action Alternative : An easement would be sold to Northwestern Energy for the placement of their pipeline under the Flathead river. This pipeline, once installed, would allow for continued delivery of natural gas to the residents of the Flathead valley.

Impacts on the Physical Environment

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

VEGETATION:

Vegetation Existing Conditions:

Existing vegetation in the project area is consistent with those species associated with riparian habitat types in Northwestern Montana. These species include willows and cottonwoods as well as riparian shrubs, forbs and grasses. Noxious weeds are also present in the area, predominately along roadways and access sites.

The work of this project is underground for the entire length of the DNRC easement. As such there would be no effects to vegetation for either alternative.

Vegetation	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
No-Action														
Noxious Weeds	X				X				X					
Rare Plants	X				X				X					
Vegetative community	X				X				X					
Old Growth	X				X				X					
Action														
Noxious Weeds		X			X				X				Yes	1
Rare Plants	X				X				X					
Vegetative community	X				X				X					
Old Growth	X				X				X					

Comments:

1. The proposed project would include the development of drilling sites outside of the DNRC easement where drilling would begin and terminate. The development of these small sites could spread noxious weeds.

Vegetation Mitigations:

1. Site development would involve precautions to limit the spread of noxious weeds. This includes grass seeding on termination of the project and possible application of herbicide if deemed necessary.

SOIL DISTURBANCE AND PRODUCTIVITY:

Soil Disturbance and Productivity Existing Conditions:

Current soil conditions in the project area are water-riverwash association according to the NRCS soil survey. This soil class is characterized by alluvial silts, sand and gravel and undergoes constant change with river flow. These soil disturbance regimes are generally low productivity for agricultural or forestry production. Soil disturbance would occur on either side of the DNRC easement where drilling begins and terminates. However, these areas are relatively small and outside of DNRC jurisdiction therefore would not affect lands managed by DNRC.

Soil Disturbance and Productivity	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
No-Action														
Physical Disturbance (Compaction and Displacement)	X				X				X					
Erosion	X				X				X					
Nutrient Cycling	X				X				X					
Slope Stability	X				X				X					
Soil Productivity	X				X				X					
Action														
Physical Disturbance (Compaction and Displacement)	X				X				X					
Erosion	X				X				X					
Nutrient Cycling	X				X				X					
Slope Stability	X				X				X					
Soil Productivity	x				X				X					

Comments: N/A

Soil Mitigations: No soil mitigations would be necessary with the horizontal directional drilling method.

WATER QUALITY AND QUANTITY:

Water Quality and Quantity Existing Conditions:

The Flathead River is a perennial, recreational (wild and scenic rivers act, 1968), blue ribbon stream in Northwestern Montana. However, the section of the river under which this project would take place is not wild or under any specific protections. The average long term median flow for this section of river is 9600 cubic feet per second.

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There are no foreseen effects to water quality or quantity associated with this project. The proposed pipeline would be installed well below the potential scour line of the Flathead River; as such it would have no foreseeable effects to water resources.

Water Quality & Quantity	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
No-Action														
Water Quality	X				X				X					
Water Quantity	X				X				X					
Action														
Water Quality	X				X				X					
Water Quantity	X				X				X					

Comments: The subsurface depth of this project would be below the greatest foreseeable scour on this section of river. By placing the pipeline outside of foreseeable river scour it is unlikely that this project would have any effect on water quality or quantity. The placement of material extracted from the borehole should be placed far enough from the riverbank and promptly revegetated to prevent potential erosion and delivery of said material into the channel.

Water Quality & Quantity Mitigations: N/A

FISHERIES:

Fisheries Existing Conditions:

This section of the Flathead River is mostly populated with native fish species. However, both rainbow and lake trout can be found in this section of river. Historically, this section of the river had variable temperatures dependent on water releases from Hungry Horse Dam. In 1995 a selective withdrawal system was installed on the dam and has since allowed for a more natural temperature regime.

No-Action: No direct or indirect impacts would occur to affected fish species or affected fisheries resources beyond those described in Fisheries Existing Conditions. Cumulative effects (other related past and present factors; other future, related actions; and any impacts described in Fisheries Existing Conditions) would continue to occur.

