

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Northwestern Energy Aerial Easement
Proposed Implementation Date:	February – December 2027
Proponent:	Northwestern Energy
Location:	T21N R4E Sec. 36
County:	Cascade

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

NorthWestern Energy has submitted an easement application to upgrade an existing overhead transmission line on State Trust Land located in T21N, R4E, Section 36 (NW¼ NW¼). The company currently operates a transmission line within the proposed easement area, and the project involves upgrading that existing line.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:

Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.

Department of Fish, Wildlife, & Parks Region 4 Wildlife Biologists, Alex Kunkel and Sonja Andersen
Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Archaeologist, Patrick Rennie
Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Ag & Grazing Surface Lessee
Montana Natural Heritage Program

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

The proposed easements would involve Montana State Trust Land allocated to the Common Schools Trust.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Alternative A – No action alternative. The proposed project would not be approved.

Alternative B – Action Alternative: Approve the proposed easement.

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.

Under the **No Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would not be developed across State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. Existing soil conditions would remain unchanged, with no ground disturbance, compaction, or alteration to soil stability, moisture, or geologic features. Fragile or potentially erodible soils would not be impacted, and no cumulative

including Rocky Mountain Lower Montane, Foothill and Valley Grasslands, Sagebrush Steppe, and Agricultural lands—would remain intact. Plant cover, quantity, and quality would not be altered, and rare or sensitive species would not be affected. No cumulative effects to vegetation would occur.

Under the **Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would cross State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. The easement corridor is 100 feet wide to accommodate future maintenance and repairs, but the area of disturbance during installation is expected to be minimal. Vegetation in the easement area includes needle and thread, prairie junegrass, bluebunch wheatgrass, big sagebrush, Rocky Mountain juniper, various introduced grasses, and forbs.

Because no powerline poles or other large infrastructure would be placed on State Trust Land, the overall cover, quantity, and quality of vegetative communities should not be significantly affected. DNRC will require the applicant to reseed disturbed areas using a pre-approved seed mix for State Trust Land and to manage noxious weeds along the easement corridor. With these mitigation measures, no cumulative effects 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.

Under the **No Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would not be developed across State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. Existing wildlife habitats would remain undisturbed, and terrestrial, avian, and aquatic species would continue to utilize the area without interference. No cumulative effects to wildlife or fish habitats would occur.

Under the **Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would cross State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. Because no powerline poles or ground-disturbing infrastructure would be placed on State Trust Land, habitat loss or fragmentation is not anticipated. Vegetation communities within the corridor, including sagebrush steppe, grasslands, and juniper stands, would largely remain intact, maintaining habitat for terrestrial and avian species. No impacts to aquatic habitats are expected, as the project does not involve stream crossings or waterbody disturbance. With minimal installation impacts and required mitigation measures such as reseeding and weed management, no measurable or cumulative effects to wildlife, bird, or fish populations 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.

Under the **No Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would not be developed across State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. Existing habitats would remain undisturbed, and federally listed threatened or endangered species, as well as state Species of Concern and sensitive habitats, would not be affected. No effects on wetlands or other limited environmental resources would occur, and there would be no cumulative impacts to these species or their habitats.

Under the **Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would cross State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. A review of Natural Heritage data and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks records indicates that while a variety of wildlife species and habitats are present in the region, not federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitats are known to occur within the project's easement area. Federally listed species in Montana include the black-footed ferret, whooping crane, and pallid sturgeon, but these are typically associated with prairie dog complexes, significant wetland systems, and larger river corridors, respectively, and are not expected in the immediate project area.

State "Species of Concern" and sensitive habitats occur throughout Cascade County, including within

land, water, air, or energy resources would occur, and existing environmental conditions would remain unchanged. No cumulative effects to these resources would occur.

Under the **Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would cross State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. Because the project does not involve placing powerline poles or other infrastructure on State Trust Land, it would require minimal land, water, air, or energy resources. Temporary demands would be limited to minimal fuel use and equipment operation during installation along the easement corridor. The project would not interfere with other activities in the area, including agricultural operations or wildlife use, and would not measurably increase consumption of environmental resources. As a result, no significant or cumulative effects to land, water, air, or energy resources are anticipated.

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.