Action Alternative (see Fisheries table below):

Fisheries	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
No-Action														
Sediment	X				x				X					
Flow Regimes	X				X				X					
Woody Debris	X				X				X					

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Fisheries	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
Stream Shading	X				X				X					
Stream Temperature	X				X				X					
Connectivity	X				X				X					
Populations	X				X				X					
Action														
Sediment	X				X				X					
Flow Regimes	X				X				X					
Woody Debris	X				X				X					
Stream Shading	X				X				X					
Stream Temperature	X				X				X					
Connectivity	X				X				X					
Populations	X				X				X					

Comments: N/A

Fisheries Mitigations: There are no foreseeable effects to fisheries with the proposed action alternative. All work would occur well below the scour line of the Flathead River, well outside of the area where any effects to fisheries would occur.

WILDLIFE:

No-Action: None of the proposed activities would occur. No wildlife habitat would be altered, and no additional disturbance would occur. Thus, no direct, indirect or cumulative effects to terrestrial wildlife species would be anticipated.

Action Alternative (see Wildlife table below):

Wildlife	Impact												Can Impact be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
Threatened and Endangered Species														
Grizzly bear (<i>Ursus arctos</i>) Habitat: Recovery areas, security from human activity	X				X				X					WI-1
Lynx (<i>Felis lynx</i>) Habitat: SF hab. types, dense sapling, old forest, deep snow zone	X				X				X					WI-2
Yellow-billed cuckoo (<i>Coccyzus americanus</i>)	X				X				X					WI-2

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Wildlife	Impact												Can Impact be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
Habitat: open cottonwood riparian forest with dense brush understories (Lake and Flathead counties)														
Wolverine (<i>Gulo gulo</i>) Habitat: high elevation areas that retain high snow levels in late spring	X				X				X					WI-2
Sensitive Species														
Bald eagle (<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>) Habitat: Late-successional forest within 1 mile of open water	X				X				X					WI-3
Black-backed woodpecker (<i>Picoides arcticus</i>) Habitat: Mature to old burned or beetle-infested forest	X				X				X					WI-2
Common loon (<i>Gavia immer</i>) Habitat: Cold mountain lakes, nest in emergent vegetation	X				X				X					WI-2
Fisher (<i>Martes pennanti</i>) Habitat: Dense mature to old forest less than 6,000 feet in elevation and riparian	X				X				X					WI-2
Flammulated owl (<i>Otus flammeolus</i>) Habitat: Late-successional ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir forest	X				X				X					WI-2
Peregrine falcon (<i>Falco peregrinus</i>) Habitat: Cliff features near open	X				X				X					WI-2

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Wildlife	Impact												Can Impact be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
foraging areas and/or wetlands														
Pileated woodpecker <i>(Dryocopus pileatus)</i> Habitat: Late-successional ponderosa pine and larch-fir forest	X				X				X					WI-2
Fringed myotis <i>(Myotis thysanodes)</i> Habitat: low elevation ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir and riparian forest with diverse roost sites including outcrops, caves, mines	X				X				X					WI-2
Hoary bat <i>(Lasiurus cinereus)</i> Habitat: coniferous and deciduous forests and roost on foliage in trees, under bark, in snags, bridges	X				X				X					WI-2
Townsend's big-eared bat <i>(Plecotus townsendii)</i> Habitat: Caves, caverns, old mines	X				X				X					WI-2
Big Game Species														
Elk	X				X				X					WI-2
Whitetail	X				X				X					WI-2
Moose	X				X				X					WI-2
Mule Deer	X				X				X					WI-2

Comments:

WI-1. The proposed project area is within the grizzly bear Recovery Zone associated with the Northern Continental Divide ecosystem (USFWS 1993, Wittinger 2002). Appreciable use of the project area by grizzly bears is unlikely due to the high levels of disturbance associated with U.S Highway 2, the railroad corridor, and recreation on the Flathead River. There have been no recent reports of grizzly bears in the vicinity of the project area (MNHP 2026). The duration of proposed activities would be relatively short and would not affect preferred bear habitat (e.g.

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berry patches). Thus, negligible direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to grizzly bears would be anticipated as a result of the proposed activities.