Under the **No Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would not be developed across State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. No additional projects or activities would occur, and existing environmental conditions would remain unchanged. No cumulative effects from other actions would occur.

Under the **Action Alternative**, no other studies, plans, or projects were identified during scoping for the proposed easements on this tract. As a result, the proposed aerial easement is not expected to interact with other current private, state, or federal actions, nor with future proposed state actions under MEPA review or permitting by any state agency. Consequently, no cumulative impacts from other projects or environmental documents are anticipated.

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.

Under the **No Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would not be developed across State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. No project-related health or safety risks would occur, and existing conditions would remain unchanged.

Under the **Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would cross State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. Because no powerline poles or other ground-disturbing infrastructure will be placed on State Trust Land, the project poses minimal risk to human health and safety. Temporary hazards may include minor construction-related equipment operations along the easement corridor, but these would be limited, short-term, and managed according to standard safety protocols. No ongoing public safety risks are expected, and no cumulative effects to human health and safety are anticipated.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

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

Under the **No Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would not be developed across State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. Existing industrial, commercial, and agricultural activities would continue without interruption, and no changes to

would be no additional demand for fire protection, law enforcement, school services, or other government functions. Consequently, no measurable or cumulative effects on government services 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.

Under the **No Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would not be developed across State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. Existing management plans and goals would remain in effect without change, and no effects to locally adopted environmental plans would occur.

Under the **Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would cross State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. No conflicts have been identified with locally adopted environmental plans or management goals for the tract. The project is consistent with DNRC management objectives for State Trust Land, and no State, County, City, USFS, BLM, or Tribal regulations or zoning restrictions would be violated. The project's minimal disturbance and mitigation measures, such as reseeding and weed management, would maintain compliance with applicable land-use goals and environmental planning standards. No measurable or cumulative effects on locally adopted environmental plans 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.

Under the **No Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would not be developed across State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. Existing recreational access and opportunities, including hunting, hiking, wildlife viewing, and other outdoor activities, would remain unchanged. No effects to wilderness or recreational activities would occur, and no cumulative impacts are anticipated.

Under the **Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would cross State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. The project does not involve placement of powerline poles or other ground-disturbing infrastructure on State Trust Land, and no permanent barriers or restrictions to recreational use are anticipated. Temporary, minor disruptions to access may occur during maintenance or inspection activities within the 30-foot easement corridor, but these would be short-term and localized. Overall, the project is not expected to measurably affect the quality or availability of recreational or wilderness activities, and no cumulative effects to recreational resources 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.

Under the **No Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would not be developed across State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. No changes to population density or housing would occur, and existing residential patterns would remain unchanged. No cumulative effects to population or housing would occur.

Under the **Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would cross State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. The project does not involve construction of housing or facilities requiring new residents. Because no permanent infrastructure or occupancy is proposed on State Trust Land, the project would not affect population distribution or housing development in the area. Any temporary workforce associated with installation or maintenance would be minimal and short-term. As a result, no measurable or cumulative effects on population or housing are anticipated.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Kasydi Lucas	Date: 4/6/2026
	Title: Land Use Specialist	

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

The **Action Alternative** is the selected course of action for the proposed aerial easement across State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. This alternative allows the easement to be established while minimizing impacts to soils, vegetation, wildlife, water resources, and cultural resources.

The selected alternative provides a modest economic return to the Trust without altering existing land uses, recreational opportunities, or social structures. Environmental and social impacts are minimal and temporary, and no significant cumulative effects are anticipated. The Action Alternative meets DNRC's management objectives and is consistent with MCA 77-1-202,203.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

Under the **Action Alternative**, the proposed aerial easement would cross State Trust Land in T21N, R4E, Section 36, Cascade County, Montana. Because no powerline poles or other ground-disturbing infrastructure will be placed on State Trust Land, the project is not expected to produce significant environmental, social, or economic impacts. Minimal, temporary disturbances associated with maintenance and inspection within the 30-foot easement corridor would be effectively mitigated through reseeding, approved seed mixes, and weed management. Impacts to soils, vegetation, water, wildlife, cultural resources, aesthetics, and recreational access are negligible. The project would generate modest economic return to the Trust without affecting population, housing, employment, or government services. Cumulative effects with other existing or planned projects are not anticipated to be measurable. Overall, the proposed action is not expected to result in significant adverse impacts to the environment or surrounding communities.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