WI-2. This species was evaluated, and it was determined that the Project Area lies outside of the normal distribution for the species, and/or suitable habitat was not found to be present.

WI-3. The proposed project is > 0.5 miles from a known bald eagle nest site, however current occupancy is unknown. Eagles routinely forage and travel along the Flathead River in the vicinity of the proposed project area (MNHP 2026). Eagles that use this area are likely habituated to high levels of human disturbance associated with Highway 2 and the railroad. Considering the existing level of disturbance, the limited duration and scope of the proposed activities, and that bald eagle habitat would not be affected, negligible adverse direct, secondary, or cumulative effects to bald eagles would be anticipated.

Wildlife Mitigations:

- If a threatened or endangered species is encountered, consult a DNRC biologist and develop additional mitigations. Similarly, if undocumented nesting raptors are encountered within ½ mile of the Project Area contact a DNRC biologist.

Literature:

Montana Natural Heritage Program. 2026. Natural Heritage Map Viewer. Montana Natural Heritage Program. Retrieved on March 2, 2026, from <http://mtnhp.org/MapViewer>.

USFWS. 1993. Grizzly bear recovery plan. Missoula, Montana. 181 pp.

Wittinger, W.T. 2002. Grizzly bear distribution outside of recovery zones. Unpublished memorandum on file at USDA Forest Service, Region 1. Missoula, Montana. 2pp.

AIR QUALITY:

Air Quality	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
No-Action														
Smoke	X				X				X					
Dust	X				X				X					
Action														
Smoke	X				X				X					
Dust		X			X				X				Yes	1

Comments:

1. There would be some dust generated by excavations at the entry and exit points of this project. The semi-remote location and frequent winds in the area would disperse this

dust quickly and it is unlikely that any negative effect to air quality would be noteworthy in duration.

Air Quality Mitigations: If complaints arise from dust associated with this project traditional dust reduction practices would be followed. This includes but is not limited to application of water or dust abatement substances.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES / AESTHETICS / DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL 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 revealed that no cultural or paleontological resources have been identified in the APE. Because the area of potential effect on state land is restricted to the bed of the Flathead River, 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.

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		
No-Action														
Historical or Archaeological Sites	X				X				X					
Aesthetics	X				X				X					
Demands on Environmental Resources of Land, Water, or Energy				X				X				X	no	1
Action														
Historical or Archaeological Sites	X				X				X					
Aesthetics	X				X				X					
Demands on Environmental Resources of Land, Water, or Energy	X				X				X					

Comments:

1. If Northwestern energy is not given this easement, it is possible that natural gas delivery to the Flathead valley will be delayed until an alternative route of delivery is found. This could result in a break of delivery of this resource to the citizens of the Flathead.

Mitigations: N/A

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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.*

- Columbia River system operations - EIS

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		
No-Action														
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					
Action														
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					

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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		
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					

Comments: None

Mitigations: N/A

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:

Costs, revenues and estimates of return are estimates intended for relative comparison of alternatives. They are not intended to be used as absolute estimates of return.

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

Action: The easement would generate additional revenue for the Public Lands Trust – Navigable rivers. The estimated return to the trust for the proposed easement is \$24,439.00 based on an estimated easement of 1.01 acre. Costs, revenues, and estimates of return are estimates intended for relative comparison of alternatives, they are not intended to be used as absolute estimates of return.

References

DNRC 1996. State forest land management plan: final environmental impact statement (and appendixes). Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Forest Management Bureau, Missoula, Montana.

DNRC. 2010. Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Forested State Trust Lands Habitat Conservation Plan: Final EIS, Volume II, Forest Management Bureau, Missoula, Montana.

MTFWP, Middle Fork Flathead River Drainage. Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks. Kalispell, MT

Does the proposed action involve potential risks or adverse effects that are uncertain but extremely harmful if they were to occur?

No

Does the proposed action have impacts that are individually minor, but cumulatively significant or potentially significant?

No

Environmental Assessment Checklist Prepared By:

Name: Rachel Payne
Title: Real Property Agent
Date: July 16, 2026

Finding

Alternative Selected

I select the action alternative.

Significance of Potential Impacts

No significant or potential impacts are expected due to the proposed alternative actions.

Need for Further Environmental Analysis

☐

EIS

☐

More Detailed EA

☒

No Further Analysis

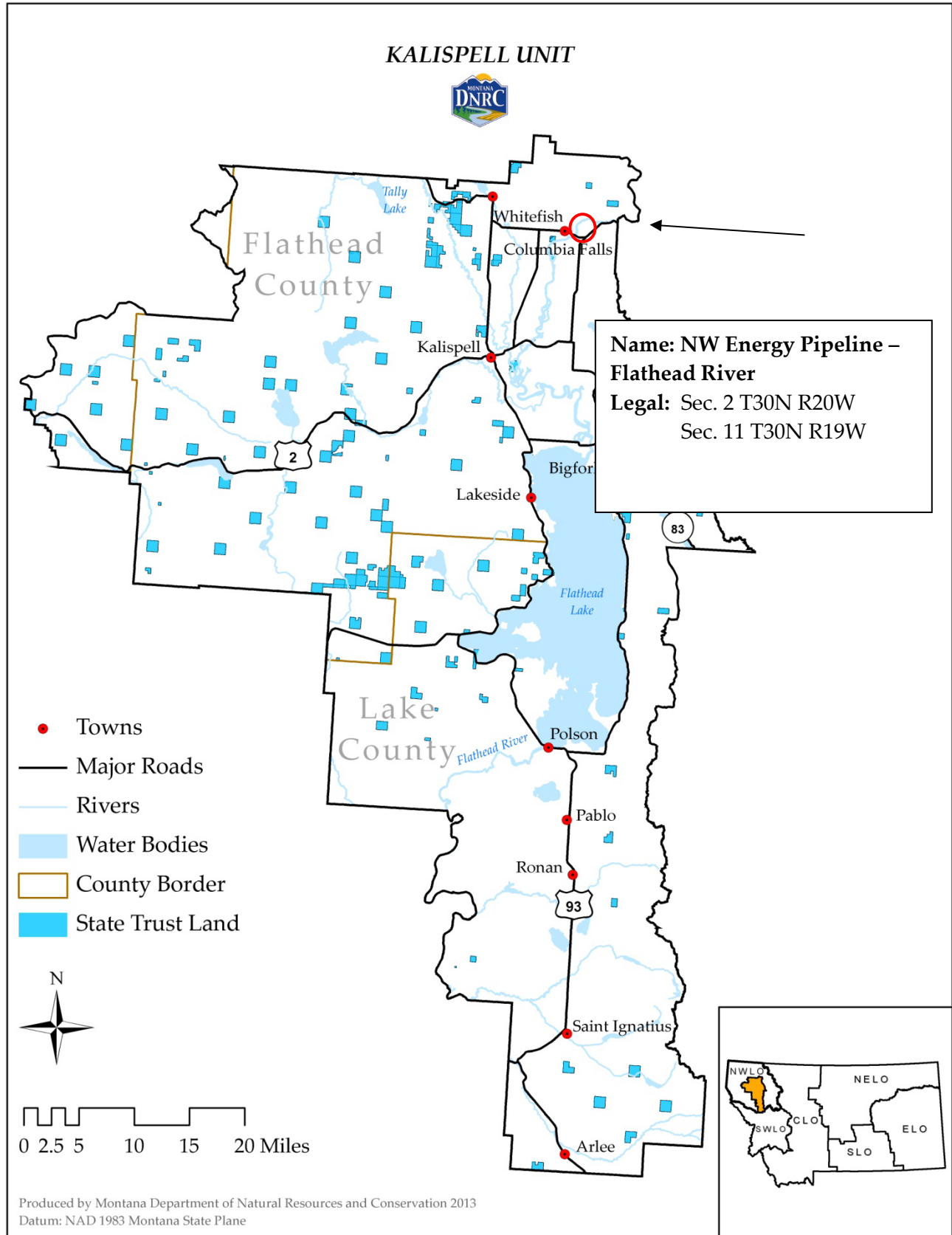
Environmental Assessment Checklist Approved By:

Name: David M. Poukish
Title: Unit Manager, Kalispell Unit, DNRC
Date: 7/21/2026
Signature: /s/ David M. Poukish