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More Detailed EA

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No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	Name: Adam Blythe
	Title: Helena Unit Manager
Signature:	Date: 5/18/26

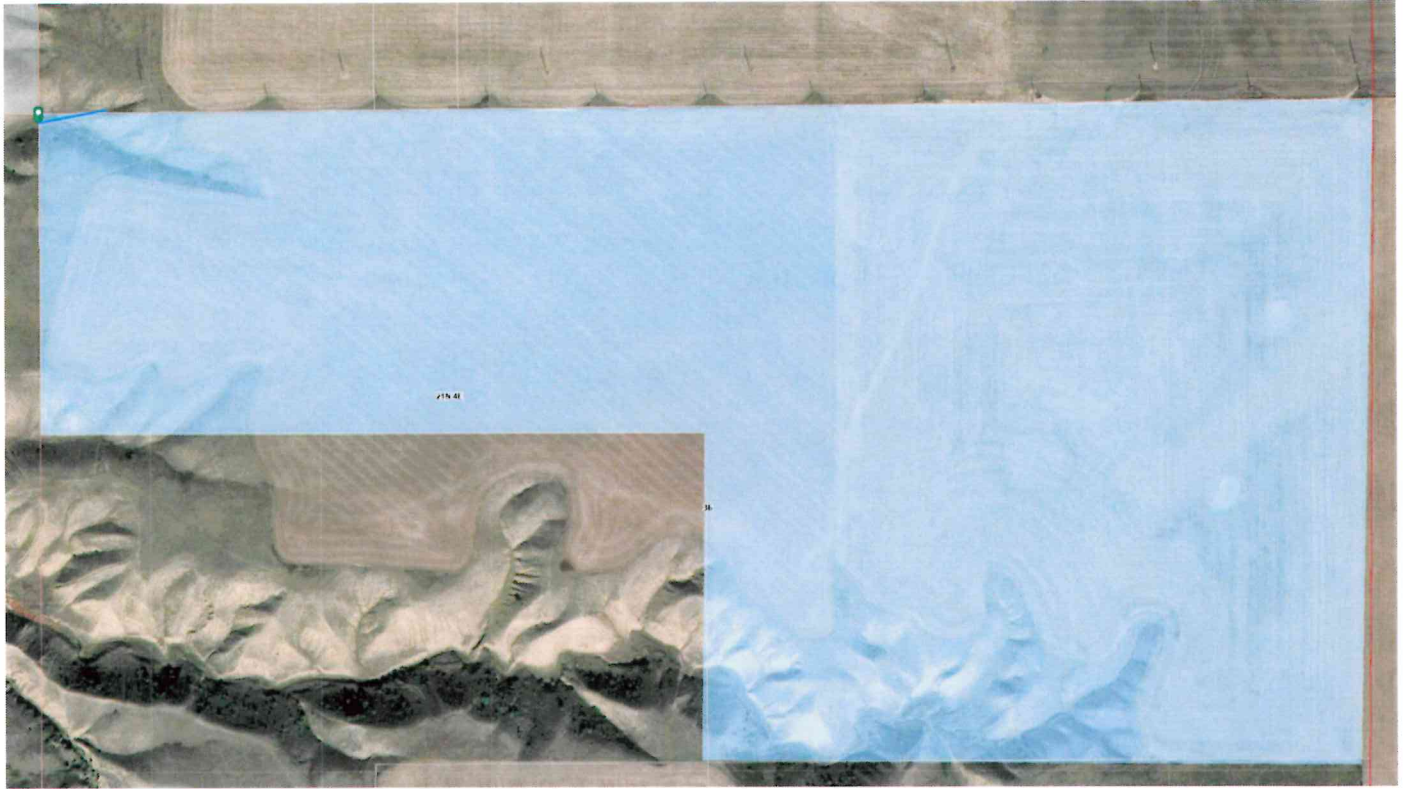


Figure 1: Proposed Right of Way Easement for overhead transmission line in NW1/4NW1/4 of T21N, R4E, Section 36.