Attachment A- Maps

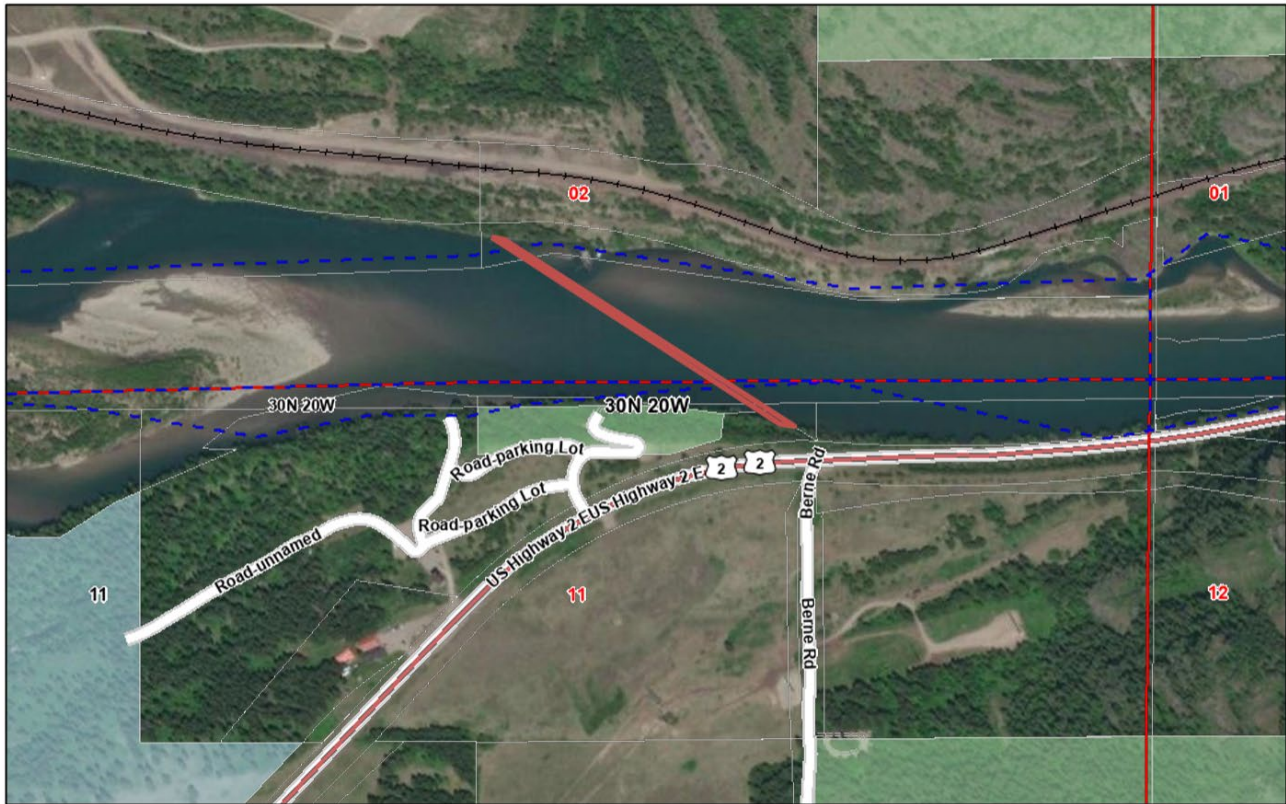
A-1: Easement Vicinity Map

[PROJECT NAME] VICINITY MAP

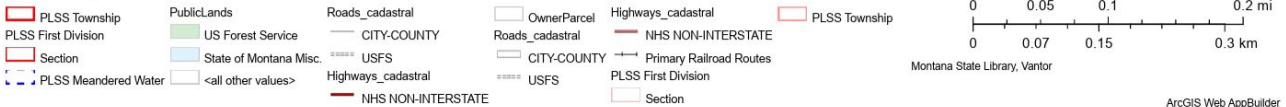


A-2: Easement Description Map

NorthWestern Energy Utility Easement



2/18/2026, 8:40:05 AM



Montana State Library | Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation | Montana State Library, Montana Department of Revenue, Flathead County, Missoula County, Ravalli County, Silver Bow County, Yellowstone County | U.S. Geological Survey, U.S.

